

Message Title: “True Sons and Daughters of Abraham” (Gal. 4:21-31)

Opening Reading:

I. Introduction

A. The Apostle Paul was a theologian. He studied God as God had revealed Himself through the Old Testament, through the person of Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit as He wrote to honor God and strengthen the church.

1. Our God has chosen to reveal Himself most clearly through His Word, which is an immeasurable blessing to us, the church. God has revealed Himself through plain language.

a. For example, He chose to utilize men to write the New Testament at a point in history when most of the world used common Greek. Further, God reveals Himself in terms we understand – as Light, as a shield, as a Father, as a Son. Through the Bible, God has shown us – all of us, no matter our educational background – who He is and what He requires.

b. Here is what Martin Luther had to say about the clarity of Scripture: “But, if many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures, but from [our] own blindness or want [i.e. lack] of understanding, who do not go the way to see the all-perfect clearness of the truth... Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear scriptures of God” (Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*).

c. Mark Twain, who openly mocked Christianity, said, “**It’s not what I don’t understand about Jesus that bothers me; it’s what I do understand that bothers me.**”

2. The overall message and teaching of the Bible is clear enough for even the most simple, uneducated person to understand. And yet, there are many difficult passages. Here is what the Apostle Peter had to say about Paul’s letters: “**There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures**” (2 Peter 3:16b).

a. Tonight, we come to one of those passages. Galatians 4:21-31 is widely regarded as one of the most difficult passages in all of Paul’s letters to understand. But this is one of the wonderful blessings of verse-by-verse expositional preaching. You and I are forced out of our comfort zones to deal with difficult passages and wrestle with both their meaning and their application.

b. I will boil my interpretation of this passage down to two simple statements and we will work from there:

1) There are only two types of people in this world: those who are born of the flesh and those who are born the promise - that is, born again.

2) Those who are born of the promise can expect two things: persecution from those born of the flesh and a glorious inheritance from God, the maker and keeper of the promise.

c. This passage is challenging, but I believe that working through it will yield a greater love for God based on a greater understanding and appreciation of His grace as well as a sober but hopeful view of what those born of the promise can expect.

II. Main Point 1: Born of the Flesh or the Promise? (21-27)

A. (read 21) To whom is this passage addressed? Those “**who desire to be under the law.**” Paul says, “Ok. You want to be under the law? Well, have you ever read it before?”

1. (read 22-23) Paul, the Jewish scholar, the Jewish theologian, tells them that Abraham had two sons – one of which was by a slave woman, his wife’s servant Hagar, and one of which was by a free woman, his wife Sarah.

2. Some of you may not be familiar with this history, which is recorded in Genesis 12-21. I would encourage you to go back and read it. I’m going to give you the highlights:

a. In Genesis 12, God appeared to Abraham and told him that He was going to make a nation out of him – even though he was 75, his wife was about 65, and they were childless.

b. In Genesis 15 (many years later), God appeared to Abraham again. He said, “**Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.**” But Abraham was worried. He reminded God that he was still childless. So God took him outside and reconfirmed His promise to give him a son and to make a great nation out of him – as numerous as the stars.

c. By Genesis 16, they still had no child. So Sarah, Abraham’s wife, comes up with a plan: **go sleep with my servant Hagar**, and maybe that’s how we’ll have kids. Well, the plan worked from a human standpoint – Hagar conceived and bore Ishmael. This made things like a bad Jerry Springer episode pretty quickly – now Sarah and Hagar, Abraham’s baby-mamma, were at each other. Abraham was 86 at this point.

d. In Genesis 17, Abraham is 99 years old. It’s getting silly now. God reaffirms his promise to Abraham to give him a son by his wife Sarah. **Abraham laughs** at that, and then pleads with God, “**Oh that Ishmael might live before you!**” To which God replies, “**No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac**” (which means he laughs). God would have the last laugh here.

e. In Genesis 18, there is still no son. Ishmael is now more than thirteen years old. God confirms again that Sarah will have a son, but adds that it will happen by the very next year. **Sarah overhears this and laughs.**

f. Now let's pick up in **Genesis 21:1-10 (read)**. Abraham is saddened by his wife's request, but this turn of events is from the Lord to make a theological point – the very point of our text tonight in Galatians 4:21-31.

3. You see, the false teachers had convinced the Galatians that if they would accept the Law, accept circumcision, that they would then be accepted by God as Abraham's sons and therefore as God's sons.

a. But anyone who knows the Law, who knows the Old Testament, knows that there is a problem with this theory. Abraham had *two sons* – one by a slave woman, and one by a free woman.

b. Even though these boys had the same father, one boy was the heir and one boy was not. That's the physical side of what's going on.

c. Paul gets to the spiritual reality in verse 23: **“But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.”**

1) The spiritual side of what is going on here is what is important and what is represented by the physical side. Ishmael, the son born of the slave woman, was **conceived by the flesh** – by **man's ways, man's plans**, apart from God.

2) Isaac, the son of the free woman, was **conceived by God's promise** – by **God's ways, God's plans**, with God's miraculous intervention on behalf of a couple that was so far past the age of child-bearing it was silly.

4. But Paul does not stop there (**read 24-25**). Paul says that the slave woman, Hagar, represents Mount Sinai in Arabia, where the Mosaic Law was given, which also corresponds to physical Jerusalem – the Jews under the Mosaic Law.

a. You will remember this from **Galatians 3:22-24 (read)**. So what does the flesh, man's works, man's attempt to earn righteousness by the Mosaic law, lead to? It leads to slavery! The Law held us as prisoners because of our inability to live up to God's perfect standard. That's what the slave woman, Hagar, represents.

a. But the free woman, Sarah, represents the heavenly Jerusalem (**read 26-27**). This is what we saw in Galatians 3:29: **“And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”**

B. So what does this mean for us? Is this merely information, theology for theology's sake? Absolutely not! Here's what you must understand:

1. Every person is born of the flesh or of the promise. Spiritually, there is no other birth.

a. Here is what Matthew writes when JTB saw the Pharisees coming to his baptism: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire'" (Matt. 3:7-10).

b. Here's what Jesus told Nicodemus: "**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God**" (John 3:3).

c. This is what we find in John 8:31-38: "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." And then he tells them their father is the devil.

d. Abraham had two sons: one a slave by a slave mother, one free by a free mother. There are two types of people: those **born of the flesh, enslaved to sin** and those **born of the promise, set free by the Son**.

1) Ishmael was born of the flesh – by man's ways, by man's plans. **Ishmael stands for man's attempt to achieve God's results through his own works.** This kind of religion results in slavery.

a) And how do you know if you are a slave? What did Jesus say? Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. Commit one sin, you are a slave. Commit 50,000, you are a slave. Everyone is a slave to sin.

b) Just as Ishmael, the slave-son, was kicked out of his father's house, those who commit sin are kicked out of the Father's house because they are slaves – slaves to sin.

2) But the son remains forever. Isaac was Abraham's son born free by Sarah, a free woman, by God's promise. **Isaac stands for God's work on behalf of man, apart from man's works.**

a) Jesus says if the Son (Himself) sets you free, you will be free indeed. And as we learned in Galatians 3:26-4:11, we become God's sons and daughters through faith in Christ.

b) Are you a child of the flesh or of the promise? Are you a slave to sin or have been set free by faith in the Son, Jesus?

c) If you've been set free by the Son, are you walking in freedom from sin or have you returned to slavery, walking in slavery instead?

e. Every person is either born of the flesh or the promise and we show we are born of the promise by placing our trust initially and in an ongoing way in Jesus, then walking in freedom as sons and daughters rather than walking as slaves to sin.

III. Main Point 2: The Expectation of those Born of the Promise: Persecution and Inheritance (28-31)

A. (read 28-31) So, if we are sons and daughters by faith, born of God's promise, what should we expect? Paul says that we can expect two things: persecution and inheritance.

1. First, we can expect persecution. You will recall from Genesis 21 the human reason why Hagar and Ishmael were kicked out of Abraham's house: Ishmael, now a young man in his late teens, mocked little Isaac when he was weaned at 3.

a. It's important to note that Ishmael was not some outsider, some enemy of the family. He was Isaac's half-brother, Abraham's son. Similarly, most persecution and difficulty that we endure is going to occur not outside of the church but from within.

1) John Stott reminds us, "The Lord Jesus was bitterly opposed, rejected, mocked and condemned by His own nation. The fiercest opponents of the apostle Paul, who dogged his footsteps and stirred up strife against him, were the official church, the Jews...and 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" (*TMOG*, 127).

2) Many of you know this firsthand. You may have experienced persecution at the hands of family members, roommates, coworkers, or friends who claim to be believers.

b. Wherever the persecution comes from, the Bible is clear how we are to handle it. Peter writes his first letter to those who are **"rejected by men but in this sight of**

God chosen and precious” and says this: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” (1 Peter 4:12-16).

- 1) Peter affirms what Paul wrote – we must **expect persecution** and not be surprised when suffering comes as though something strange were happening.
- 2) We are to **rejoice in suffering** because when we suffer, we share in Christ’s sufferings – we understand what He went through on our behalf.
- 3) If you are having trouble rejoicing in suffering, remember the truth of God’s word here – you are **blessed because the Holy Spirit rests on you!** Remember your deposit and what that deposit means – which leads to Paul’s next application for us.

2. Second, we can expect the inheritance of sons and daughters. In Ephesians 1:13-14, Paul calls the Holy Spirit the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance. And what kind of an inheritance does a child receive – specifically, in biblical terms, the firstborn son? The answer is *everything*.

a. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 8:31-39: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, [as in no – tribulation, etc. cannot separate us from the love of Christ] in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

- 1) Paul’s point, which is expressed in a powerful, moving way in these verses, is that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Not anyone who would bring charges against God’s elect – charges that we had not kept God’s Law, charges that we are undeserving, charges of any kind. Not anyone who would condemn us. And not persecution of any kind.

2) We are tempted to quit when things get hard, when opposition and difficulty arise. So why do we persevere – whether it's through pain in sports, through difficult courses in school, through hard assignments at work, or through trials and sufferings in life?

3) Ultimately, it is because we believe the end result is worth it. The victory, the degree, the promotion, and certainly the inheritance – which is undefiled and unfading, as Peter says – is worth it.

b. If you are a son or daughter of God through faith in Christ, you are free and will receive the greatest inheritance ever. But many of us have lost sight of that truth, and have frittered away time pursuing worldly goals and ambitions, worrying, and pitying ourselves because of the mockery and persecution we endure (which is nothing compared to our brothers and sisters worldwide).

c. Our inheritance is greater than everything this world could offer combined. But we have to keep this truth at the forefront of our minds in everyday life if we are to live as free sons and daughters by faith in Christ.

B. I want to return to Mark Twain's quote as we close. He said, "It's not what I don't understand about Jesus that bothers me; it's what I do understand that bothers me."

1. Understand this: there are only two types of people in this world – those born of the flesh and those born of the promise (that is, born again). Those born of the flesh are slaves to sin and have no inheritance in God's kingdom.

2. But those born of the promise are born again to eternal life by God's grace and can expect both persecution and a glorious inheritance. Count the cost: is the persecution worth the inheritance?