

**LISTEN TO THE LAW!**  
**PART 4**

TEXT: GALATIANS 4:21-31

June 12, 2011

**INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:**

The nature of the gospel, properly taken, is a promise—a free promise of life and salvation through Christ. Paul reveals this in Galatians 3:8, when he writes, “And the Scripture (OT), foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Clearly, the good news spoken to Abraham was a free promise, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

The good news of the gospel is that in due time the promising God will be a performing God (see Ralph Erskine, *Works of Ralph Erskine, vol. 2*, p. 339). We first see the God of promise and performance in Genesis 3:15. At a minimum, we see that God promises enmity between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman.

This enmity (persecution) is first expressed through Cain and Abel. When Cain murders Abel, it appears the line of the offspring of the woman has come to an end. But, God—in His grace—starts another line of descendants from Adam through Seth and Enoch to Noah (Gen. 4:25-6:8). From Noah, God’s promise of “the offspring of the woman” runs from Shem—Noah’s son—to Abram (Gen. 11:26).

This brings us to Genesis 12, where we find a renewed emphasis upon God’s promise of the “offspring.” In Gen. 12:3, 7 God promises Abraham, “<sup>3</sup>...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (quoted in Gal. 3:8-J.F.)...<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.”

Despite Abraham and Sarah’s sin with Hagar and despite the fact that Abraham was old in age and Sarah was barren—again making it appear that God’s promise of the offspring of the woman will come to an end—God promises Abraham, “I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” (Gen. 17:16; emphasis mine).

Even though Abraham and Sarah had to wait 25 years for the birth of Isaac, Genesis 21:1 states, “The LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did to Sarah *as He had promised*” (emphasis mine). Then, after Isaac is born, God again promises Abraham, “in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed...” (Gen. 22:18).

However, Isaac’s wife—Rebekah—is barren and it appears that the promise of the “offspring of the woman” has come to an end. Once again graciously intervenes and answers Isaac’s prayer and Rebekah conceives and bears Esau and Jacob (Gen. 25:21).

The LORD then appears to Isaac in Genesis 26:3-4 and assures him of the promises made to his father Abraham saying, “<sup>3</sup> I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your *offspring* I will give all these lands, and *I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father*. <sup>4</sup> I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your *offspring* all the nations of the earth shall be blessed...” (emphasis mine). Once again, the God of promise is the God of performance.

The LORD next appears to Jacob in Gen. 28:14-15 and assures him that He will not abandon Him but will fulfill His promises to him, “<sup>14</sup> Your *offspring* shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your *offspring* shall all the families of the earth be blessed. <sup>15</sup> Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (emphasis mine).

Yet, once again, the promise of the “offspring” appears to be threatened because Jacob’s wife—Rachel—is barren (Gen. 30:1). Rachel—in unbelief—seeks to overcome her barrenness through self-effort and offers Jacob Bilhah—her servant—as a substitute wife (v. 3; just like Sarah with Abraham; cf. 16:1-4). Yet, despite Rachel’s unbelief and self-effort, God, is once again faithful to His promise and Genesis 30:22 says, “...God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb” (what grace!). As a result, Rachel conceived and gave birth to Joseph (Gen. 30:23-24).

From the narrative of Joseph (Gen. 37-50), we see how the LORD remains faithful to His promise to bring about the offspring of the woman despite personal sin, seemingly impossible providential circumstances, and persecution. Genesis 50:20 clearly brings this out, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about *that many people should be kept alive, as they are today*” (emphasis mine).

The reason God keeps the offspring alive is because His purpose is the blessing/salvation of all nations (cf. Gen. 22:18; Gal. 3:8). However, Adam and Israel failed to fulfill their mission, therefore God—Paul says in Galatians 3:16; 4:4—sends the “offspring of the woman”—Jesus Christ—the last Adam and the true Israel.

The covenant made with Abraham required God’s own coming in the person of His Son. The promise of God’s covenant to Abraham is the goal of Old Testament history (cf. Edmund Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, p. 16). Ultimately, Jesus is the substance of the Abrahamic covenant (and Davidic). This is the point of Matthew’s gospel.

In Matthew 1:1, Matthew shows us that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises to both Abraham and David. Matthew begins his gospel by tracing Jesus’ roots all the way back to Abraham, where God promised Abraham that his offspring would be a blessing to all the nations (cf. Gen. 12:2-3; 17:8; 22:17-18). By linking Jesus to Abraham, Matthew is declaring that God’s promise to bless the nations is fulfilled through Jesus.

In addition, Matthew traces Jesus' roots to Abraham through David, to whom God had also given great promises (2 Sam. 7). By linking Jesus to David, Matthew shows that through Israel's King, God was fulfilling His promise to Abraham to bless the nations (cf. Gen. 17:6; see Ps. 72:17, "... All nations will be blessed through Him...").

In Psalm 89:3-4, the Psalmist speaking of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:16), tells us that God promised David specifically, "<sup>3</sup>...I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: 4 *'I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations'*" (emphasis mine).

The astounding good news of God's promise to David is that He will remain faithful to His covenant despite His people's ongoing failures,

<sup>30</sup> If His children forsake My law and do not walk according to My rules, <sup>31</sup> if they violate My statutes and do not keep My commandments, <sup>32</sup> then I will punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes, <sup>33</sup> but I will not remove from him My steadfast love or be false to My faithfulness. <sup>34</sup> I will not violate My covenant or alter the word that went forth from My lips."

Because God will not take away His promise from His own Son or be false to His faithfulness or violate His covenant or alter His word, He will not take away His steadfast love and faithfulness from you! Ralph Erskine writes, "He cannot fail you, because He cannot fail His Son Christ, who hath sealed the covenant with His blood" (*Works of Ralph Erskine, vol. 2, p. 364*).

God's glory shines in all His works, but especially in accomplishing His promises, for which Paul writes, "All the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory" (2 Cor. 1:20).

Jesus, the son of David, inaugurates a kingdom that will bless the nations and last forever. Daniel 7:14 is the blueprint for His future exaltation, "And to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (see Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 203).

The Genesis account demonstrates that it is God's faithfulness, power and grace that keep His promise of the offspring of the woman alive generation after generation. Thus, the important point for us to take note of is that God is faithful to His promise! The good news is that we have a promising God who is also a performing God. This is our hope!

This is how Paul in Galatians 4 is reading the Old Testament. He is arguing that we become sons of God (4:1-7)—children of the free woman (4:31)—by promise—like Isaac—and in no other way do we obtain this highest privilege of the gospel.

Unlike the Mosaic covenant—a covenant of law and personal obligation—the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant—covenant of promise—was not left to your own self-effort. Rather, the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham depends solely on God’s performance. Your hope and joy reside in the fact that you are kept by His power and grace through faith not self-effort.

Paul has thoroughly argued in Galatians (cf. 3:10-29) that in the Mosaic covenant, God’s blessing is attained by our personal performance. But, in the Abrahamic Covenant, God’s blessing is bestowed upon us as an inheritance resulting from the personal performance of another. Therefore, even though you change a hundred times, even though your faith is weak and unreliable, God will not change one word of His covenant promises to you! Your faith is founded on the eternal and unchangeable faithfulness of God to fulfill His promises.

In 1 Corinthians 1:7-9, Paul says that “<sup>7</sup>...our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>8</sup>... will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” On the basis of God’s faithfulness to us the author of Hebrews exhorts, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, *for He who promised is faithful*” (emphasis mine).

The everlasting nature of the covenant of promise assures you that the completion of your salvation is not left to your self-effort—your fulfillment of a covenant with God. Rather, your assurance and joy lies in the fact that God—Himself—has made a covenant with you and therefore you are being kept by His power, through faith to salvation. This is why Paul was able to say, “...I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Tim. 1:12).

Paul was convinced that God was a God of promise and performance. Because Jesus—the offspring—has come and fulfilled the covenant, God cannot fail you because He cannot fail His Son, who has sealed the covenant with His own blood (cf. Matt. 26:28).

Now, why is it important for us to take this brief survey of redemptive history from the OT Scriptures? The reason is because Paul, in Galatians 4:21-31, is showing us how to properly read the Scriptures (i.e., OT). He says to the Galatians in v. 21, “Do you really want to be under the law (Mosaic Covenant)? Do you listen to the law (Torah)? Do you really understand what the Torah instructs? If you read the Scriptures properly, you would know that it teaches you to trust in God’s promise rather than your own self-effort.”

By teaching us how to properly read the Scriptures, Paul is seeking to move us from performance to promise back to performance—but this time performance driven by gratitude rather than slavish duty. We obey as heirs not as slaves!

So, in order to motivate the Galatians to abandon their desire (4:21, *θέλοντες*) to be the under law (“Do this and live” performance) and instead to live in the freedom of the

gospel (“Live, now do this” promise), Paul appeals to a lesson from the Law (Torah) itself.

Specifically, he sees from the Genesis story of Hagar and Sarah an analogy, which illustrates the spiritual truth he is teaching (i.e., all who rely on self-effort end up in sin and bondage whereas those who trust in God’s promise receive salvation and freedom).

Paul divides his analogy from the Torah into three sections: The Historical Basis of the Analogy (vv. 21-23); The Spiritual Meaning of the Analogy (vv. 24-27); The Personal Application of the Analogy (vv. 28-31). Having examined the first two, we come this morning to the personal application (vv. 28-31).

Paul’s first application of his analogy demonstrates why we must properly read and understand the Scriptures. Your understanding and trust in the fact that God is a promising and performing God is essential because you are going to be persecuted and thus be tempted to give up!

Look what Paul says in vv. 28-29, “<sup>28</sup> Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. <sup>29</sup> But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, *so also it is now*” (emphasis mine).

#### **LESSON:**

### **III. SECTION 3: THE PERSONAL APPLICATION OF THE ANALOGY (VV. 28-31)**

#### **A. WE MUST EXPECT PERSECUTION FROM LEGALISTS VV. 28-29**

Notice how Paul again addresses the Galatians as “brothers” (cf. 4:12, 28, 31). The Galatians and Paul share the same mother—Sarah—and thus are members of the same family and so it follows that they are brothers. They are brothers by grace having been birthed by the Spirit (v. 29). Paul reveals that the brothers of legalism who have been birthed by self-effort persecute them.

Ishmael—the son born according to the flesh—persecuted Isaac—the son born according to promise. A gospel-centered believer should expect persecution and suffering for Christ’s and the gospel’s sake. Martin Luther reminds us, “Whenever the teaching of the gospel flourishes in the church, there is always this persecution, that the sons according to the flesh persecute the sons according to the promise” (*Luther’s Works, vol. 26, p. 454*).

Paul is alluding to Genesis 21:8-9, where Abraham held a great feast to celebrate Isaac’s weaning—typically three years of age. Genesis 21:8-9 reads, “<sup>8</sup> And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. <sup>9</sup> But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing/mockingly (צחק).”

The Hebrew verb (צחק) translated here as “laughing” can also be translated “mocking.” “Mocking” favors the context and follows Paul’s reading in Galatians 4:29 (cf. Hendriksen, *Galatians*, pp. 185-187).

Most likely through pride, Ishmael—the oldest son, 17—mocked/ridiculed Isaac as Abraham’s promised son. Before Isaac’s birth, Ishmael—because he was the older son—must have regarded himself as the sole heir of Abraham’s estate (Ibid, p. 186). Also, he may have thought his inheritance was coming soon because his father was getting older. And then Isaac is surprisingly born and everything changes.

Abraham celebrates a great feast for Isaac and bestows upon him his entire estate! The reason then for Ishmael’s mockery and ridicule is clear. The disappointment that both Hagar and Ishmael must have felt in response to the birth and blessing of Isaac, explains Ishmael’s ill-will and contempt for his brother (cf., Cain and Abel, Gen. 4:8). Ishmael copied the contempt that his mother Hagar showed to Sarah (Gen. 16:4; 21:9).

Paul’s point is that just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, “so also it is now” with the Galatians. The Judaizers were persecuting the Galatians by oppressing them with the law. They were seeking to strip them of their freedom and bring them back under spiritual slavery. Gospel-driven believers should expect legalists to treat them with contempt the same way Ishmael treated Isaac and the Judaizers treated the Galatians.

Legalists—the offspring of Hagar—will always show contempt toward those who trust in God’s promise because they don’t understand grace. Grace is offensive to a self-righteous heart! Calvin writes, “All persecutions arise from this source, that wicked men despise and hate in the elect the grace of God...” (*Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 143).

Those who trust in their own performance and self-effort view God as a debtor who owes them. As the firstborn, Ishmael thought Abraham owed him. How dare his little brother born fourteen years later receive his inheritance! Through pride and conceit of being Abraham’s older son, Ishmael derided, ridiculed and mocked Isaac.

In the same way, when a “sinner” (cf. Gal. 2:15) comes along and receives God’s blessing and inheritance without observing the required rules, the legalist becomes infuriated! The Judaizers thought of themselves as “righteous/justified” because of their physical descent from Abraham and their observance of the Mosaic law.

But, Paul infuriates them when he calls them Ishmaelites—the spiritual offspring of Hagar! Oh! How grace is highly offensive to a self-righteous heart! As a result, persecution will come.

It can come in all types of forms and degrees. Persecution certainly includes martyrdom. In the 20th century more Christians died for their faith than in all the other centuries combined. It appears that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will continue this trend.

But, not every believer will be imprisoned, tortured (physical violence, Gal. 6:17) or martyred for his or her faith. Ishmael's persecution of Isaac didn't consist of martyrdom. Rather, it consisted of disdain, scorn, mocking, ridicule, ill-will, etc... Persecution then includes more subtle forms such as ridicule, feelings of ill-will, contempt, hatred, marginalization, shame, scorn, mockery, loss of material goods or unjust legislation.

Like Isaac, perhaps some of you know what it is like to receive ill treatment from members of your own family because of your faith in Christ. In Matthew 10:34-36, Jesus said to expect this, <sup>34</sup> "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." <sup>35</sup> "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." <sup>36</sup> "And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."

As gospel-centered believers, we certainly do not go looking for persecution but we should expect it and be prepared for it—as Paul is pointing out. Martin Luther wrote, "If someone does not want to endure persecution from Ishmael, let him not claim that he is a Christian" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 451).

Jesus taught in John 15:18-21,

<sup>18</sup> "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup> If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. <sup>21</sup> But all these things they will do to you on account of My Name, because they do not know Him who sent Me."

In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul reminds Timothy, "...all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..." In Galatians 5:17, Paul says "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit..." The flesh hates the Spirit; self-righteousness recoils and strikes like a snake at imputed righteousness and desires to inflict a fatal wound.

As Christians we should not be surprised that the world hates the gospel and us. Persecution of the offspring of the woman by the offspring of the serpent follows the pattern we see in the Scriptures ever since Cain murdered Abel (cf. Gen. 4:8; Heb. 11:4; 1 John 3:12). Ever since the Fall of Adam and Eve, the Scriptures trace enmity between two kinds of people: Cain vs. Abel; Ishmael vs. Isaac; Jacob vs. Esau; Moses vs. Pharaoh; David vs. Goliath, etc...

Ultimately, the enmity and persecution that exists between the woman's offspring and the serpent's offspring foreshadows the conflict between Christ and Satan. This conflict results in the victorious confrontation between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11), the Cross (Col. 2:15), and in the future at His Second Coming (Rev. 12:9; 20:10).

Curiously, the NT applies the promise of God crushing satan under the feet of Christians (Rom. 16:20). It is also possible that Paul's statement in Galatians 4:4 alludes to the promise of Gen. 3:15.

The point is this: The world persecutes believers because it is seeking to destroy "the offspring—Christ" (Jn. 15:18; Gal. 3:16). Martin Luther writes,

“...it is not some king or emperor but the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4) who is provoked; and he is a powerful spirit and the lord of the whole world. This great adversary is attacked by the weak Word that preaches Christ crucified. Feeling its divine power, Behemoth stirs up all his limbs, shakes his tail, and ‘makes the deep boil like a pot’ (Job 41:31. This is the source of the tumult and uproar in the world” (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 452 see also p. 455).

But, the good news of the gospel is that the enemy of our faith is a defeated foe! In Colossians 2:15, Paul says Christ has disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them! Amen!

Because we are united to Christ in His victory, we can fight the enemy of our faith with confidence, knowing that whatever persecution comes our way the God of peace will soon crush Satan under our feet (Rom. 16:20). We fight from a position of victory not defeat!

Even though the enemy of our faith is a defeated foe, satan and his demonic army of fallen angels rage continual war against Christ and His people. Nonetheless, the gospel promises us the ultimate defeat of satan precisely because we are united to Christ and the victory He has won.

However, were it not that our God is a promising and performing God, we would not be able to bear the persecution we encounter. The only source of comfort and courage in the midst of persecution is to remember that we have a promise keeping and performing God.

#### **REFLECTION:**

This passage then is full of comfort for us. The goal of our enemy is to “make void our confidence, which rests on the promises of God; when they ridicule our salvation, when they wantonly laugh to scorn the whole gospel...” (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 144). Through ridicule, mockery, scorn, ill-will, etc... our adversary is seeking to extinguish the doctrine (i.e., gospel) from which we draw the breath of life (*Ibid*, p. 144).

But, the good news to take away with you this morning is that our promising God is also a performing God. We are sustained by this confidence. Therefore, you must hold fast to the doctrine of justification, which serves as an anchor for your soul. You must never lose sight of it. For, justification rests upon the comforting truth that our God who promises also performs! Luther writes, “...the doctrine of justification must be learned diligently; it alone can strengthen us against those endless offenses and comfort us in all trials and

persecutions” (*Luther’s Works, vol. 26, p. 453*). Receive and rest in the Lord as He speaks these words of comfort and courage to you: “I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father” (Gen. 26:3).

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