

Introduction

Have you ever tried to help someone who did not need your help? When I was a teenager, my cousin and I helped my grandfather replace a fence. For the intersection posts, he used full railroad ties. After the hole for the post was cleared, the two of us carried the railroad tie to the fence line. We barely made it. We carried it a few steps, then set it down to rest ... the whole way to the fence line. Then we contemplated how we would stand it up on end and put it in the hole. We were pretty certain that it was impossible.

After a short time of debating how to pick up the post, my grandfather showed up and saw that the hole was ready and the railroad tie was ready. He picked up the tie by himself and set it in the hole upright. I felt like our work had been wasted. He could have dug the hole better. He could have carried the railroad tie better. He could set the tie in place, which we probably would have never done. He did not need our help

Preview

*Do you ever try to **help** God? Do you try to help Him fix your struggles or bring about His will? Do you try to help Him in your salvation? Do you try to help Him in your personal growth?*

[Galatians 4:21-31](#) is an allegory ([Gal 4:24](#)). The passage builds on the birth of Abraham's two sons, only one of which was considered Abraham's heir. Scripture uses the birth of those two sons to illustrate the contrast of knowing God through faith alone or through works. The conclusion of this story is that **faith brings freedom, but works brings slavery**.

Two sons

Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, were born to two different mothers, one free and one a slave. We see right away in verse 21 that this illustration speaks against those who proclaim a works-based salvation. [Galatians 4:21-23](#) "21 Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. 23 But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise."

Biblical Context

In Genesis, God made a covenant with Abraham and his heir ([Gen 15, 17](#)). However, Abraham and Sarah were very old and Sarah was unable to have children. The Bible sometimes describes them to be "as good as dead" ([Rom 4:19](#); [Heb 11:12](#)). *Who would be their heir?* Abraham's and Sarah's difficulty reconciling God's promise with their lack of children led to the birth of Abraham's two sons in two very different circumstances.

Ishmael

Abraham and Sarah attempted to **help** God accomplish His covenant promise, as if God **needed help**. Sarah offered her servant, Hagar, to provide Abraham an heir ([Gen 16:1-3](#)). Abraham and Hagar had a son, named Ishmael. However, God told Abraham that Ishmael would not be his heir ([Gen 17:18-21](#); [21:12](#)). God had promised to **give** Abraham and Sarah a son. He did not need their help.

Isaac

God fulfilled His promise of providing an heir for Abraham through Sarah. Fourteen years after Ishmael's birth, Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 ([Gen 21:1-7](#)). This was an impossible birth; it was clearly a work of God. God told Abraham that His covenant would be given to Isaac ([Gen 17:18-21](#); [21:12](#)).

The contrast

Notice the contrast between the birth of these two sons in [Galatians 4:21-23](#). Ishmael's mother was a slave; Isaac's mother was free. Ishmael was born "according to the flesh;" that is, he was born as a result of human contribution, not faith in God. Isaac was born "through promise;" that is, he was born as a result of God's work. Isaac's birth was **clearly** a work of God and Ishmael's birth was **clearly** a work of the flesh.

Let me point out that the birth of Ishmael was from sin, because he was born out of doubt in God's promise. [Gal 5](#) makes the point that every work of the flesh is sin. The sin was that they did not trust God's promise. **You cannot help God without rejecting His promise.**

Two covenants

Allegorically, these two sons represent two different covenants. [Galatians 4:24-27](#) "24 Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.""

When verse 24 says that the two women (i.e., the two births) are two covenants, it does not mean that God made a covenant with both Ishmael and Isaac. God promised to bless Ishmael, but Ishmael did not receive the covenant. This comparison is an allegory that teaches us about God's covenant.

Slavery

Hagar gave birth to Ishmael in slavery; she was a slave. Verse 24 says that this corresponds to Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is where God made His covenant with the nation of Israel through Moses, which we usually refer to as the Mosaic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was conditional. If you obey God, He will be with you; if you are unfaithful, He will oppose you ([Deut 28](#)). [Galatians 3:10-12](#) makes the point that this covenant required perfection; therefore, no one is saved by the law.

Verse 25 says that Hagar also corresponds to first-century Jerusalem. That is, they depended on the flesh for justification. They trusted in their birth and taught that salvation required obedience (e.g., circumcision, OT feasts and holy days, dietary rules, etc.). But, according to verse 25, those who proclaimed salvation by works were enslaved, along with those who followed them (cf. [Matt 23:15](#)).

There are plenty of works-based gospels being proclaimed today. Some people state it explicitly. **Mormons** teach that a person is saved by both faith and works. The **Catholic** church teaches that a person is saved by faith, works, and connection to the church. Others teach works-based gospels more implicitly, even if they don't realize it. Many churches, regardless of denomination, teach that if you **repeat a prayer**, you will be saved. Some churches, such as **Nazarene** churches, teach that you can lose your salvation without ongoing repentance and faithfulness ["We believe that all persons may fall from grace and apostatize and, unless they repent of their sins, be hopelessly and eternally lost" (*Church of the Nazarene Articles of Faith*)]. All of these are examples of works-based gospels. Every works-based gospel enslaves people to their own sinfulness.

Freedom

Sarah bore Isaac in freedom; she was not a slave. Verse 26 says that "the Jerusalem above is free." [Hebrews 12:18-29](#) makes a similar comparison between Mount Sinai and the heavenly Jerusalem. The context of [Hebrews 12](#) really helps us understand this contrast between the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. [Heb 8-10](#)). The Mosaic covenant was established at Mount Sinai and was inaugurated with animal sacrifices ([Heb 9:18](#)). Jesus, however, established a New Covenant in **heaven** through His own death ([He 9:23-26](#)). Our covenant home is in heaven.

The basis of our freedom is Jesus's death. We are all slaves to sin and death. The law further enslaves you to sin by explicitly showing you what is right ([Gal 3:22-23](#)). Only Jesus's death can set you **free** from sin and death ([Heb 2:14-15](#)).

Verse 27 quotes [Isa 54:1](#). It may be easy to overlook the significance of the verse. Notice that it is a call for the one who is barren to rejoice over the many children she will have. Sarah should not have been able to have children; she was barren. The birth of Isaac was miraculous; it was a work of God. You cannot **choose** to be free from your sin any more than a barren woman can

choose to have a baby. You were **dead** in your sins ([Eph 2:1](#)). You can only be saved by a miraculous work of God.

Two gospels

Chapter 4 uses the illustration of these two sons to contrast the gospel of Jesus and false, works-based gospels. [Galatians 1:6-9](#) states that there is only one gospel. [Galatians 2:16-21](#) says that we are justified **only** by faith, not by works of the law. If we add anything to the gospel, then we by implication believe that Jesus died for no purpose. *Are you a child of God by faith in God's promise **or** by your own works?* [Galatians 4:28-31](#) “28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. 30 But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” 31 So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.”

Children of promise

Verse 28 states that believers are children of promise like Isaac. Verse 31 says we are born into freedom, not slavery. God promised Abraham and Sarah a son, although it was impossible for **them**. Ishmael was born out of an effort to **help** God. A works-based gospel cannot save; it keeps us enslaved to our sin.

Isaac was born solely by God's grace; His birth was a work of God. He was a child of promise, not works ([Rom 9:6-9](#)). God promised a covenant relationship with those of faith; He will be their God and they will be His people ([Rom 9:24-29](#)). Christ, who is the eternal God, fulfilled that promise; salvation is a work of God.

How do we become “children of promise?” The point of this entire passage is that you do not inherit a covenant relationship with God through works. You cannot **help** God deal with our sins. Your response to the gospel should be Christ-focused, not self-focused. The gospel is not about what you can do. Christ died to save you from sins; therefore, you should **have faith in Christ**. Christ gives you a relationship with God by His life and death; therefore you should **have faith in Christ**. We become “children of promise” by trusting in the fulfillment of God's promise in Christ.

Opposition

How should we respond to false gospels? Verses 29-30 reference an interaction between Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael mocked (laughed at) Isaac ([Gen 21:9](#)); verse 29 says he persecuted Isaac. Notice that verse 29 says “so also it is now.” Those who wrongly teach the gospel, insisting on some human contribution, **persecute** the true gospel and God's people. They are leading people away from God.

How did Sarah respond to Ishmael's persecution of Isaac? Verse 30 quotes [Gen 21:10](#) where Sarah told Abraham that Hagar and Ishmael needed to be “cast out” (driven away). Although Abraham was hesitant, God told him that it was the right thing to do; there had to be a distinction between the heir and the slave.

How should we respond to false gospels? We should drive them out. *How should we respond to false teachers?* We should drive them out. As [Galatians 2:21](#) expresses, those who teach any other gospel make Jesus's death pointless. Every other gospel rejects Christ; therefore, we should not tolerate them.

Conclusion

Personal reflection

As you reflect on this passage of Scripture this week, ask yourself if you are trying to **help God**. *Are you pursuing a relationship with God through faith in Jesus **alone**? Or are you adding works? Do you strive to grow in your relationship with God through faith in Jesus **alone**? Or are you adding works?* Freedom from sin and death comes only through Christ's work by His atoning death. [Galatians 4:21-31](#) teaches that **Faith brings freedom; works bring slavery**. God does not need your help. **Trust in His grace through Christ.**

Closing Scripture: [Ephesians 2:8-9](#) “8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”