



# THE MYSTERY OF FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

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Galatians 4:21-31  
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Most of us are fascinated by mysteries. We find “whodunits” hard to resist. We start as children by reading books and watching movies about the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew; then we graduate to Sherlock Holmes, Alfred Hitchcock, Perry Mason, Colombo, and Jessica Fletcher. A mystery story by its very nature, of course, involves things that are concealed. Red herrings lead us down the garden path, but uncovering concealed clues makes us want to dig even deeper. Our determination to try and figure out the conclusion before the author reveals it draws us along. Often the mystery concludes with an unexpected ending, an ironic twist that both surprises and delights us.

There are many mysteries in the Bible, some of which have not been thoroughly understood through the ages. In the Old Testament especially, God has concealed clues regarding the mystery of Christ and God’s plan of redemption for both Jews and Gentiles. Throughout its history, Israel missed many of these clues. In fact, even after Christ came the Jews did not understand their OT history.

This morning, our study on freedom in the book of Galatians reveals some interesting if ironic truths regarding the mystery of God’s plan of redemption for the church. In these verses Paul gives the Galatians a history lesson to reveal to them the freedom that was theirs in Christ.

The text opens with a question from the apostle. Chapter 4, verse 21:

**Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?** (Gal 4:21, NASB)

Recall that the context of this letter centers on the fact that the Gentile believers in Galatia were being influenced by Jewish agitators. These troublemakers were trying to force the Christians to live under law, to adopt Jewish identity markers of circumcision, food laws, and holy days. We have already seen that living under law involves placing ourselves under the emotional, physical, or spiritual control of someone or something as opposed to living freely in Christ. And we have seen that we are susceptible to living under law because we want to find an approved identity.

The dynamics of living under law are the same whether we place ourselves under Torah, church rules, laws imposed upon us by our families, or self-imposed requirements. We can live under law in our relationship with God, with our spouses, with our parents, with our families, or in the workplace. The expected dynamic is that we must keep law, we must do something in order to find approval, identity and acceptance. This becomes so insidious that our entire lives are taken over.

The problem with the Galatian believers was that they did not understand the law. They were blind to what they were doing. They were under law, but did not “listen” to

the law, according to Paul. They had been persuaded that their own efforts counted in their salvation and freedom. But everywhere the Scripture identifies the vanity of self-effort. As Dr. Harry Ironside said, “No one hates grace as much as the man who is trying to save himself by his own efforts.”

Christians today are no different. Many of us think we are free, but we are not. Although we insist that we are saved by grace, some of us continue living under law—and we don’t even know it. Our identity is based on performance. We are under law, but we cannot see or hear it. A few years ago I would have denied that I was a legalist. I do not have a problem with most things that could be considered legalistic. But as I began to see in this letter the dynamics of living under law, I discovered how much I actually lived that way.

It is hard for us to discern that we are living under law, and hard to admit it when we discover that we are. What is required, in Paul’s words, is that we “listen to the law,” i.e. we fully understand the word of God.

In order to awaken the Galatians to the danger of losing their freedom in Christ and living under law, Paul gives them a jolt. He recounts a well known Old Testament story. Verses 22-26:

**For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. This is allegorically speaking: for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. (4:22-26)**

This OT illustration is key, because one of the Jews’ loudest and proudest boasts was that they were descended from Abraham, the father and founder of their race; therefore they believed they were eternally secure. (See Matt. 3:9 and John 8:31-44.)

We are familiar with this story of Abraham’s two sons, but many of us probably are not well versed in the conclusions that Paul draws from it. God promised a seed to Abraham and Sarah, and he promised to bless all the nations of the earth through this seed. But there was a problem: Sarah was barren. She proposed a solution to her dilemma. She suggested to Abraham that he go in to Hagar, her maid, and have a child through her. Hagar conceived and gave birth to Ishmael, but the birth of this son caused a lot of friction between Sarah and Hagar.

Then, thirteen years later, God told Abraham that he

and Sarah would have a son. Abraham replied that he wished Ishmael could live in God's sight; and Sarah laughed at God's promise. But God was clear: they would have a son, his name would be Isaac, and God's covenant would be with him, not Ishmael. When Abraham was one hundred years old and his wife ninety, Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

In verses 22-23, Paul makes two points of historical comparison between these two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. First, they had different mothers. Ishmael was the son of a slave woman; Isaac was the son of a free woman. And each boy took after his mother. Ishmael was born into slavery; Isaac was born into freedom. The Code of Hammurabi, which governed the culture in Abraham's day, stated that the son of a slave woman was a slave. So even though Ishmael was Abraham's son, he was a slave.

The second point of comparison was that these sons were born in different ways and under different circumstances. Ishmael was born "according to flesh." Ishmael was the human solution, man's effort to bring about God's promise. He was born according to nature. Isaac was born through promise. Isaac was the divine solution. He was born contrary to nature (both Abraham and Sarah were well past childbearing age). Isaac's was a supernatural birth, brought about through an exceptional promise of God.

Next, in verses 24-26, Paul makes an allegorical comparison between the two mothers, Hagar and Sarah. These women stand for two different covenants. Hagar represents the old covenant, Mount Sinai, the Mosaic Law, which gives birth naturally to slavery; Sarah represents the new covenant through Christ, ratified by his blood, which gives birth supernaturally to freedom. The categories of the old covenant are nature, law, and bondage; the categories of the new covenant are promise, Spirit, and freedom.

Now here comes the ironic twist to the story. According to Paul, the two mothers stand for two different Jerusalems. Hagar represents the present, earthly Jerusalem—physical Israel. Hagar represents Jews living under the old covenant, living in slavery to the law, children who are born out of flesh. Sarah represents the heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem from above—believers living free in a new covenant relationship with God, children born out of promise. Physical Israel, physical Jerusalem, corresponds to Hagar, and therefore is a slave under law. Spiritual Israel is now the spiritual seed of Sarah, through Isaac, through Christ. This spiritual seed is the new Jerusalem, the new Zion, God's holy mountain. Paul is saying that to be a physical Jew, a physical seed of Abraham, means nothing. But to be a spiritual seed of Sarah means everything. Being in Christ means that you are already living in the new Jerusalem. No wonder the Jews killed Jesus. Jesus came to fulfill God's promise to Abraham and to usher in a new spiritual order. (See Heb. 12:18-24; Rev. 3:12; 21:2.)

In verse 27, the apostle appeals to Isaiah 54 for his reasoning:

**For it is written,**

**“Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear;  
Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor;  
For more are the children of the desolate  
Than of the one who has a husband.” (4:27)**

The Babylonian exile forms the context of this statement.

This idea of a barren one giving birth is prevalent throughout the Bible. In Babylon, the Jews were barren and unfruitful, but this text articulates God's promise of restoration, a promise that was partially fulfilled when Israel was restored and she reentered the land of Canaan.

But the true fulfillment of this promise is the church, the spiritual seed of Abraham, the children of promise. Sarah was barren and gave birth to Isaac; Israel was barren and gave birth to Jesus, the shoot of Jesse. Then Jesus, the seed of Abraham who had no offspring, gave birth to a multitude of Christians. Christians are born into slavery naturally, and reborn into Jesus supernaturally. The fulfillment of this text then is Christ, who gave birth to the church. The inhabitants of the new Jerusalem are children of promise, not children of the flesh. This image of barrenness is saying that God will act out of promise, that man is completely impotent. God's actions count for everything because God must act supernaturally so that what is physically impossible can come to pass.

The exhortation then is to break forth and shout for joy. God has promised and God has fulfilled. Praise be to God!

What are the implications of this history lesson for us? What bearing does this have on freedom as opposed to living under the law? Paul draws three conclusions, beginning in verse 28:

**And you, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time, he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the Scripture say?**

**“Cast out the bondwoman and her son, For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman.”**

**So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman. (4:28-31)**

Here is the first conclusion: Knowing your spiritual parents gives you an unshakable identity that leads to freedom. We are children of promise, not flesh (28); we are children of the free woman, not the slave woman (31).

The Jews claimed Abraham as their father, and therefore they were participants in the blessing promised to Abraham. But it is not enough to claim Abraham as your father. The crucial question is, Who is your mother? If your mother is Hagar, you are an Ishmael, a slave under law. If your mother is Sarah, you are free man or woman.

The reason we can be free is because in Christ we partake of the promise, the seed given to Abraham and Sarah, and as a result we have a new identity. We are free because we are born not of flesh, but of Spirit; we are born into the promise of God. Because I am a son of Abraham and Sarah, I am a son of God. My new identity is the key to freedom. No longer am I under the system of law. No longer do I depend upon law for salvation or acceptability. This is the argument that Paul makes over and over again in chapters 3 and 4 of this letter.

A couple with a four-year-old son brought home their new baby from the hospital. Four-year-olds have an uncanny ability to see, imagine, and trust. The four-year-old said he wanted to talk to the baby by himself. The parents put the baby in the crib, left the room, and shut the door.

But they kept their ear pressed to the door. The little boy leaned over the crib, and said to the baby, "Tell me who you are. Tell me where you came from. Quick, because I am starting to forget."

Living under law makes it easy to forget who we are. Who are you? Where did you come from? Why do you exist? Who were your parents? Who were you before you had a face? If indeed you believe in him, you were hidden in Christ, you were a child of promise. But we forget this because we live under law. This truth is what we need to recapture. Once we know where we came from, then we will know who we are. Our new identity in Christ transports us from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit. This is what allows us to look past the visible to the invisible. This is what allows us to live in the heavenly Jerusalem and not the earthly Jerusalem. This is what sets us free from the curse of the law.

Words convey different meanings for different people. For example, when I hear the words "white Christmas," my eyes well up tears, because I remember Christmas as a boy. This word "promise" has helped me greatly. For some reason, the notion of promise penetrates my heart much more than words like "grace," "new covenant," or even the phrase, "God loves you." These concepts may be meaningful for you, but for me the idea of promise carries a special significance. It means my relationship with God, my identity, my acceptance, is based solely on his promise—the promise that he made to Abraham and Sarah, the promise that he made to his Son, the promise that he made to me when I was born again. My faith plugs into this concept. Just as a lamp lights up when the plug is inserted in the wall socket, the idea of promise lights me up, setting me free inside.

As believers in Jesus Christ we are children of promise, just like Isaac.

And this identity dramatically affects the way we live. Ishmael and Isaac are a helpful analogy here. Ishmael is a picture of living under law; Isaac is a picture of living by the promise. The religion of Ishmael is a natural religion—what man can do to save himself. But the religion of Isaac is a religion of grace—what God has done and continues to do in our behalf. The Ishmaels of this world trust in themselves to be acceptable; the Isaacs of this world trust only in God through Jesus Christ. The Ishmaels live in bondage, because that is what self-reliance leads to; the Isaacs live in freedom, because of the promise of Christ.

Eugene Peterson put it this way:

[This is] a story about the freedom that comes when we trust God to be in control and the loss of freedom that results when we attempt to take control ourselves... one son was born because God promised, the other son was born because Abraham and Sarah doubted. Ishmael was a product of human impatience, the human trying to do God's work for him; Isaac was the result of God doing his own work in his own time. Ishmael caused nothing but trouble; Isaac continued in the faithful covenant of the freely loving God. The great disaster of Abraham's life was that he used Hagar to get what he thought God wanted for him; the great achievement of his life was what God did for him apart from any programs or plans that he put into action...The moment we begin manipulating lives in order to get control of circumstances, we

become enslaved in our own plans, tangled up in our own red tape, and have to live with grievous, unintended consequences (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 130-131).

Law and promise, therefore, are two very different ways of living. We allow ourselves to be controlled by law because we crave identity and acceptance. This is the leverage point that others use in controlling us or that determines our need to try and control others. We desire someone's approval or acceptance, and as a result we either live under their control or we try to control them. Living under law is an Ishmael-like existence, because law is the human solution to God's promise, the human solution to freedom, acceptance, and identity. We do things that we think will give us freedom, but they result in slavery. As long as the leverage point is there we will be under law in our relationships. But if the leverage point is no longer there, then we will be free from control. Freedom is removing the leverage point, in other words. Freedom is being an Isaac. It is believing the promise of God and living with the identity that he gives us in Christ, as children of promise.

If I am ministering in the church to find approval, I am ministering under law. If I am trying to control my wife to gain affection, that is law. If my mood is controlled by how well my child does in school or performs in sports, then I am under law. But if I believe and trust my new identity in Christ, then I live in freedom.

We are either Ishmaels or Isaacs, children of slavery or children of promise. Grasping an Isaac-like spirituality gives us unshakable identity and freedom.

Here is Paul's second conclusion. If we have an Isaac identity, then we can expect persecution and struggle (see verse 29). Historically, Ishmael "mocked" Isaac. We read in Genesis 21:8-9: "And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking." The word "mocking" has the idea of laughter, either because of joy or skepticism. In the stronger Hebrew form, the form that is used in this text in Genesis, the mocking referred to may be positive, as in play and sport, or negative, as in derision. Ironically, this word comes from the same root as the name Isaac, conveyed upon Isaac when Sarah exclaimed, "God has made laughter for me, so that all who hear will laugh with me" (Gen 21:6). Ishmael was a continual source of persecution and mocking to Isaac.

Paul says that just as that was the case then, "so it is now also" (29). Freedom will always be subject to persecution by law. The promise will always be attacked by those living in slavery. And the persecution of the true church does not come solely from the world, from unrelated strangers. It comes from our half-brothers, the religious people, the traditionalists, the orthodox. John Stott says, "The greatest enemies of the evangelical faith today are not unbelievers, who when they hear the gospel often embrace it, but the church, the establishment, the hierarchy. Isaac is always mocked and persecuted by Ishmael" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 127).

The ultimate example of this persecution, of course, is Jesus. The sons of slavery, Jews living under law, put to death the Son of promise. Certainly in the context of Gala-

tians, Paul was being mocked by the agitators. The apostle is telling the Galatians that they too will be mocked. And this has been the case down through the centuries. The great Protestant reformers paid dearly for proclaiming freedom in Christ from the established church.

If you are going to be an Isaac, then you must expect conflict. Your freedom will ruffle feathers, and you will be mocked. You may laugh, but they will mock. If you are committed to living freely in Christ, then those who are in bondage to law will be angry at your freedom and will want to shut you up under law. This kind of persecution often occurs in families when one member becomes a Christian and forsakes the family's religious background.

Finally, says Paul, maintaining an Isaac identity demands drastic action. He writes, "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman" (30). The Jews interpreted this Scripture to say that God had rejected the Gentiles. But here Paul boldly reverses their interpretation and applies it to the exclusion of unbelieving Jews from the inheritance. J. B. Lightfoot comments: "the Apostle thus confidently sounds the death-knell of Judaism" (quoted by Stott, *Galatians*, 128).

The reason for throwing out the female slave and her son is that Ishmael would not be an heir. It was Isaac who received the inheritance, not his half-brother Ishmael. "Such, then, is the double lot of 'Isaacs'—the pain of persecution on the one hand and the privilege of inheritance on the other" (Stott, *Galatians*, 128).

We are either Isaacs or Ishmaels. We cannot be both. And ridding ourselves of our Ishmael complex and embracing our inheritance often requires drastic action.

Freedom is a gift of God. We can never achieve it on our own. But it does not come easily. It does not come through a slight rearrangement of our schedules. It comes only through radically casting away the system or identity to which we are attached. We cannot have a deep sense of freedom and still hold onto time-honored legalism and world-directed religion. Our views of God and of ourselves have to be drastically changed. That is the radical nature of this history lesson about Hagar and Sarah. It takes courage to see things the way they really are and to cast off those things that bind us.

But freedom also requires that we embrace the new. Paul says that the Jerusalem from above is free, and that is where we are to live right now. The physical is gone, the spiritual is here. The church is called to enter into the heavenly city that is already, but not yet.

Here is how the book of Isaiah puts it:

"Lift up your eyes round about, and see  
They all gather together, they come to you  
Your sons will come from afar,  
And your daughters will be carried in the arms"  
(Isa 60:4).

People from all the nations, an international community, not just Israel or the United States, are gathering right now at the heavenly city. God is calling out sons and daughters from all humanity, children of promise, believers in Christ, to enter his holy city and glorify his name.

Certainly Christmas is a time when we desire to cast off the old and enter into the new. Many of you are making plans to be with your families. These can be joyful occasions, but they can be marred by law, i.e. by control. My wife and I have some family members coming to celebrate with us. One morning last week we were already beginning to feel tense, and so we prayed that we could be free to serve them. At school later that day, God laid it on my wife's heart to invite a young French couple to Christmas dinner. They have no family here, and the young woman has just suffered a miscarriage. She was overjoyed at the invitation, and our children are delighted to have an opportunity to serve. This is just a small thing, but this is how we enter into the promise.

In Christ, we are no longer tied to the constraints of the past, the things that bound us year after year. God has called us to freedom, to live out the promise and enter into what he is doing through his Spirit. This may result in your crossing spiritual and physical boundaries that you never thought you would dare cross, but you can boldly enter in because of your new identity in Christ.

What a wonderful introduction this text makes for the Christmas story! Jesus was the seed of Abraham, the seed of Isaac, the Child of promise. He was the one who came out of barren Israel, the root of Jesse who allows us to rejoice, to break forth and shout, to come to the holy city and sing the praises of our glorious God. The Jews did not recognize who Jesus was because they did not have their history right. The world today still does not understand him, either. It is because they have ignored the clues. Man has reinterpreted history to make Jesus what man wants him to be, not who he really is.

But Christmas reminds us who we are. Christmas reminds us that we are no longer natural, but supernatural. Christmas reminds us that we are sons and daughters of promise, not slaves in bondage. Christmas reminds us that we are Isaacs, not Ishmaels. Christmas reminds us that we are citizens of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city, holy Zion. Christmas reminds us that we are free. "If the son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed."

May we experience in full measure the freedom that is ours in Christ this holiday season, as we celebrate the long-promised birth of God's Son.

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