

Our Family Identity * Galatians 4:21-31 September 20, 215 * Rod Fultz

Today's definition of family is so broad almost any group of people, or animals, (maybe even plants) can be deemed a family. But in the Bible, a family is the union of one man and one woman in a covenant relationship called marriage. A Husband and a Wife joined together as one form a new entity called family. By God's grace, through that union, God often gives offspring so that the family grows and even multiplies.

This Design is not merely the basic building block of society, but was created in order to depict God the Son's relationship with His Bride, the Church. As the Bride of Christ relates to her Husband through the union of the Spirit, Gospel seed is sown in the world new children of God are created through that Word. God births His children into the Church and through the Church so that His family grows and multiplies. That is what we want our local church to be a picture of. Christ is our Husband, our head, our seed sower! Together, we are His Bride and we are in the business of birthing God's children through the gospel.

Today, as we return to our study of Galatians, Paul is going to teach us about Our Family Identity. It is the heritage we share with believers of every age and of every tribe and tongue. You may recall that the occasion (the reason) Paul wrote this letter to the Galatian churches is that Judaizers had been traveling around the region attempting to lure believers back into an earth-based religion, back under the System of Law keeping (Moses). It was nothing short of an attempt to undermine the formative work Paul had begun in the churches.

So, in (4:19) Paul had said that he was "again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ was formed in" them. In other words, Paul was laboring in prayer and in admonishing them in love so that they would increasingly be shaped into the image of the Risen Christ, instead of being duped into trying to achieve righteousness by their own works. As we come to 4:21 it is important to remember that this is an argument. Paul is trying to refute falsehood, and he wisely does so on the opponents own turf. He goes to the very Law they wanted to trust in and correctly interprets what the ancestry now represents as Paul sets Christianity apart from the Old Covenant of Law. I want you (if you have been born from on high through the gospel) to see the family benefits you share with every believer of all times

Galatians 4:21–31 (ESV)

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.

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.”

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.

You probably know that unbelieving Jews banked their inclusion in God’s chosen people almost exclusively on physical genealogy. They proudly declared (like the Jews in Jesus’ day): Abraham is our father. So Paul says, good but have you read in the Law who your momma was? Leon Morris informs us that in ancient times, the mother determined the status of the children (not the father). So if your mother was a slave, you were a slave. If your Mom was free you were free.

If you have read Genesis, you know that God made Abraham and Sarah the promise that He would give them a son to be the heir of all His promises which He made to Abraham. But Abraham & Sarah got tired of waiting so, like we are prone to do, Sarai decided to make it happen. We do that in almost every area of life, do we not? We manufacture some “blessing” through contriving whatever means we have to do it our way. We manipulate people, blur the difference between right and wrong to achieve our purpose. Sarah had a brilliant plan. It was obvious that God was late or had forgotten. Forget this waiting on the Lord and his timing. Life is too short. Let’s do this!

If that describes you today I want to urge you to recognize your error. Give up your human devices. Quit trying to make it happen. Instead, trust God’s promises and act in faith.

Sarah gave Abraham her maid Hagar (an Egyptian slave) as his wife. (That was part of the evil of slavery. The child born of a slave would automatically become the property of her owner). Instead of leading his wife, Abraham said the plan sounded good to him. He took Hagar, went into her tent, and she conceived and bore a son. They named him Ishmael.

In God’s mercy, He did not give up on His promise but visited Abraham and Sarah again and reaffirmed it. Abraham said good! We have you covered God. Here is the young man Ishmael right here, but God said:

Genesis 15:4 (ESV)

“This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”

By God’s grace and through His unchangeable promise, Sarah did conceive and bear a son, the man we know as Isaac. Ishmael was the “natural” produce of the flesh. He was born to a slave. But Isaac was the child of promise. Paul is saying to those who wanted to be under Moses instead of Christ that they are proving that they are children of slavery, children of the flesh.

Galatians 4:21–23 (ESV)

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.

You might be thinking, “What does that have to do with me? I am not Jewish and have no desire to be under the Law of Moses.” It has everything to do with you because, like Ishmael, you were born into slavery, the slavery of sin.

John Stott – “Everyone is a slave by nature, until in the fulfillment of God’s promise he is set free. So everyone is either an Ishmael or an Isaac, either still what he is by nature, a slave, or by the grace of God set free.”

Jesus said it is not hard to tell if you are a slave. Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. Think about that. Once you are convicted something is sin but you feel compelled to do it anyway, are you not controlled by sin? By contrast, if you believe in the promise of eternal life in Christ Jesus, that Jesus paid the ransom for your sin on the cross, you have been set free from both the penalty and the power of sin! And you are increasingly being set free from the practice of sin – as you believe. That’s the indicator that while you were born into sin, God has caused you to be born again (through His promise) into eternal freedom.

Our Family Identity

1. We are Born through Promise

The birth of Isaac was miraculous. Abraham was over 100 years old and Sarah was over 90. But this wasn’t just an aged couple that needed a little hormonal help. Sarah had been barren her entire life! This was God opening her womb and then giving her the ability to birth a child through faith in His Promise. If you are a Christian, the Bible says something similar about you. It says that your soul (like Sarah’s womb) was dead. You were an enemy of God, but He came (through His word) giving you a promise, the same one He gave Martha:

John 11:25–27 (ESV)

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

You said yes, I do believe that is who you are and yes, I do believe that I have eternal life in your name. You are the Christ, the Son of God. And God says to you _____, “Flesh and blood has not revealed that to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” And...

1 Peter 1:23 (ESV)

you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

That is who makes up the Family of God. Not people of a certain ethnicity or educational level but those whom God has caused to be born again. You have been birthed into the family of God through His promise. Our beginning is with God. He decided to bring us out of sin and into Christ through the promise of the gospel. So Paul says (down in v. 28):

Galatians 4:28 (ESV)

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

See why the promises of God in Scripture are so vital to our identity? They tell us, no matter how we feel at any given moment, who God says that we are. Like Isaac, and just as miraculously, we were born spiritually through promise

Our Family Identity

2. We are Children of Freedom

I heard a testimony of a former Muslim woman whom God saved through the gospel in her early 20's. She said that growing up, she was born into Islam. No choice. In Islam, Allah is very distant. He only cares about morality and she said it felt like a sharp painful rock she carried around in her heart all the time. Every time she thought of God, she only felt the pain and weight of her sin. That is the slavery of being under Law. Our sin is continually exposed, but the freedom of grace in Christ is never seen trying to earn salvation through works in what Alan Cole calls "a fruitless and hopeless bondage." Paul says that is exactly what these false teachers were doing: bearing children for slavery! But, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, that is not who we are. Christ has set us free! God has made us children of freedom.

Galatians 4:24–26 (ESV)

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.

When Paul says he is interpreting the events of the two women allegorically, he is actually answering his opponents on their terms. This is what was known as a Rabbinic argument and the format is precisely the logic the Jews followed in interpreting texts. Paul says: Hagar (slave wife) is Mt. Sinai (where the Mosaic Law was given). She corresponds to the present Jerusalem. Jerusalem is his way of referring to all Jews who had rejected Jesus. much like when world leaders say, "Washington's position on this is..." they are referring to America as a whole, as in our capitol city, Washington, equals America.

In a much deeper way, the earthly city of Jerusalem represents the Jews, especially those still trying to earn salvation under the Law. Literally, the phrase "corresponds to" in verse 25 equals "marches with." In other words, just as Hagar was a physical slave (and bore children into physical slavery) so the present, earthly city of Jerusalem is in spiritual bondage with one another under the Law. If Paul tried he could not have insulted the Judaizers any more deeply. First, they prided themselves on being the offspring of Isaac, not that despised mother of all Arabs, Hagar.

Second, when they heard of Jerusalem being in bondage what would first pop into their mind is the miserable state of being under Roman rule (which was an act of judgment) so it rub salt in the “wound”

Third, what is this talk of a new Covenant, they would have said. That is all future after Messiah comes.

Paul says nope, Jesus is the New Covenant and these two women serve to exemplify and symbolize the marked contrast between the spiritual bondage which the Old Covenant System produces and what the New Covenant of Grace in Christ provides. The Old Covenant is based on faith in yourself. If you keep the rules, you get the credit. Only it is never enough because you keep losing. The New Covenant (in Christ) is based on God taking responsibility and action to save His people and credit them with freedom from sin!

John Stott- “In the law God laid the responsibility on men and said “thou shalt , thou shall not ; but in the promise God keeps the responsibility Himself and says ‘I will , I will ’”

But not so with the true family of God!

Galatians 4:26

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

“Our” refers to believers in Jesus, both Jew and Gentile in every age. We are children of the free woman! She is our mother. In every age, and in every culture, the concept of mother is the means of nurture, love, protection and care. (By the way moms, I cannot think of a more important job in all the world.) In fact for most people, to say mom is to say home.

The Jerusalem above is our home, our mother land. She is where we want to be, where we belong. She is free: free from sin, free from works, free from disease, free from strife and free from hate. She is life indeed. The OT prophets made it clear that the Temple of God and even the city of Jerusalem itself was an earthly model of a heavenly reality. Every Jew believed that in the eschatological age, this New Jerusalem (in all her perfections and beauty) would one day come to earth and replace the miserable one currently on earth.

But the NT teaches us that this is not some mere replacement of New for Old, like you would change out your kitchen cabinets. It is the true city of God in all her perfection. It is the reality that Believers in Christ have already become citizens of and, in spirit, are already worshipping there in Spirit right now. The author of Hebrews contrasts our worship to those still under Law:

Hebrews 12:22–24 (ESV)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

It is the New Jerusalem where Christ is now reigning at the right hand of God, where He is making intercession for us and where His blood is presented as proof that our sins are forgiven! We are Children of freedom in His Name.

Our Family Identity

3. We Rejoice in Our Future!

Life here in a sin-cursed world is hard. One of the most painful evidences of the curse of sin is called barrenness. Yet, infertility was a prominent theme for women in the line of Christ in the OT. Not just Sarah, who had to wait on the Lord for the Promise to be fulfilled, but Isaac's wife Rebekah was also barren. Whats up with that? Isaac is the child of promise!

It doesn't stop there, with Jacob and Rachel. Some of you know the pain and agony of a barren womb when you desperately want to bear children. You long for your family to grow and even multiply. Your future seems uncertain. You don't exactly feel like rejoicing. Sometimes we feel like that as a church, don't we? We sow gospel seed. We try to water it, fertilize it in people's lives. Yet it often feels like it is one step forward, two steps back. God says to us today, believe my promises, Children of Freedom, and rejoice based on what I say is going to happen.

Galatians 4:27 (ESV)

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."

Paul is quoting here from Isaiah 54. It was originally written to Israel while they were in captivity for their sin in Babylon. Their future looked bleak. Remember how the Psalmist wrote, "How can we sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land?" It felt as if God had abandoned them. The Jerusalem they loved was bereft of all her children (barren) while all of the pagan "married" nations around her prospered.

God did indeed fulfill this prophesy to Israel. He brought them back to Jerusalem and they multiplied. But Paul is saying that was not the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy. Who can tell me what Chapter in Isaiah comes before Isaiah 54? Isaiah 53 (from beginning to end) is a detailed prophetic picture of the suffering of the Messiah on the cross, where Jesus bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, where He was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, where God smote His Son and afflicted Him with our sin. Jesus poured out His soul unto death and bore the sin of many. The result of the full atonement foretold in Isaiah 53 is the immediate hymn of praise in Isaiah 54.

Paul quotes it here (Tom Schriener says) welcoming the sudden arrival of the new age! Do you get that? Once your sin was paid in full, Zion is beginning to bear children!! And she will not stop until there is a number which no one can count from every tribe, tongue, and nation standing before the throne shouting salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!

Christian, you can rejoice in our future because it is very bright. As you go through life – going to work, raising kids, looking at what is happening in the world on the internet – and you feel like you don't belong here, it's because you don't! You are a pilgrim on your way to your true home. It will not take faith to rejoice once you see Jesus. God wants you to rejoice now while you walk in the midst of people who hate you without a cause because persecution for Christians is just beginning in America. But you can rejoice in the future God has promised His children:

Galatians 4:28–31 (ESV)

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.

At the end of the age, all those who feign allegiance to Christ will be culled out of the Church. All the hypocrites and the outwardly religious who are still in slavery to sin will be thrown into the lake of fire (worm does not die and the fire is not quenched). No matter how good their life appears to be right now, no matter how prosperous and happy they seem to be, unless they repent their future is literally abysmal. But you who trust in Christ are no longer children of the slave woman. You are children of promise. You are children of freedom. Rejoice with all your heart in our future together as God's global family.