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Galatians 4:21-31 “Are You on the Right Path to God?”

Intro. The human condition is characterized by sin. No one lives free from sin. Most cultures and societies limit sin, but in other cases we see sin in all its ugliness, as in the recent gruesome beheading of Nick Berg. Because of sin in our world, there is sorrow. There is sickness, injury, bondage and addiction, dissatisfaction, despair. Ultimately, the wages of sin is death, as Romans 6:23 says. Some believe death is the end. Most believe that the death of the body is not the end of the spirit. Many believe the spirit of man lives on, either in the joys of heaven, or in the utter suffering and despair of hell.

Religion seeks to deal with these vital issues. Religion seeks to deal with the sin problem. One common approach is to control sin with law. Furthermore, every religion offers some way to cope with sorrow that is so common in this world. And I suppose all religions address the painful reality of death.

In this text of Scripture, Paul presents two covenants, the covenant based on obedience to the Law, and the covenant based on God's gracious promise. These two covenants are representative of two basic approaches to dealing with the problems of sin, sorrow, and death. One is a religion based on human achievement, and the other is based on God's promised provision. One exalts man's pride, and the other glorifies God. These two approaches are as different as night and day, and as heaven and hell.

These two approaches to dealing with the fundamental problems man face are before you. Which pathway have you chosen? Sadly, most people choose the wrong approach. The Galatians were being misled down the wrong path. They were being led into adopting salvation and spiritual progress by human effort or works. Paul had to convince them of the right way, and so he challenged them in v.21 to listen to what the book of the law itself says about this. He reminds them of a story from Genesis about Abraham¹ and his 2 sons by two different women. He shows that this story illustrates or typifies² the 2 contrasting ways of salvation from sin. I will refer to this story throughout my message.

My assignment this morning is to show you the right path, convince you that it *is* the right path, and encourage you to choose the right path, and stay on the right path. We are going to see that even the Old Testament shows that we will not inherit heaven by human effort, but by faith in the promise of God.

Now to help you decide which pathway to take, I will present you will a series of contrasts that bring out the differences between these two basic approaches to religion. First of all, I urge you:

¹ Paul anchors his argument in the patriarch Paul thinks is paramount: Abraham, not Moses.

² Paul refers to these events as “symbolic” (v. 24a, NKJV). The King James translates the word “allegory.” Paul is not engaging in fanciful allegorical interpretation. Rather, Paul sees in this story an obvious illustration or analogy of spiritual truth. We can even say that Paul sees in the story a form of typology. Typology occurs when God, through His Providence, brought about analogies or illustrations of truth that would later be fulfilled in the Messiah. Paul is simply comparing the similarities between the story of Abraham and the spiritual truths of the gospel of grace.

I. CHOOSE SPIRITUAL BIRTH OVER NATURAL BIRTH

Let's look at the story first beginning in v.22, "For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman." Since not all of you may be familiar with what led up to the birth of these two sons, let me share a brief summary of what happened. When Abraham was 75 years old, God promised that he would be the father of a great nation, even though up to that point he was childless (Gen. 12:1-3). God reaffirmed this promises several times (13:16, 15:1-6, etc.). The promise included the assurance that Abraham and Sarah were to become the parents of a son. 10 years later, Abraham and Sarah still did not have any children. So Sarah decided she would help God out a little. She suggested that Hagar, her personal female slave be given to Abraham, not to take the full status of a wife, but merely to serve as a concubine to bear Abraham a child for her, like a serigate mother.³ So instead of listening to God Almighty, Abraham (like Adam) listened to his wife and did as she suggested. How often we have trouble waiting upon God to fulfill His promises!

Paul gives his inspired interpretation beginning in v.23, "But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh..." Likewise, in v.29 Paul mentions "he who was born according to the flesh." There are two aspects of how this applies to false religion. First, Ishmael was a physical child of Abraham, and he was the first-born. Those who are always boasting about their descent from Abraham are forgetting that Abraham had not one son but two sons. They who are Jews only by physical birth are really not any better off than the Ishmaelites. Even so, those who are born of Christian parents do not automatically become Christians. Physical birth from Abraham, a Christian, or even a preacher does not save you.

Furthermore, Abraham and Sarah sought to fulfill the blessings of the covenant by natural means. Ishmael was born according to the normal human process of reproduction. He symbolizes those who have had only natural birth and who trust in their own works. Notice how this relates to the quest for eternal life. How do we obtain it? By natural means? The rich young ruler came to Jesus & asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" We have physical life, but how do we obtain spiritual and eternal life? Most people labor slavishly to attain eternal life by their own works. Translated into today's terms, that might mean joining the church, being baptized, attending church faithfully, giving up certain sins, taking communion and any other so-called sacraments, and acting like a Christian ought to live. And by the end of your life, you hope that you have done enough to earn your way into heaven. Now if you ask a person who follows that kind of religion, "Are you going to heaven when you die," they can only say, "Well, I hope so." They have no assurance of salvation, because their salvation is based on works.

In contrast, Paul says that he who was born "of the freewoman [was born] through promise." God's grace is greater than our sin. And so years later, God renewed His promise. This was done when Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 89. Sarah had reached the age when it was even more clear that she was biologically incapable of bearing children. God was waiting until both of them were "as good as dead" before He would perform the miracle of sending them a son (Rom. 4:17-22). The miracle is even more clear when you consider that Sarah was not able to conceive children even as a young adult. So not surprisingly, both Abraham and Sarah laughed when God told them that Sarah would bear the child that He had earlier promised. In response to their difficulty to believe, the angel said it well, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" So in chapter 21 of Genesis (vv. 1-8) we read that God indeed fulfilled His promise. Sarah gave birth to a son at the age of 90! Unlike Ishmael, the birth of Isaac was in fulfillment of God's promise, and brought

³ This was a custom that was apparently acceptable at that time (cf. 30:3-13).

about by a miracle of the Holy Spirit. He enabled Abraham and Sarah to conceive a child even though it was biologically impossible. What was humanly impossible was brought to pass by the power of God in fulfillment of the divinely-given promise.

Notice how Paul applies this story to believers today in v.28, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.” The New Testament way of salvation does not center on man's effort but God's gracious promise. God promises that if we believe in His Son Jesus, and trust in His sacrificial death for our sin, we can be born again and have eternal life. Notice in v.29 that he contrasts he who was born according to the flesh” with “him who was born according to the Spirit.” Jesus made a similar contrast when He spoke to Nicodemus in John 3. He said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.” As Isaac's life came about by a miracle, even so our spiritual birth and spiritual life comes about by a miracle of God's Spirit. It is humanly impossible to earn your way to heaven. But what is impossible with man, is possible by God's Spirit. So if you have only been born of flesh, you do not have eternal life. Only those who have been born again of the Spirit of God have eternal life.

Also, in v.26 we see the spiritual, heavenly source of our life. In the spiritual sense, heaven is our mother, for our spiritual birth comes from above. In fact, when Jesus said in John 3, “You must be born again,” it can be translated, “You must be born from above.” Heaven our true homeland (Phil. 3:20). Heb. 12:22 says, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels.”

The religion of law and human effort has not given birth to God's children, but the way of faith in God's promise has. In v.27 Paul quotes from Isaiah 54:1, ““Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, You who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children Than she who has a husband.” Those words were originally written to cheer the Jewish exiles in Babylon, but are here applied to Sarah, the barren woman, whose barrenness seemingly stood as an impenetrable barrier to the fulfillment of God's promise to her husband, Abraham. In Paul's thought this passage has Messianic significance and finds its deepest fulfillment in the growth of the Church. Through a salvation by promise, God's family has increased to millions of people from every nation. Because the early church held fast to grace, it spread across the world in fruitfulness. Instead of being a small nation or sect, the spiritual seed of Abraham has truly grown to a number as the stars of the heavens. The preaching of the gospel of grace is the one saving message that is bringing forth children to God.

So I believe Paul's argument is convincing. In order to become a child of God, and enjoy His blessings in this life and have eternal life, you must renounce the way of the works of the flesh, and choose to be born again by a miracle of the Spirit of God. God promises that He will do this if you will only repent of your sin, and trust in His Son Jesus.

Now let's move on to the next contrast:

II. CHOOSE FREEDOM OVER BONDAGE

This is perhaps the primary theme of this text. Paul demonstrates that the false religion of human works only keeps us in bondage, while the true way of faith leads to freedom. The difference is illustrated once again in our story. V.22 says, “For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman.” All distinctions between the two sons are based on the fact that they had two different mothers.

Paul sees in the two mothers and two sons an interesting parallel to spiritual truth. False religion leads to bondage, while God's truth way of salvation leads to freedom. In vv. 24-25 Paul first addresses the religion of bondage. He said, “For these are the two covenants: the one from

Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.” It is significant that Mount Sinai is located in what is still known today as the Arabian Peninsula, where the descendants of Ishmael settled. In the days of slavery here in our country, the national law stated that a child of a slave was born a slave, even if the father was a free man. And so since Ishmael was the son of a slave, he and his mother Hagar illustrate the covenant of Law. Paul’s point is that a covenant that is based on human ability to obey law is not freedom, but bondage. God gave Israel about 600 laws, and said, “Do them, and live.” Over the years, the scribes added to the bondage of the law by adding thousands of interpretive regulations that the Jews had to live by. Yet, the law is unable to deliver anyone from this bondage of sin. It not only leaves men in their bondage but it adds to their heavy burden. Peter said the Law was a yoke that neither we nor our fathers were able to bear. Truly, there is no more rigorous taskmaster than religious law. Look at Islam today. It likewise places people under bondage to the religious leaders. Here’s the primary problem with the Law. It commands obedience, but supplies no power to obey. It does nothing to destroy our sin nature. In fact, it incites our sin nature. Have you noticed that when you give a commandment not to do something, that a person has an inward compulsion to do the very thing they are commanded not to do? Furthermore, the slaves of the law work, and work, but they have never done enough in this life. They are never free. Then, when sinful man gets involved in a religion of law, they only add to the bondage of religious law, as we have seen.

In contrast, Paul says in v.26, “but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all,” that is of all believers. Those who are born from above are free, unlike the human condition of bondage. Then in v.28 he says, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.” And notice how he wraps up his argument in v.31, “So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondswoman but of the free.” Thank God, the Christian is set free from the curse of the law and the control of the law. We become free from the penalty of sin, and we can be free from the power of sin. When you are born again, obedience to the will of God is no longer a form of bondage, but it becomes the desire of our hearts. For the first time you are free to genuinely do good and to please God.

An important application can be seen once again illustrated in our story. Paul says in v.30, “Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the bondswoman and her son....’” Here we see that the Law must give place to the Gospel. It is impossible for law and grace, the flesh and the Spirit, to compromise and stay together. You must choose one or the other. The two approaches are incompatible. Legalism is one of the major problems among Christians today. We must keep in mind that legalism does not mean the setting of spiritual standards; it means thinking that we are spiritual because we outwardly obey religious rules. A person can refrain from smoking, drinking, and even attending theaters and still not be spiritual. The Pharisees had high standards; yet they crucified Jesus. But the old nature loves legalism, because it gives the old nature a chance to “look good.” Pride is the worst sin. Another application is this: Paul may also be saying that, as Sarah expelled Hagar and her son, so the Galatian believers ought to expel the Judaizers. The church today must likewise stand strong against false teachers such as religious legalists.

So you must choose legalism, or the way of the Spirit. Choose law or grace. And choose you must, for the two approaches are incompatible. And let me warn you; he who trusts in his own merits for salvation will find himself some day cast out just as Hagar & her son.

Now consider with me a third contrast:

III. ACCEPT SUFFERING WITH GOD'S PEOPLE OVER ACCEPTANCE BY THE WORLD

Paul sees another interesting parallel is the story of Isaac and Ishmael. He said in v.29, "But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now."

The reference is to Ishmael who persecuted Isaac by ridiculing him at Isaac's weaning celebration (Gen. 21:9). [Big brothers do pick on little brothers!] Paul saw yet another parallel to spiritual truth. The way Ishmael treated Isaac corresponds to the way unbelievers have treated God's true people down through the centuries. Think of the prophets. Think of Daniel's 3 friends who were threatened with the fiery furnace. Think of Daniel himself. Think of Jesus, who was persecuted primarily by the religious leaders. This hostility continued toward His apostles, including Paul. He was constantly persecuted by Jews in bondage to a law-works salvation. It continued for several centuries in the early church. It continues to this present day. The latest animosity has come from Arab Muslims, descendants of Ishmael, who hate and kill "Christians and Jews." The experience of believers shows that those who hold to salvation by works hate those who proclaim salvation by grace without works. They despise those who preach, "You must be born again." Whether within Judaism, Islam, or Christianity, legalists have always been persecutors. Those who trust in God have always been persecuted by those who trust in themselves. The same will be true today. Such people can even be in the same church, baptized in the same water, taking communion from the same table! Isaac and Ishmael lived together for a time. The self-religionist and the believer in the promise may be members of the same church for years, but they are not agreed, and cannot be happy together, for their principles are essentially opposed. Oil and water will not mingle, neither will the natural man's religion agree with that which is born of the promise, and sustained by the promise. Remember, it is the false religious system of Revelation 17:6 that is "drunk with the blood of the saints."

There is a general conflict of worldviews when it comes to a Christian and a non-Christian in our modern world. The entire Bible witnesses to the notion that the world is opposed to the gospel as darkness is opposed to light (John 3:19-21). The Christian cannot expect to find in the "world" an ally to the gospel. Opposition can only be expected. And the minute a Christian is willing to state his or her case for the truth of the gospel, at that very moment persecution of some kind will frequently appear in various forms, from subtle to overt opposition. But remember Paul's point, the experience of opposition is for the Christian a confirmation of the truth of the gospel. Let's face it, the gospel, properly understood and persuasively presented, is offensive to sinful people.

I acknowledge that you are hereby presented with a difficult choice. Becoming a Christian, trusting in God's promise, places you in the company of the persecuted. If you follow Christ, live for Him, and especially if you speak out for Him, you will be ridiculed and persecuted and other ways. But I would rather suffer now for Christ, than to suffer for all eternity in hell! I would rather suffer for good, than to suffer the terrible consequences of sin. That is why Christ said that if you choose to follow Him, you must deny self, and take up your cross. And this is why Christian fellowship is so important. We can take the world's rejection and ridicule much easier if we find love and acceptance among God's people. Will you choose Christ today?

Finally, let see together Paul's final contrast:

IV. TRUST IN GOD'S PROMISED INHERITANCE OVER WORLDLY VALUES

Why should we be willing to suffer persecution & rejection by the world? Here is one reason. When you choose Christ, and trust in Him, you become an heir of blessings far more valuable than anything the world has to offer.

In v.30 Paul makes reference to what Sarah said to Abraham after Ishmael had mocked her son. He said, "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman."

The promised son was the heir, not only of Abraham's property, but of all of God's promises of blessing originally given to Abraham. This includes the promise of eternal life in heaven. It includes God's active blessing in your earthly life. I have followed Christ for 30 years, and I have experienced blessing after blessing. I have experienced His protection. He has blessed my ministry of the years. He has blessed Cheryl and Andrew in many ways, as they also trusted in Him.

You can enjoy eternal life and earthly blessing as well. I believe we have seen from our text how this comes about [review]. As we have seen before, this promised inheritance must be received by faith. Gen. 15:6 says that Abraham believed God, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness. Faith was the only response that Abraham needed to receive God's gracious promise.

Conclusion: All of us want to go to heaven some day. Don't you want to inherit heaven? No person in their right mind would want to go to hell. Let me ask you, "What are you counting on to get to heaven?" If you are counting on your works and religious rituals, you will be terribly disappointed. I hope that some here today will turn from sin and self, and turn to Jesus the Savior, and trust wholly in Him to give you the gift of eternal life. Do it today! Don't delay.

Sources: W.A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 1962); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians & Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968); John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987); Scot McKnight, *The NIV Application Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Charles H. Spurgeon, *According to Promise* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour), 5-11, 28-33; Lehman Strauss, *Devotional Studies in Galatians and Ephesians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957); Curtis Vaughan, *Galatians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon tape on this text dated 11/11/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1975); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Galatians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1944, 1973). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).