

Children of The Promise

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[0 : 00] When Sam asked me to choose a week to preach, I just chose any week that was free. I didn't realize it was going to be on Hagar and Sarah. It's a pretty difficult passage.

And I also remembered about three months ago, at heartbeat, Steve said that we should really dig into the Bible. And he read through the passage in Hagar and Sarah and found out something that he never found out before.

So I've got double pressure now. Hard passage and Steve saying that he understood this clearly. So I feel a bit intimidated right now. I think it's more important that it's not just because that is a hard passage or what Steve has understood, because it's God's Word.

So let us pray to help us understand it and help us to live in light of it. Let's pray. Dear God, we thank you for your Word. Pray that we will submit before your Word.

Pray that you can help me to speak clearly and be faithful to your Word. And that we will live in light of what you say and believe in what it says. In Jesus' name we pray.

[1 : 07] Amen. Okay. So one of the great things about telling the Gospel to people that have never heard the Gospel before is that they have a very refreshingly different perspective.

So I'll recall a time I was doing student ministry in China. I've just learned Mandarin for about three months or so. I was sharing the Gospel with a uni student in China.

And then I read through a Gospel tract with him and I basically shared with him how you can become a Christian and probably quoted John 3.16 and told him that if you believe this honestly and pray it in your heart with me then you can become a Christian.

He says, I can't pray this and become a Christian. I can't believe in Jesus. I can't pray this. And I asked him why. And he said, because I have a lecture at 3 p.m. I said, how does a lecture at 3 p.m. affect your decision of becoming a Christian? He says, doesn't it say in your tract that 3.16, right, that you have to pray to believe in Jesus at 3.16?

[2 : 15] So you can actually see that maybe a few things. One thing is that I didn't tell the Gospel clearly. The other thing is that non-Christians or young Christians are very eager to pick up anything about the Christian faith.

And we have to be clear in our communication. Sometimes it is Gospel and sometimes it's just my bad habits being transferred to him. So hopefully we need to communicate the Gospel clearly.

But this is some of the pressures that the Galatians are facing. Remember the Galatians, they just believed in the Gospel, but they've been facing pressure from a group of false teachers from the Jewish background.

They've been telling these Galatians that you have to be circumcised and you have to observe various fluid laws in order to receive God's promises. So it's under this background that Paul is preaching, writing this message.

And just like a good sermon, this passage is in three parts. So I'll just break down each part for us and walk through it. So the first part of this passage is the history of Hagar and Sarah.

[3 : 33] We can see that in verses 22 to 23, where Paul recounts the history of Hagar and Sarah. And we know that he's recounting history by the way he introduces these verses.

At the start of verse 22, he says, it has been written. So if you know your New Testament well, this is how Jesus and other New Testament writers quote the Old Testament.

So they want us to look at the Bible carefully, so let's look through Genesis chapter 16 and chapter 21. Before we read that on the screen, I'll just tell you a little bit of backstory of what led up to these passages.

So in Genesis chapter 12, we recall that God made a promise to Abram saying that he will bless Abram and have a great nation through him.

And Abram is challenged by that message because he doesn't have any kids. And in chapter 15, he basically had some doubts because God reaffirmed the promises to Abraham, but Abram said, I only have adopted heir, Eliezer.

[4 : 43] So I can't build a nation through that, right? But God reassured him and in chapter 15, verse 6, it's a very famous verse. Abraham believed in God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

So let's look at what Abram did after that chapter. I'll read the first half of Genesis chapter 16. I'll start from Genesis chapter 16, verse 1.

Now Sarah, Abram's wife, had borne him no children, but she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. So she said to Abram, the Lord has kept me from having children.

Go sleep with my slave. Perhaps I can build a family through her. Abram agreed to what Sarah had said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan for 10 years, Sarah, his wife, took the Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.

He slept with Hagar and she conceived. When she knew that she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarah said to Abram, you are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.

[5 : 54] I put my slave in your arms and now that she knows that she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me. Your slave is in your hands, Abram said.

Do with her whatever you think best. Then Sarah mistreated Hagar, so she fled from her. The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert and it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.

And he said, Hagar, slave of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going? I'm running from my mistress, Sarah, she answered. Then the angel of the Lord told her, go back to your mistress and submit to her.

The angel added, I will increase your descendants so much that there will be too numerous to count. And we will stop the reading there. So one of the things that we should notice there is that God made a promise to Hagar that a great nation will be also built through her because she is the wife of Abram.

So if you look at the history of Ishmael and you look at Islam in particular, Ishmael is recognised as the forefather of Mohammed.

[7 : 06] And Ishmael is head of several Arabian tribes. So you can actually see from one act of disobedience, not only did it cause family's drive between Sarah and Hagar and Abraham, it actually had a huge impact for the world, which we experience right now.

Let's read through Genesis chapter 21. I'll start from the first one again. Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah, as he has said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.

Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age. And at the very time God has promised him, Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.

When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him.

Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Sarah said, God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.

And she added, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children, yet I have born him a son in his old age?

[8 : 16] The child grew and was weaned. And on the day that Isaac weaned, Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had born to Abraham was mocking.

And she said to Abraham, Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac. You can see Hagar and Ishmael is driven away once again.

And just as an aside, before we go back to Galatians, we actually want to look at this story as a side note. We can look at the story of Abraham and Sarah. The Bible isn't ashamed to hide their flaws.

Abraham is the father of many nations, is called a man of faith. But yet in these passages, we can see that Sarah is the one wearing the pants. She told Abraham what to do.

She told him to sleep with Hagar and take her as his wife. And she drove her away when things

didn't work out. So if you were to write the Bible of one of your founding fathers, if I was to write the account, I would just write all the stuff, good stuff about him and just leave out all the bad stuff

because it's embarrassing.

[9 : 36] But that's not what the Bible does. The Bible isn't ashamed to hide these flaws. And this is one of the many, many factors that contribute to the historicity and the realism of the Bible.

So the Bible is true. So if you have questions about the Bible, please talk to me or Sam and one of the other leaders. And one of the things that you can talk to, talk to Ko as well.

Ko loves talking about the historicity of the Bible. I talked to him a few weeks ago. He talked to me. I just sat there and listened for maybe 10 minutes or so. And I talked to him just before the service and listened a bit more again.

So he loves to talk about the Bible. Please ask him. And he would love to tell you why the Bible is true. And throughout the series, let's go back to Galatians. Throughout the series, we've been talking a lot about the false teachers and what they have done to the Galatians.

But we have not really explored their cultural heritage or their motives. So let's borrow from our vision series and I'll get the AV team to bring up the iceberg. The iceberg is, this is one of the things that hopefully we'll be exploring in the vision series.

[10 : 46] So one can use an iceberg to represent what people do. If you see people's behaviour, it's like the tip of the iceberg. It's just a tiny, tiny bit of what makes them tick.

But beneath that, there are values and worldviews and beliefs. And it's those things that drive a person. So if you look at Genesis and look at the brief snapshot of what the false teachers are like, you can sort of basically tell what they've been doing.

They've been pressuring the Galatians to circumcise and observe fruit laws. But let's explore why they do that. They would have believed that they were God's chosen people because they were descended from Abraham.

They are Jews that are circumcised. Now they have believed in Jesus. So in some sense, you can almost imagine them saying that we are doubly blessed.

We've got the best of the old and the best of the new. We've got both mixed together. So they believe that they've got a mix of Judaism and Christianity that they want to tell other people. They believe that that is the way to be blessed.

[12 : 01] And they don't want the Galatians to miss out. They want them to be circumcised and observe these laws. And on the flip side, they would have thought possibly that those that didn't undergo circumcision or observe the fruit laws, they would have been missing out on things, missing out on God's promises and blessings.

So it is to this background that Paul is writing to the Galatians. And the way that he helps them to understand is to interpret the historical facts that we have read in Genesis as an allegory in verses 24 to 27.

So when I heard the word allegory, I was a little bit shocked when I first read it as a Christian about 20 years ago. Because I've been taught that the right way to read the Old Testament is biblical theology.

You have to read the Bible in context and you have to read the history and how it's real and fulfilled through Jesus and how this is real for us now. But why is Paul using an allegory?

Is he reading the Bible wrong? So I guess the answer is, well, it's probably me, not him. So let's work out what this means for us. So let's put this allegory together and compare Hagar and Sarah side by side.

[13 : 21] We have two women, Hagar and Sarah. Two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. And this is a story we've just read about in Genesis 16 and 21.

We also have two covenants, old and new. And there are two types of people, slaves and free. So Paul, if you look at the book of Galatians, Paul has already touched on what the old and new covenants are in Galatians chapters 2 and 3.

The old covenant is for those that want to be right before God by observing the law. And it says in Galatians chapter 2 verse 10 that clearly no one is justified from observing the law.

In fact, those that are trying to establish a relationship with God through the law are cursed and are slaves to the law. The new covenant is through Jesus and what he has done for you on the cross, which gives us freedom.

So imagine what the Jewish false teachers would have heard when they heard this allegory. They would have agreed with all these points. Yes, Hagar and Sarah, the first four points, Ishmael, Isaac, slave and free, old and new.

[14 : 39] If we were to say that there were two cities, what would you have thought their expected answer would be? They would have expected Paul to say and there are also two cities, one in Arabia and one in Jerusalem.

The ones that are from Hagar, they're outside of God's promise. Whereas the ones that are descended from Sarah, they're the ones that are truly God's people. But that's not what Paul says in this passage.

The last contrast is that there's the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem. Those people that were the Jewish false teachers would have been shocked by this comparison.

Because after all, if you think about their worldview, if you look at the iceberg, they would have believed truly about Judaism. They believe that they are God's people and they believe they are the free ones, they're the blessed ones.

But what is Paul saying? The ones that are observing these laws are in fact slaves. They are not God's people. So that's exactly opposite of what they were expecting.

[15 : 53] Paul is implying that their belief system is completely false. And so if we understood this passage properly, we can see that Paul didn't interpret the Bible wrongly or forget his biblical theology.

Rather, he's using concepts that are close to the hearts of these false teachers and what is said by them probably, that he's using these concepts to communicate to the Galatians and the false teachers and to tell them that what the false teachers have been preaching is wrong.

So this is not bad exegesis. It's not bad understanding of the Bible. In fact, it's actually good communication. Paul is using things that are close to the Jewish people's hearts and turning it on them to make them understand the gospel.

So having a look at what it means for the meaning of the allegory, let's have a look at what it means for the Galatians. Paul returns to plain language in verses 29 to 31.

He's not using the allegory anymore and he just tells the Galatians plainly what to do. Paul tells the Galatians to get rid of the false teachers and to get rid of the false teachings that they have been bringing to the Galatians.

[17 : 16] He quotes Genesis chapter 21, verse 10, in verse 30. Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for they will never share in the inheritance with a free woman's son.

We can see that Paul is very serious here. He doesn't want the Galatians to mix Judaism and Christianity together. He doesn't want them to rely on both the law and Christ.

So having had a look at, had a really brief snapshot of having a look at what it means for the Galatians, let's look at what it means for us. So the way that we can help us to understand what something is, is to look at the flip side and to understand what it is not.

So this passage, I think one of the things that it is not telling us to do is to get rid of our culture completely. Paul is not saying that to become a Christian, you must stop being Chinese or Australian or etc.

I don't know. Yeah, I should say etc. But yeah, Paul is not saying for us to abandon our culture. After all, Galatians chapter 3, verse 28, says that there's neither male or female, Jews or Greek, slaves or free.

[18 : 29] We are all one in Christ Jesus. We are not to abandon our culture when we believe in Jesus, but we are to be joined together as one body. And it's also not telling us to abandon our history.

He's not saying that the old covenant is bad because it's just old and the new covenant is good because it's new. If that was true, I think our last series is not very useful. We celebrated history. We celebrated the history of the Reformation. We celebrated the gospel truth that we've been preserving for the last 500 years. What this passage is saying though is there's one encouragement and one rebuke.

So the encouragement here is that just like the Galatians, we are not Jewish, I don't think. We don't have a Jewish background. So what that means is that just like the Galatians, if you believe in the gospel, you can be just like Sarah's children.

You will belong to the heavenly Jerusalem. You'll be part of God's people with his blessing. And I want to expand this point a little bit more by telling you of the stories that I've encountered when I've been running through the Investigating Christianity course, both once there and I've been running another instance on Friday nights.

[19 : 46] There have been quite a few ESL students that have been bringing their kids to Friday youth and their parents have been hanging around and they really want to hear the gospel, which is really great. That's why I've been running the course on Friday nights in the office.

And both the September course and that one, most of the people are from a Chinese background, from mainland China, and they have the same question. We think, they phrase a question like this. We think that the Christian faith is a Western religion. We from China have no exposure to this. We come from an atheist background and we have our Buddhism and Taoism and Confucianism. And I think it's just you have your Christian faith for the West and we have our own faith in the East. And it's really hard for us to believe in the gospel. The encouragement from this passage is that no matter what your ethnicity or your background, the Christian faith is for you.

All you have to do is to believe in what Jesus has done for you. So if you want to know more about what it means to believe in Jesus, please talk to me or put it on the communication card.

[20 : 53] I would love to talk to you more about this. And it is that simple. No matter what your background is, you can come to know Christ. With this news, there's also, on the flip side, there's a reminder and a rebuke.

So one of the things that Paul reminds the Galatians to think about is to get rid of the slave woman and to get rid of the false teachings and the false teachers.

And one of the things that we can do is, if you look at the iceberg, which has always been there, is that it's easy for us to have Christian behaviours. We'll go to church, we'll go to Bible study, and we'll pray and read the Bible.

But sometimes we have to ask us, what is the worldview beneath all these things? We might even have some of the values, like core values in this church, they're on the wall, outside the church. If you're going to pass away, you'll hear about the core values. These are important to our church and important to us. But we have to actually ask us, right at the bottom, our worldview.

[22 : 00] What is real for us? Because the great danger is for us to mix our Christian faith with something that we believe in. And I'll actually bring an illustration from, I've got one from the Chinese congregation I used in the morning.

So, this is a story about a pastor, he's a Canadian Chinese, and his mum who is involved in ancestor worship. And, actually this is, like, the matter of ancestor worship and paying respect to the elders is not that far from me.

When I do certain ministry in China or when I have to go to funerals for non-Christians in Hong Kong, we will be pressured to pay respect to our ancestors and to worship ancestors in the past. So, this particular pastor has a mum and his mum has lots of, like, Chinese idols and, like, a lot of ancestor worship places.

I'm not sure whether you've seen them. The little red things with the glowing lights and you put, like, rose pig and oranges and other things. And, she became a Christian but she didn't want to get rid of her, all her idols and all these worship places.

[23 : 23] And, she told her son this story. Imagine, if you've known your old friend for a long time and you've met a new friend who is better. Jesus is this better friend and, it would be really disloyal of you just to abandon all your old friends just because you've got a better friend.

the best way to do it is to, why don't you just spend time with your old friends and spend time with your new friends and they'll be all fine. And, that's the way she thought about Christianity.

And, although we won't laugh at this, we actually need to ask ourselves, is Christ just a little bit better on what you rely on? Or, is Christ at the centre of your world view?

If Christ is at the centre, it will affect everything else that you will do. The values that we have outside at the church, it won't be just something you put on, it's not something that we are asked to do, it will be flowing out of your heart.

If Christ is at the centre of your world view, what is said in Galatians chapter 2 will be true. It is not I that live but Christ that lives in me. If it is true, our behaviours isn't just something that we do on Sundays.

[24 : 43] We wouldn't just come to church and at the first second we will just dash out the door. I remember there was a traditional church I went to about 20 years ago. The pastor is just standing at the door greeting people.

He's expecting people to leave. People are wanting to get out of the church and spending time to do their own things. But if we are keen for the gospel, we would want to encourage our brothers and

sisters.

We would want to tell people within church that doesn't know the gospel yet how they can encounter Jesus. So I actually want to ask us, is there anything that you are placing along with Christ right at the bottom of the iceberg that is real for you?

It's not, you're just thinking that Christ is a little bit better than what you have here. If there is, Paul would probably ask you to do the same thing. Get rid of these things. Get rid of these things so that you can hold on to Christ.

Believe in Christ, hold on to Christ so that the things that we value, the things that we believe, the things that we do is actually flowing from what you hold dear in your heart. And I hope that God can help us to do that.