

The Mother of All Passages

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 March 2006

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray. Our Heavenly Father, we need your particular help this morning. We ask that you would draw close to us as we try and draw close to you and that by your Spirit you would form the Lord Jesus Christ in us continually.

For we ask it in his name. Amen. Please sit down. Well, if you would open your Bibles to Galatians chapter 4 on page 179, that would be just great.

As you do this, I just wanted to tell you a little story. When I was growing up as a teenager in Australia, it was a great mark of shame that if you knew that you were a direct descendant of one of the convicts, and during high school we had a teacher who came from a European country who when he was enraged with us as a class, which was always on Fridays in the middle two periods, he would yell at us, you are sons of convicts, that's all you are, which was not helpful for our behaviour after that.

You also may know that over the last 20 years, as Australia has celebrated 200 years of white settlement and sought to identify herself as independent from England, the sufferings and brutalities and injustices that were inflicted upon the convicts have become a source of enormous national pride and identification.

And Australians are a laid-back people and part of the reason has to do with the way that we were settled. Nowadays, if you can demonstrate that your family line goes back to one of the early convicts, you have an instant source of pride.

[2 : 02] And if you can demonstrate that your name, that you're a direct descendant of one of those people who came on the first fleet, you're royalty. I don't expect anyone here to understand that, unless you are brought up in Australia.

But the reason I mention it is that at the time of Jesus, and at the time this book was written, the Jews took terrific pride in being able to say, we are children of Abraham.

We can trace back our line straight to Father Abraham. And when the gospel message with the apostle Paul first went into Galatia, and men and women turned to the Lord Jesus, they turned from a pagan past.

They were not Jews. And they rejoiced in the freedom and forgiveness of the gospel. And when the apostle left and went back to Israel, a group of teachers came in who were Jewish Christians, and they said, look, what Paul has told you is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough.

You can be a follower of Jesus, but if you really want to be a son of Abraham, if you want to be a child of Abraham, you're going to have to take on all that Abraham and all the Old Testament took on in the law and circumcision.

[3 : 21] This letter of Galatians is a brilliant statement in the New Testament of the fact that there is one vital, central, essential element of our identity as the people of God.

It's that we have been crucified with Christ and that the Spirit of Christ has come to dwell in us. And that the way we began the Christian life through faith in Jesus Christ and faith in the promise of God is the way that we continue, grow, and will finish the Christian life.

And that if we turn back to the law as a way of relating to God, we move from freedom back into slavery. And so here in this passage we come to, in chapter 4, verse 21, the apostle goes on the front foot and he says, look, those people who are telling you that you have to do certain things to become children of Abraham, they're deceiving you.

The question is not, who is my spiritual father? But who is my spiritual mother? This is a very clever passage.

And I wonder whether, you know, last week we looked at that wonderful verse, verse 19 in chapter 4. The apostle says, I'm like a woman in labour until Christ is formed in you.

[4 : 39] He's got this mother thing on his brain right now and he says in this passage, your spiritual paternity is not the big deal. It is your spiritual maternity. Who is your spiritual mother is the question.

And in the passage he tells us about two different mothers. You see verse 22? Abraham had two sons, one by a slave, one by a free woman.

The son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman, through promise. Paul is referring to the sordid story of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah.

And it comes in Genesis chapter 16. If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you'll remember we looked at Genesis 15 where God seals the covenant with Abraham.

He lays out the carcasses in an act of great kindness. God walks through the carcasses. He takes on the covenant to himself. And then as Dan told us earlier today, he takes Abraham out and looks up at the night sky and says, you and Sarah, I'll make your children like stars in the sky.

[5 : 53] But there's a problem. The problem is that God is taking too long to fulfil his promises for Sarah's liking. And part of the reason that God relates to us by promises is to teach us to trust his word over time, to learn patience, to learn that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

But Sarah found the wait too difficult. It was excruciating. And the very first thing that happens when chapter 16 in Genesis opens is she says to Abraham, it's not going to happen to us.

I'm too old. Why don't you take my attractive young Egyptian slave girl, marry her and have a child? Which of course was legal at the time, but being legal does not make something according to God's will, which is something we can talk about another time. So here you are, you're Mr. Abraham, and your wife has given you a choice.

I can wait for God's miraculous promise, even though we are not getting any younger, or I can act now and I can make a family on my own through my own human ability.

[7 : 13] Sarah is old and getting older. I'm going to have to take things into my own hands. And so he marries Hagar and nine months later, they have a son called Ishmael.

And from that moment on, Hagar despises Sarah and Sarah despises Hagar. And for 12 years, there's hostility and cruelty and division in the house until we reach all the way up to Genesis 21. When Genesis 21 begins, we read these words, the Lord visited Sarah as he had said and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised and Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time that God had spoken and they called him Isaac.

Now here's the point. Here are two boys, two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Both sons can call Abraham father. They're both Abraham's seed, right?

But you couldn't have two more different children. Ishmael was born of a slave woman and therefore he is born into slavery. It's not a value judgment on him, it's just a statement of fact.

[8 : 26] Isaac is born of a free woman, of Sarah. And so he is born under the promise. And this is Paul's point in Galatians 4. Ishmael was born according to the flesh.

Isaac is born through promise. And let's think about this just for a moment. You see, Hagar and Ishmael are the most obvious thing to do in a world when it is clear that God just isn't coming through with the goods.

It's the obvious thing to do to take things into your own hands, isn't it? And to find a way out through using Hagar. Don't we live in a world that values skill, competence, ability and planning?

Hagar represents the temptation to do things my way, to make God's promise happen, to have a backup plan, to trust the fruit of my own work rather than the promise of God.

When it's too hard to wait for what God has promised, I just have to take things into my own hands. I've got to take control. I've got to act. And we all have Hagar strategies, don't we?

[9 : 36] We know what God has promised, but it's just too hard to wait and so I've got to have a backup plan. I've got to deal with this with my own human ability. This thing that I am missing, this vacuum that I have.

And we live in a culture of instantaneous gratification where there's no room for living by faith in promises, particularly from a God who is invisible. The culture says, you are not someone who waits, you are someone who chooses, you are someone to whom options must be given.

Don't wait for God to act, take things into your hands. You can't really trust the promise of God, you can't really trust the word of God because he does not have your best interest at heart.

Live by what you see, not by the word of God. And we take things into our own hands and we do the backup plan and we take the Hagar option and it always, always, always leads to disappointment.

You see, we want to take the blessing of God without God. We want to do what God says except not in his way at his time. I cannot wait for God to take away my shame.

[10:50] I cannot wait for God to fill what I feel is missing. And so we do this all the time. I mean, we do it with our sexuality, we do it with our careers. You can do it by getting a PhD or finding financial security or by working hard or making yourself terribly attractive and sexually beautiful.

But we can, but in doing that, we are trying to assume God's role. And when we do it, we live by flesh and not by the promise. And as I said before, the results are devastation.

Devastation in the family, disappointment for ourselves. This is what Paul has been saying all along. It is the difference between relating to God based on law and what I do or related on promise and what God does by his Holy Spirit.

And in verse 24, Paul says, now this is an allegory. These two women are two covenants. Now, there are some passages in the Bible that are more simple than others.

And I'm very aware as we go into this next section that we are swimming in deep water. We've already lost sight of the bottom, in my view, a long time ago. And what I want to do here is just dive down under the surface for just a few minutes.

[12:03] So I want you to take a deep breath as we dive under the surface and have a look at this allegory. And if you can't hold your breath, that's okay. Just float back to the surface and hold hands with everyone else and wait for us to return at the time.

This is not a section that easily translates into Monday morning application. You have to work on it until Thursday, until you get it. You know that there's a, the commentators are absolutely in a lather that Paul uses this word allegory here.

Some commentators say, you see, we shouldn't take the Bible literally. We should take it allegorically. And by the way, I like allegory. I don't like taking the Bible literally. And I just want to say two things as we dive deep here about this word allegory and how Paul uses it here.

The first is that Paul's understanding is controlled by the literal meaning of the text in Genesis.

You're probably aware that there's a long history of dishonest preaching where the preacher doesn't tell us what the text says but tells us what comes out of their imagination.

This is the way it works. You watch preachers what they do with the Bible. Often they'll start and they'll read a verse and then they'll close the Bible and put it away. And you know that's a big hint that they're going to tell us what they think and not what the Bible thinks.

[13:26] In the medieval church there was a tremendous amount of creativity and preaching was marked by allegory. It's the same today. A lot of post-modern preaching starts with the assumption that anything, all that matters about the text is what matters to me.

Two little illustrations. Augustine in the 4th century has a famous sermon on the prodigal son. He turns it into an allegory.

He says, the wounded man is Adam, Jerusalem the heavenly city. The thieves are the devil who strip Adam of his immortality and lead him into sin. The priest and the Levite are the Old Testament law.

The good Samaritan who binds his wounds, that's Christ, of course, who forgives our sin. The oil and the wine, a wine, are hope and stimulus to work.

The donkey, that's the incarnation. The inn is the church and the innkeeper is the Apostle Paul. I'm not going to say anything about that.

[14:29] Let me give you a second illustration. Today, what happens is that miracles, the miracles of Jesus, are not treated as though they actually happen. They're treated as sort of metaphors and symbols and figures, resources for our imagination.

I was at Synod once in this diocese and we were told that the Bible is the repository of the symbols of our faith. So you see, it doesn't matter whether the resurrection actually happened or not.

What happens is the resurrection becomes a kind of a symbol for the continual process of the circle of life, life out of death and endless human potential.

And it's just a way of avoiding what the Bible says. But when you look at the way this word allegory was used in the ancient Greek world, it was used to describe a kind of extended metaphor.

And what Paul is doing here in Galatians 4 is he's showing us that there are deep structural connections between the story of what happened with Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and what happens with us through Jesus Christ.

[15 : 32] That there is a deep spiritual correspondence between the events of the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the New. And he only brings out the significance in harmony with the literal meaning of the text.

So what we're going to see is Paul's running an extended metaphor between these two women, Sarah and Hagar, revealing the truth of the gospel and the two women stand for two different ways of relating to God.

That's the first point. The second point is this and I'm running it quickly because you can get the, you can download the recording later. This is the only place in the New Testament allegory is used. It's the only place the Apostle Paul uses it and it's my guess that the reason he does it is because this was a favorite weapon of the false teachers in Galatia.

They were terribly proud that Abraham was their father. And Paul writes to people who are pagans who were the spiritual children of Hagar and are now the spiritual children of Sarah who've been invaded by the literal children of Sarah who want to make them again the spiritual children of Hagar.

[16 : 41] And if you didn't follow that, fine, let's all come back to the surface again. Take a deep breath. Here is the point. The point is this. These two mothers, Hagar and Sarah, represent two diametrically different ways of relating to God.

One is relating to God through the flesh of my own ability, of my own control, and the other is relating to God by promise, by God's ability, and by his grace.

And Paul says, here is one house of Abraham with two families in it. One family was achieved by his strength.

The other is a complete miracle of God. And he says, here is one church and there are two spiritual families, one which comes from Hagar and one which comes from Sarah.

Isn't that striking? He's saying exactly what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. Do you remember? Jesus said, when you pray and when you fast and when you give charity, know that your Heavenly Father knows in secret what you are doing and do it for him.

[17 : 58] In other words, Jesus says, take two people, they're singing their hymns loudly, they're praying their prayers, they're giving their money generously, but there is a world of difference between them because one person is doing it for applause and human approval.

She's laying up treasure on earth. But the other is doing it for her Heavenly Father and she's laying up treasure in heaven. She is Sarah. One is working by the law, the other is working by faith.

And that's what Paul means in verse 26. He says, the Jerusalem above is free and she is our mother. He's speaking about the Christian church.

He's saying that the Christian church does not take its origin from inside this world but comes from above, from God himself. And she is the mother of all true believers.

That is why we are citizens of heaven now. And that is why in our ongoing growth in Jesus Christ, it's not enhanced by our obedience or our effort or by the law or by anything else that comes from within this present world order.

[19 : 10] It only comes as Jesus Christ supplies the spirit to us by promise. And when you look at the church through the eyes of the flesh, she's a pretty pathetic old woman, isn't she?

She's confused and divided and she doesn't seem like anything particularly special. When you look at her through the eyes of the faith, she is the bearer of the promise of God. And that is why Paul quotes in verse 27 from the book of Isaiah.

He says, It is written, Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear. Break forth and shout, you who are not in travail. For the children of the desolate one are many more than the children of her that is married.

This is remarkably deep stuff. Paul is saying, you can build the church in two ways. You can build the church like Hagar or you can build the church like Sarah.

You can build the church on your own abilities and technologies and skills and whatever else. Or you can rest on the grace of God. You can place yourself in the hands of God.

[20 : 21] That is what Paul is calling on us to do this morning. He's saying, place yourself in the hands of God and receive what is promised to you. He says, it doesn't matter really what you have done.

It doesn't matter. You may have been involved with organized crime. You may have sold your body for a price. It doesn't really matter. If you place yourself in the hands of God, verse 27, he promises freedom and he promises joy and he promises fruitfulness.

Two mothers, two spiritual mothers. And Paul finishes and he concludes with two results or two expectations that we should have.

And I, the first one is in verse 29. You aware that Cramner set this passage as the reading for the fourth Sunday in Lent.

And Lent is meant to be a penitential season. So our penance this morning is doing this entire passage. So let's look at these two results, shall we? Verse 29, the first thing we should expect if we're children of Sarah is persecution.

[21 : 31] As at that time, he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the spirit. So it is now. We don't have time to deal with this, but from the moment Hagar had her son, there's deep conflict and hostility towards Sarah.

We read in Genesis 21 that when Sarah had baby Isaac, when Isaac was weaned, the teenage boy, Ishmael, mocked and ridiculed the young Isaac.

Paul says, if you belong to Jesus Christ and if you trust the promise, you will be persecuted. But here is the edge.

Paul is not saying we'll just expect persecution generally from the world out there. It was Isaac received persecution from his religious half-brother. The most bitter opposition will usually not come from the world, but from others who want to call Abraham father.

I want to show you just another passage how this works. Keep your finger in Galatians 4 and turn back to John chapter 8 for just a moment. on page 96.

[22 : 55] In John chapter 8 verse 31, Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.

you will know the truth and the truth will make you free. They answered him, we are the descendants of Abraham. We have never been in bondage to anyone despite the fact that they are under Roman occupation.

How is it that you say we will be made free? And Jesus answered them, truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

The slave does not continue in the house forever, the son continues forever. If the son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants 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 not and you do what you have heard from your father. And they said, Abraham is our father. And Jesus said, if you were of Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did.

[24 : 01] But now you seek to kill me. You see, in Jesus' mind, the issue of slavery is fundamental to the human condition.

And in Jesus' view, our massive, it is our massive ability for self-deception which enslaves us. That before anything else, we are captives, enslaved to sin, happily, religiously, enslaved to sin.

And the most solid proof of our enslavement is if we are offended by these words of Jesus.

Because the person who is affronted and indignant to be called a slave of sin are those who claim Abraham as their father.

And Jesus puts before us a choice. He says, we either accept the fact that we are in bondage to sin and slaves of our self-deception or we have to kill him. It's very striking, isn't it? This is what lies behind persecution of the children of Sarah by the children of Hagar.

Expect persecution. And finally, expect the inheritance. Let's go back to Galatians 4. Verse 30.

[25 : 21] What does the scripture say? Cast out the slave and her son for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman. And so, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Terrific assurance here that even the persecution of the children of promise will come under the word of judgment from God. And that those who belong to the law will persecute those who belong to the spirit and in the end they will be cast out by God.

And the reason for that is very simple, that the inheritance does not come by the law but it comes by the promise through the spirit and needs to be received by faith.

If I was trying to paint a picture of this passage it would be a picture of two arms and two hands reaching up. One hand would be the hand of Hagar and it is the hand of grasping and taking hold on my own terms.

And the other would be the hand of our mother Sarah of reaching out with an open hand receiving the promise of God. You and I we are our mother's children, our spiritual mother's children.

[26 : 37] God wants us to be free. He's given us his son. He's given us his spirit and he promises us joy even now. Who your spiritual mother is determines who you are and you and I today must choose between Hagar and Sarah.

Amen.