

The Gospel Family Tree

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[0 : 00] As we continue in the letter of Galatians, where Paul has reminded us so many times there's no other gospel, there's no other good news other than the good news that we are saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and not by our works.

And then he comes to this passage here, talking about the family of Abraham. And so we're going to think this morning about the gospel family tree for a few minutes.

Paul has already in chapter 3 used the story of Abraham, the example of Abraham to make the point that it was never God's intention to save people by the law.

He called Abraham by a promise 430 years before the law. And he never changed his intention that we're always saved by promise and not law.

Paul, in chapter 3, he talks about Abraham demonstrating the fact that it was never God's intention that the law would save us.

[1 : 02] It was always on the basis of grace and promise and covenant. And so now he's going to return to the family tree of Abraham to teach some important lessons on the topic of grace and promise.

So Galatians chapter 4 and at verse 21, let's read and hear God's word together. Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?

For it is 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 in the ordinary way, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. 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.

[2 : 06] But the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother. For it is written, Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children.

Break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labour pains, because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time, the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit.

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

Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. This is God's word.

[3 : 10] Now, as we look around us today, we discover that tracing our family history, tracing our family trees is becoming a big deal.

In fact, it's becoming big business. There are now a variety of DNA testing companies that you can send a sample away to. They can help you trace your origins and roots.

You can employ a DNA detective. If you don't know who your family is, if you want to find distant family members, there is the business of archive research, which grows all the time.

It's made its way into popular culture with TV shows like Who Do You Think You Are? Where celebrities are brought in and they meet with experts who can help them trace their stories.

Sometimes those stories can be really surprising, really shocking to those who are involved. But why is this big business to us? It's because family matters to us. Family connects us to people and to places.

[4 : 14] Family gives us that sense of roots and having a shared identity. Family is important for a sense of belonging. Now, central to the whole letter of Galatians is a question, who are the children of God and how can I become a child of God?

And in the background, Paul, who's writing the letter, is reacting time and again to false teachers who've been saying, On the one hand, because we are Jewish people and because we're keeping the law, we are God's children.

Because of our family tree that we can trace back to Abraham, we are in God's family. And on the other hand, they were saying to people who weren't Jewish, well, you're believing in Jesus, yes, but you also need to become Jewish.

You need to take on Jewish rituals and ceremonies. You need to be keeping the Jewish law if you really want to be saved and be a child of God. And so Paul is reacting to that and he's going to say, that's the wrong way to think about it.

We're saved by grace. We become children of God by God's loving kindness, not because of who we are and what we've done. And he's going to use Paul, Paul's going to use Abraham's family tree in order to teach that.

[5 : 32] He's going to give us a warning to say, don't rely on your family, don't rely on your own moral goodness. And he's going to give hope. He's going to say, because it comes as a free gift, there is good news for anyone who is willing to listen.

So our big question, how can I be a child of God? Now, boys and girls, let me speak to you for a few minutes. Sometimes in our families, we are very like our brothers and sisters.

Sometimes you're twins and then you're really, really like, you know, sometimes we have the same interests. We like doing the same kind of stuff together. Other times we're quite different.

Sometimes people wonder, are they actually in the same family because they're so different? Well, today in our story, Paul is going to tell us about two brothers who are in Abraham's family.

One's called Ishmael and one's called Isaac. And their stories are very, very different as we're going to think of it. And Paul says, we can actually think about these two brothers and think about them standing for two different ways to try and know God.

[6 : 45] One is the wrong way and one is the right way. So he's going to talk about this boy, this man called Ishmael. And he's going to say, Ishmael stands for the wrong way to try and know God, which is all about us thinking, well, if I try and be really, really good, then God will accept me.

God will welcome me. So if I try and be really good in my family, if I try and be good at school, go to church and read my Bible, keep the rules, Paul's saying, actually, that's not how we are saved.

That's not how we become a child of God. Because God's standards are higher than ours. So boys and girls, if I was to ask you, are you good at jumping?

Probably quite a few of you, if you're quite sporty, say, yeah, I'm pretty good. I'm probably better than some people in my class. So you'd have your own idea. Here's what good at jumping looks like. Maybe you could jump as high as this table.

Maybe you could jump as high as my head. Maybe. But if I said to you, here's what I think being good at jumping is. Can you jump high so you can touch the roof? That's a different standard, isn't it?

[8 : 01] That's an impossible standard. We could never get there. Even with a trampoline, we couldn't get there. And what Paul is going to remind us, he reminds us in this letter again and again, we cannot be good enough for God's perfect standard.

It's too high for us. So there needs to be another way. There needs to be another way for us to be children of God. So there's a right way. And that takes us to the other brother, not Ishmael, but to Isaac.

Isaac was the son of a promise. He came as a gift from God. And for anyone to be in the family of God, it comes as a gift of God.

It comes as a gift of his kindness. And what we need to do is not trust in our own goodness. It's to trust in Jesus. It's to trust that where we couldn't match God's perfect standard, Jesus can and Jesus did.

And he did it for us. And then he died to forgive our sin, to wash our sin away, to bring us to God. So as we listen to the Bible story, sometimes in our head, we think, I just need to be a really good boy.

[9 : 05] I need to be a really good girl. And Paul is saying, no, you need to trust in Jesus. You need to receive the promised grace from God. So let's remember that, boys and girls, as we work our way through our Bible passage here.

Two things I want to say. The first is it's important to know your family history in spiritual terms.

Now, who is Paul speaking to at this precise moment in his letter?

Look with me at verse 21. He says, tell me, you who want to be under the law. So he's writing to a whole church, but then he's writing to a group of people within the church, this group that want to be under the law.

In other words, they want to rely on God's law for their acceptance. He's writing and speaking to a group of people who are tempted to say, I need Jesus and I need the law.

So they're tempted to that way of thinking. Now, he says to them positively in verse 28 that they are brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. In verse 31, therefore, brothers and sisters, he'll say, you're children of the free women.

[10 : 17] You already have all these wonderful things. So he's warning them, don't go back to an old way, to a bad way of thinking. And to help them with that, he uses the story of Abraham again.

So verse 21, are you not aware of what the law says? First five books of the Bible, sometimes known as the law. Book of Genesis is where we find the story of Abraham.

And he's going to use that story to show them that being under the law, it is to be in slavery. And he's going to point them back to God's way of grace. So in verses 22 and 23, we get a summary of two branches of Abraham's family tree.

And boys and girls, you'll find on your worksheet, there's these details that you can fill in so that we can help to track with what Paul is saying. Let's read verse 22 again.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. So there are two mothers. We only get the name of one of them in this passage.

[11 : 25] Her name is Hagar. She's the slave woman. And then Abraham's wife is Sarah, described here as the free woman.

So this is taking us back to the story that we find beginning in Genesis 12, all the way to Genesis 21. And in that section, we find time and time again, God made promises to Abraham and to Sarah, promising that they would have a child, that God would bless them, that they would become a great nation, and that one of their seed would be the source of blessing for the whole world.

Those were promises to Abraham and to Sarah in particular. But as time passes in the story in Genesis, Abraham and Sarah are old and getting older, and Sarah can't have children.

And so we get to this point in Genesis chapter 16, where Sarah comes up with a new plan. She says to Abraham, I can't have children, so why don't you take my slave woman, Hagar, and start a family with her?

So we end up in Abraham's family tree. We have two mothers. We have Hagar, the slave woman, and we have Sarah, the free woman. And then we have two sons.

[12 : 49] Verse 23. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

So his son by the slave woman, again, is not given a name here, but we know in the Bible that this is Ishmael. And Paul says he's born in the ordinary way because he's the project of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar coming together, having this discussion, working out how to get a son, born in the natural way, representing human effort.

But then there's this other child mentioned, the child who's born as the result of the promise, and this is Isaac, who is the son of Sarah.

And he's not born in an ordinary way. He's born in an extraordinary, in a supernatural way, because his birth comes as a result of God's kindness, as a result of God's faithfulness to that promise that he'd made as a result of God's gracious provision to Abraham and to Sarah.

So Isaac comes as a gift of grace in response to that promise that they'd received. So here is Paul, and he's tracing out these two different branches of Abraham's family tree, but why is he doing it?

[14 : 13] What point is he making here? Well, he's trying to remind these Christians who are tempted to go back under the law and to become Jewish. He's saying being a child of God is not about physical DNA.

It's not about our biology. It's not about the family that we belong to. And nor is it about human effort. It's not about human effort at law keeping.

Rather, enjoying God's freedom is a gift to receive by faith. It's the message he's been bringing to us again and again in the book of Galatians.

Now, why is he making the point? He's making the point, remember, these are people who are free in Christ, but they're tempted to go back towards slavery. He's making the point to say to them that by trusting in Jesus, they're already adopted as children of God.

He's saying to them, don't forget, that's already yours. That's your status. Let's remind ourselves of Galatians 4, verses 4 and 5. He says, when the time had fully come, God sent his son Jesus, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law that we might receive the full rights of sons. [15:33] Verse 7, you're no longer a slave, but a son. And since you're a son, God has also made you an heir. You don't need anything else if you're trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation and your acceptance from God.

But this passage stands as a reminder to us that even as Christians, we stand in danger of what we might call legalism, relying on the law in order to be accepted by God.

If I do this thing, and if I don't do that thing, then God will love me more. He will value me more highly.

Or if I keep this list of things that I must do, then God will surely accept me. And on the other hand, if I do badly, if I fail, then perhaps God will love me less.

Perhaps God will want nothing to do with me. And we become very insecure or very proud and judgmental or despairing when our sense of salvation is rooted in what we are doing and how we are performing.

[16:50] And so Paul is reminding them that the gospel of grace gives us freedom from that. The knowledge that because we're in Christ, we are fully loved and accepted.

Let's think about it this way. Boys and girls, when it's your birthday time, do you find your parents coming with a sheet of paper and adding up your list of good things and bad things?

Do they say, oh wow, you did really well helping with the dishes and you're really kind and helpful. Oh, but you did that thing wrong and that thing wrong.

Therefore, I was going to give you this gift, but now it didn't quite make the good. We don't do that. We give out of grace and out of love and out of kindness. And we need to recognize that God is far more generous and loving towards His children.

And we have this invitation to joy and freedom and security in Christ if we are in Him. Because if we are in Him, we enjoy God's perfect gift, His perfect love.

[17:58] And it's when we are resting in that, when we are trusting in that, then we have also the freedom to obey. He's going to start talking about because you're free, you get to obey out of thankful hearts, not because you're afraid that you'll be judged, but because you want to please your Father.

So know your family history. All of us are either an Ishmael by nature in slavery to sin and far from God or we are an Isaac by God's grace set free.

Which family tree do we belong to and which family tree do we want to be part of? And we need to understand that it all depends on how we respond to Jesus, the King, to Jesus, the Lord and Savior. Do we turn from sin? Do we trust that He forgave sin? That He has the power to deal with the power and the penalty of sin to give us new life, to bring us to God?

And as Christians, how can we avoid this danger of legalism that some of the Galatian church was falling into? Again, it's about knowing your family history.

[19:15] Live with freedom and joy because you know that you're living in light of the promise and grace and because of Jesus' finished work on your behalf.

Take a gospel DNA test. What am I trusting in for my salvation? Am I trusting in Jesus alone or am I tempted to think it's Jesus plus my efforts, plus my law keeping?

If we're trusting in Jesus alone, we're told we're a child and an heir of God, we're in God's family with all the freedom that that brings. So know your family history and also know your family story. In verses 24 to 31, Paul moves away from a straightforward family tree and he begins to use allegory. He uses this family tree to stand for spiritual truth.

He's continuing to build his argument that we trust in grace and promise and not effort and law. So he's going to say these families represent different realities.

[20:23] First of all, the two families represent two different covenants. So look with me at verse 24. And we find that's exactly what he says.

These things may be taken figuratively for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai. So that's the covenant of law at Mount Sinai.

But then there's another covenant. There's the covenant of promise. Verse 28, Now you brothers like Isaac are children of promise.

So as I was saying just before we started reading the Bible that in Galatians chapter 3 Paul had already said promise comes first. Promise was always the only way to be a child of God.

And in actual fact the law's purpose is to lead us to see our own sin and to see why we need Jesus as Savior. And so Hagar and Ishmael represent living under the law whereas Sarah and Isaac represent living under the covenant of promise.

[21 : 32] And he goes further and he talks about two places. Verse 25, Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem because she is in slavery with her children.

So there's the physical city of Jerusalem in verse 25 and then verse 26 there's the Jerusalem that is above which is free or the heavenly Jerusalem. So one is a place filled with slaves marked by slavery.

The other is filled with children of God who are enjoying freedom. And that points us to these two conditions that Paul is driving towards. So one is slavery.

One covenant verse 24 again is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves. Verse 26, But the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother.

Now, we maybe don't get the sense of this but there is a real shock factor in what Paul has just said. So remember he's speaking against these false teachers, these Judaizers who are so proud of their family tree, so proud of their DNA, so proud of their law keeping, believing that that made them children of God.

[23 : 01] And he turns and he says to you spiritually you are slaves. You think you are free, you think you're children of promise but because you're not trusting in Jesus spiritually you're slaves.

Jerusalem is described as a city full of slaves because by and large they had rejected Jesus. They decided we don't need Jesus, we'll continue to trust in our own righteousness, in our own efforts at law keeping and so they rejected Jesus, God's Savior.

So Paul says to them when you trace your family story spiritually you discover a nasty surprise. I was reading about some of the highlights of that TV show Who Do You Think You Are?

I think it's been on for 10 seasons and one of the most surprising, shocking moments for one of the guests was when Ainsley Harriet, you know the TV chef, he was on finding out about his family history and he discovered that his great, great grandmother when she was just two years old in Trinidad was sold into slavery.

And so there was a real shock for him discovering that he was descended from this slave woman who he'd known nothing about. Paul wants to shock his readers to say to them look if you continue on this path that the false teachers are recommending your family story will be about slavery.

[24 : 37] You will make yourself slaves if you walk away from Jesus and his grace. To the legalist he's saying you think you enjoy promise and privilege because you're Abraham's children but because you reject Jesus your father is Ishmael not Isaac.

To rely on our own ability rather than the supernatural grace of God is to remain in slavery is to remain under judgment and this should stand as a warning to us.

I don't know how many of you have done the series called Christianity Explored but in one of those sessions there is a question that is asked why should God let you into heaven?

And there are various people who come up on the screen and they present answers that ultimately are not good enough but answers that many people rely on. I'm a good person.

I give to charity. I try and obey the law. I've never been to prison. I read my Bible. I pray. And what Paul teaches, what the Bible teaches is that any answer that begins because I, it is doomed to failure.

[26 : 01] The only way into God's presence, the only way to know and enjoy God's love is because Jesus. Because Jesus loved me. Because Jesus gave himself for me. Because Jesus died in my place and for my sins.

So he gives a warning about slavery and then he gives the promise, the reminder of freedom. Almost the flip side to Ainsley Harriet's story is the story told by C.S.

Lewis in *The Horse and His Boy*. I don't know how many of the boys and girls have read through some of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Well, in *The Horse and His Boy*, which I think is the third one in the series, the story begins with a boy called Shasta.

And Shasta was being raised by a really mean fisherman who was basically keeping him as a slave and he thought this man, this horrible mean man was his dad. But then he goes on this adventure, he runs away from home, goes on and it turns out he's actually a prince.

He's actually a son of the king living as a slave. But actually, he had this glorious freedom. And Paul is saying, look, you're wanting to go back to slavery but you have this glorious freedom to enjoy.

[27 : 13] That's what he's saying to us as a church. The opposite of slavery is freedom and the opposite of human effort is God's initiative, God's power, God's grace and that's represented by Isaac's family tree.

So in verse 29, at that time, the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born, how? Born by the power of the spirit.

So here is a reminder that Isaac was a gift from God. There is grace in evidence here. And Paul also parallels this with the story of Israel.

That's why he quotes in verse 27 from Isaiah chapter 54. These are words spoken to exiled Israel, feeling abandoned, feeling small, feeling weak and helpless.

Here is hope for them that God would restore them by his grace and would expand their family.

Here is promise that God's kingdom will be much bigger than anybody ever imagined.

[28 : 22] So Paul uses the story of Isaac and he uses the story of Israel to bring hope. Hope. Because it's all about Jesus, anyone can become a child of God.

It's not restricted to those who have the right family pedigree. It's not about our human family. It's not about our background and circumstances. It's not about our ability or morality.

It's all about faith in Jesus, trusting in who he is as the son of God and what he has done in coming to rescue us from our sin to bring us to God.

It's really important for us to notice how he closes off his discussion of these two family trees. Verse 29, we read about Ishmael persecuting Isaac.

And Paul says at the end of verse 29, it's the same now. That these false teachers are persecuting those who are trusting in Jesus. And then verse 30, what does the scripture say?

[29 : 30] Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son. So in Abraham's family, under Abraham's roof, there was fighting and there was tension.

There were two families, two brothers who couldn't live under the same roof. Ishmael was persecuting his younger brother Isaac. And there is this reminder, only the child of promise would receive God's spiritual inheritance, not Ishmael.

And then Paul applies the story to the church and says that in the same way, you cannot have existing in the same place a theology that rests on grace and a theology that rests on human works. One of them must go so that grace alone is left to stand. And so we must be really careful in our churches to preserve the gospel of grace to defend it from legalism which is always a danger that we face.

Which family story is ours today? Are we under law? Thinking it's all about do better, try harder and in the end I hope that God might accept me?

[30 : 43] Or are we under Christ where it is true security because we're resting on his finished work, his precious promises to us so that we can know that we are God's children because only in Jesus is there freedom to enjoy God's promise.

Only in Jesus can we become children of God through what Jesus came to do for us.