

The Children of Promise

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if you've been with us for the last three Galatian sermons, you may have picked up that the main point of each sermon has largely been the same.

In fact, I think I might have said so one week, that what Paul's doing over the last few chapters, from chapter 2, verse 16 onwards, is to explain on his claim in that verse.

In chapter 2 of verse 16, where he says that we can only be justified or made right before God by faith in Jesus and not by observing the law.

And the reason he says this is clear, because the Jews that have come from Jerusalem to Galatia are telling the Galatians that on top of following Jesus, they needed to observe the law in order to be saved.

But this was a false gospel, leading them away from the truth and robbing them of their salvation. Instead, the true gospel is that justification is by faith alone.

[1 : 0 0] It's also where true freedom lies. Hence, we've got the title of our series, True Gospel, True Freedom. So if you look at your outline, by way of a brief recap, let me just show you what Paul has been arguing since chapter 2.

So in chapter 3, verses 1 to 18, Paul explains how it's been justification by faith all along. And even the law in the Old Testament itself foreshadowed this through Abraham's faith.

His faith, he was made righteous by faith. In addition, it was in Genesis as well that God gave the promise that even the Gentiles, those who are not Jews, like the Galatians, would one day be justified by faith.

Then the week after that, in verses 19 through to 29, Paul shows how God gave the law for a different purpose, to prepare Israel and to prepare us for the coming of Jesus.

It's to help us to see our need for him because we cannot meet God's standard, which is in the law, by ourselves. And so the law was given to point us to Jesus, to show us God's character, and now that we are Christians, to guide our way of life in Christ.

[2 : 2 1] And then two weeks ago, we looked at chapter 4, and we learned there that returning to the law isn't a neutral thing. It's not like how sometimes you hear the doctors say, you know, you can eat vitamin supplements, you know, it's not going to cure you of your ailment, but, hey, it's not going to harm, so, you know, go for your life.

No. Trying to get right with God by obeying the law is actually harmful. It enslaves us again when we are free. For the Gentiles, they may not be turning back to pagan worship to be enslaved, which is what they've left, but trying to obey the law had the same effect.

So Paul pleads with them not to do so, and he keeps going on in the same vein tonight, in our passage. Tonight, however, there's also an emphasis on our freedom.

So if you're feeling like you're hearing this same thing over and over again, then the reason for that is you are. And yet, Paul's keen to drive home this message to the Galatians, and so it probably doesn't hurt us to hear this message again.

But Paul tonight uses a different imagery, which he borrows from Genesis, and this time, he uses two women to illustrate his point.

[3 : 44] And so on your next heading, in the outline, you see that Paul tells us the story of two women who each represent a covenant, and ultimately, they also represent two cities.

But to understand what Paul says, we need to be familiar with the story of these two women. So let me first read what Paul says in verses 21 to 23, and then we'll look at the story.

Tell me, verse 21, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it's written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman, and the other by the free woman.

His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as a result of a divine promise. Now Paul here doesn't mention the names of the women, nor their sons, although Isaac we see is mentioned a bit later.

But it's clear who they are, because Abraham is mentioned. And so the slave woman is Hagar, and actually she is mentioned later on, and the free woman is Sarah, who is not mentioned, or Sarai.

[4 : 50] And you'll find their story in Genesis chapter 16. There in verse 1 we read, Now Sarai, and it's on the slide, so you can follow along, Abraham's wife had borne him no children, but she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar.

So she said to Abraham, that's Sarai said to Abraham, The Lord has kept me from having children. Go sleep with my slave. Perhaps I can build a family through her. Abraham agreed to what Sarai said.

So he sleeps with Hagar, and a son, Ishmael, is born. Now what's going on here? What's the spiritual significance of what is happening? Because if you think about it, it's not like Ishmael's birth was natural, and somehow Isaac's, the son of divine promise, was somehow supernatural.

No, both of them were conceived by Abraham, and both were his seed. So that can't be the distinction. Neither is it that Hagar was a slave, and Sarah wasn't.

Although, the fact that Hagar is a slave, her status as a slave, does matter later on in Paul's illustration. Rather, if you read, Paul distinguishes Ishmael from Isaac by calling him a son according to the flesh.

[6 : 11] While Isaac is a son as a result of divine promise. So you see, Ishmael was a son born out of human decision. He's the result of Abraham and Sarah's impatience, who couldn't wait for God to fulfill their promise, his promise to them, and so took things into their own hands.

They decided to do it themselves, as it were, and bring about a son for Abraham by themselves. On the other hand, Isaac comes as a result of God's promise.

He's promised by God before Ishmael was born, but he's born only after all human effort and avenues have been exhausted. Where Abraham's only hope left was to trust God and to throw himself on God's mercy.

That's why Isaac is the son of divine promise. And it's this distinction that of doing it themselves versus relying on God's promise that Paul now uses to compare the two covenants that he's been talking about so far.

One which comes from Sinai, which is the law, and the other which comes from promise. So, if we go back to Galatians chapter 4 and verse 24, let's read on, and it says, these things are being taken figuratively.

[7 : 33] The women represent two governors. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves. This is Hagar. Now, Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem because she is in slavery with her children.

But the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother. So, Paul is using Hagar and Sarah's sons figuratively because when it came to deciding how to be right before God, remember, we're thinking justification here, obeying the law corresponds to the way that Ishmael was born while faith in Jesus corresponds to the way Isaac was born.

Ishmael represents trying to get God's blessing by human decision, which is similar to what the Jews were doing, taking the way to salvation into their own hands by trying to keep the law.

The law, it says here, is associated with Mount Sinai. That's where Moses handed down the law and if you look at the map, it's actually right at the bottom of the Arabian Peninsula.

It's nearly out of my map actually. But although that's where the law was originally given, Paul is now saying that it corresponds the present city of Jerusalem because that's now the epicenter for law keeping, for Judaism.

[9 : 01] But as we shall see soon in more detail, this way of access to God leads only to slavery. They're just like Hagar and her son.

It leads to us being slaves if we try to keep the law. But Paul then says now that there's another way to God and that's the covenant that is a result of divine promise.

And this covenant too is represented by another city, one called Jerusalem from above or a heavenly Jerusalem. So if you look at my slide, we have Hagar, the slave woman and her son representing the covenant in Sinai, that's the law, corresponding to the present city of Jerusalem.

That's on the left hand. And then we have Sarah, the free woman, and her son Isaac and they represent the covenant based on divine promise and it corresponds to the city of Jerusalem but this time Jerusalem from above.

Now, the present city of Jerusalem we've talked about, it's clear, we know where it is on the map, but what is the Jerusalem that's from above? Well, it turns out that if you read the Old Testament, there's a lot of description about Jerusalem.

[10 : 18] Many of you will know that Jerusalem has long represented the place where God dwells among his people. That's why the temple was built in Jerusalem, that's why Israel's kings reign from there.

And that's why Jerusalem is the place that people go to during the year to meet with God and to offer gifts and offerings. And so when the people of Israel rebelled against God, Jerusalem is the city that is judged as a sign of this fractured relationship.

And indeed, that's what happened during the exile where God's king and people were cast out from Jerusalem. But then we also have prophecies that follow that talk about what will happen to Jerusalem after that.

And one of those is in our first reading for tonight in Isaiah 54. And you may have noticed if you've been paying attention that Paul himself quotes from verse 1 in verse 27 of Galatians 4.

So in verse 27 we read this, Be glad, barren woman, you who have never born a child, shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor, because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.

[11 : 38] Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. Now if you just read the quote from Galatians, you probably think that this prophecy was speaking about Sarah or some other barren woman.

But of course, we've turned to Isaiah 54 itself, haven't we? And when we do that, what we realize is that God's actually speaking of Jerusalem. He's speaking of Jerusalem with her people in exile.

She's the barren woman. She's the desolate woman. There's no specific reference to Jerusalem in chapter 54, but if you look at verse 11 of that chapter, she's referred to as the afflicted city.

And actually, if you read the surrounding chapters, chapter 52, she's actually identified as Jerusalem or Zion. But here in Isaiah 54, the prophecy is one of hope and restoration, of a time after the exile when her glory is about to be restored and she's going to be filled with children again.

But what's important to note is that the means by which this restoration will be achieved is not through natural means. Nor is it to be achieved by Israel taking things into her own hands.

[13 : 01] But the way God is going to do this is through the divine promise of a Savior, a suffering servant who will take the place of the people and bear their sins and punishment.

That's why we read into chapter 53 just before this passage. Now, as Annette said, this is the suffering servant song. And in verse 11, which I put up again on the slide, it says in particular of this servant, after he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied by his knowledge.

which my righteous servant will justify, remember how we're talking about justification, will justify many and he will bear their iniquities. And this prophecy we know is fulfilled by Jesus who came and by his death justified many.

And this is how people will enter the heavenly Jerusalem. Not by obeying the law, but by trusting in God's promise. That's how they become children of the promise or children of promise.

Now, before we leave Isaiah 54, I want to also point out verse 2 and 3 because here God says that when Jerusalem is restored, her citizens are not going to be confined to physical boundaries.

[14 : 25] Instead, God says to Jerusalem in verse 2 on the slide, enlarge the place of your tent, stretch out your tent curtains wide. Do not hold back, lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes for you will spread out to the right, no, this is right, to the right and to the left.

Your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities. So can you see that the Jerusalem from above is no longer geographically confined in that strip of land between the Mediterranean and Jordan like the present city of Jerusalem.

Instead, as God's spirit comes down from heaven and spreads out across the earth, he'll make children of promise across all nations and God's people will be found in every city and village and they wouldn't need to be Abraham's physical descendants in order to be his children.

But Paul makes a very clear distinction in our final few verses back in Galatians. You see, what Paul is saying is that you can only be a citizen of one Jerusalem.

Either you're part of the Jerusalem from above or you're part of the Jerusalem of the present city. Either you're like Ishmael, the son of the slave woman, or you're like Isaac, the son of the free woman.

[15 : 51] Either you share in the inheritance or you don't. So, follow with me in verse 29. Paul says, At that time, the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the spirit.

It is the same now. But what does scripture say? Get rid of the slave woman and her son. For the slave woman's son will never share the inheritance with the free woman's son.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman but of the free woman. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

So again, if you go back to my earlier slide, what I have now is two bubbles at the end. This is where Paul ends up. Each one of us belongs either to the left column or to the right but we can't both be both at the same time.

In fact, Paul says that we used to be slaves to sin in the left column but by the power of the Spirit, verse 29, we are born again as children of promise.

[17 : 00] We are set free from the left column so as to live in the heavenly Jerusalem in the right free by faith in Jesus. And so in my last point on the outline, Paul gives us two instructions, gives the Galatians and us two instructions that come out of that.

First, he says that we are to get rid of the slave woman and her son. For the Galatians that meant disassociating themselves with the Jews from Jerusalem and their teaching.

Stop allowing what they are saying to influence their faith. Here, it is likely that the Jews were actually trying to exert their authority over them.

Perhaps they are claiming that they are coming from the apostles and therefore they need to be listened to. Paul goes so far as to characterize this as persecution or perhaps I would call it bullying.

Now, we may not be under that kind of persecution today, but I think we need to be careful too as well, don't we? Firstly, what we teach and what we allow ourselves to be influenced by.

[18 : 12] we need to be discerning so that we protect ourselves from the lies about the gospel. We protect ourselves by believing and standing firm in the truth.

And if we are teachers of the Bible, then we are only to preach faith in Jesus as the means of salvation. We mustn't, whether subconsciously or consciously, apply pressure on people to do something else that you need to do something extra in order to be a better Christian or to be saved.

But second, Paul wants us to also stand firm in this freedom. Again, in chapter 5 and 6, we'll look more about what that means in future weeks. But at the start of it, in verse 1, and where we end up tonight, we're called to stand firm in the freedom of Christ.

And standing firm means not just maintaining the truth, but actually to align our lives and our faith as well to it. Our lives ought to be free in Christ, no longer burdened by the yoke of slavery.

And that yoke comes from trying to take salvation back into our own hands. Now, I don't know about you, but Aussies love the idea of DIY.

[19 : 33] Right? Do it yourself. That's why Bunnings makes so much money out of us. Now, I'm not really good at it, but I do get it in a sense, because there's a certain sense of pride and satisfaction that comes from doing it yourself, right?

There's this pink wall in my daughter's former bedroom, which I did for Emma, pastel pink. And then there's a lime green wall which I did for Lauren.

And even today as I look at it, it fills me with pride because I did it myself. The painter came around afterwards and, you know, the one who did the rest of the house and inspected it and, you know, just shaking his head and pointing to all the floors and stuff.

But it doesn't faze me one bit because I had done it myself. Now, the thing is that while DIY may be good for many things, it doesn't work for religion.

Because what DIY religion does is keep us enslaved. When we take salvation back into our own hands, then we're actually carrying the burden of having to meet the standards, whatever they may be, and to keep meeting it in order to be right with God.

[20 : 48] And I have to say, if you look at many of the major religions of the world, that's actually what they require of us, don't they? That we have to do it ourselves to be saved.

And sadly, some churches have done that as well, preaching the false gospel. It's also very much the same if you look at the whole self-help movement, and all those inspirational gurus on YouTube.

Sure, they promise a healthier, happier, and more fulfilled life. Or they ask you to join into some movement to create a better world. But they always come with conditions, don't they?

That we have to do it ourselves. perhaps it's this particular health regime you have to follow, perhaps it's some habit that they want to form, or some movement they want you to join in with.

But the moment you stop doing it, then the happiness or the satisfaction that they try and promise you disappears, doesn't it? So, instead of freedom, I mean, what is it actually?

[21 : 56] It actually enslaves you, doesn't it? You have to keep doing it. in order to find that happiness, satisfaction, fulfillment, whatever it is. How different it is with Jesus.

Because when we become children of promise, then our salvation does not depend on us, but on God keeping His promise. Everything hangs off His promise.

And that hangs off His character, whether He can be trusted or not. He can be trusted, then that's all we need. If God is trustworthy, then our salvation is actually secure.

And that's true freedom, isn't it? We just need to know that God can be trusted. And He can. There's a certain premium that's paid for promise keeping in our household, household, especially when it comes to parents keeping their promises to their children.

And I know sometimes the children in my house would rather go out and do it themselves, buy it with their own pocket money or something. But when the request is for something like a new iPad or MacBook, then the pocket money really doesn't go far enough.

[23 : 18] And so what they actually have to do is rely on Dad to keep His Word. And I see in their faces that can seem hard, can't it?

Because when that's all you have, all you can do is really just have to wait. Wait until the one who's promised makes it happen.

And I think sometimes that's how we feel about our faith in Jesus, that we can only wait and we don't know when God will act. In the meantime, we look around us and other people seem to be doing it themselves and getting ahead or getting a much better deal out of life.

But when you think about it, that's not true, is it? Because we do know that God has acted by sending His Son Jesus to die for us. And we do know that God has raised Him from the dead.

And so while we may not see fully the inheritance that God has promised us, we know that God's Word is trustworthy. Even though we may not know when Jesus is going to come again and we're going to inherit fully all that has been promised.

[24 : 30] So it's in that context that Paul tells us that we need to stand firm. Stand firm in this freedom of our faith and not go back to try and do it ourselves.

To try and create a sense of security or satisfaction with DIY religion. And so friends, if there's any of you here tonight that's still trying to do it yourself, then I hope you've caught a glimpse of how futile that is.

In the last weeks that we've been looking at relations, we've seen just how impossible it is to keep God's law perfectly. And even if we could do it theoretically speaking, it only becomes a burden for us.

It's like studying for your exams, perhaps your maths exam. I know some of you are good enough to get a perfect score, 100 marks. Now, when that happens for the first time, it's just exhilarating, isn't it?

How many of you have had that feeling? No, you don't want to tell me. But you get it for the first time, it's such a great feeling, isn't it? But then let's say you start to get that aim that, you know, I'm then going to now, because I can do it one time, I'm going to keep getting perfect score all the time.

[25 : 43] What does it become? It becomes a burden, doesn't it? Because all it takes is one careless mistake, and the record is, you know, broken or blemished.

And that's the same way with DIY religion, or trying to obey the law. It becomes a yoke of slavery. And I'm sure some of you, in your own life, have probably experienced that.

You've tried, and then you've gone, oh, I've done this, but I have to keep doing this, and it becomes a burden. But the good news is that Jesus has set us free from all that.

And now, what God promises is that all we need is to have faith in Him. And when we do, we become children of promise, sons of the free woman, not sons of the slave woman.

We become citizens of the Jerusalem from above, and we're born again, by the Spirit, through the gracious work of God. What a great freedom that is.

[26 : 45] Well, let me give thanks to God for that. Let's pray. Father, thank You for the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus. Thank You that You are trustworthy and that we can put our faith wholly in Your promises to us.

Help us to reject DIY religion in all its different guises and forms, even if some of these forms look like Christianity.

But they actually rely on us doing things or following certain things apart from faith in Jesus. No, Father, help us to keep trusting in Jesus to be right before You.

We ask this in His name, in the name of Jesus. Amen.