

# “Children of Promise”

(Galatians 4:21-5:1)

## Introduction

➤ As the presidential election draws near, we are bombarded with political messages – messages that, among other things, make promises. For many, these are only empty promises (“politics” – poly + tics = many bloodsuckers). For others, they are well-intended promises (without the absolute assurance that they will be able to keep them). Oftentimes, we listen to such promises with skepticism, or cynicism, not really believing or expecting these promises to be kept.

Most of us, struggle to keep our promises as well. We either fail to do what we said we would do, or casually make commitments without ever consciously intending to keep them (e.g. “I never do that again”, “I will always be here for you”, “I will be praying for you”, etc.). One problem with this unfortunate reality is that it can cheapen the word “promise.” This is of even greater consequence when we devalue or doubt the promises of God (thinking that He, like us, fails to keep His promises or makes insincere promises).

➤ There is (only) one promise-maker who is always (perfectly) truthful and faithful, and that is almighty God. He is not only perfect (holy) in character, but also absolute in power and sovereign in authority. God has the knowledge (which is infinite) and the ability (which is incomparable) to make good on all His promises. Scripture repeatedly affirms that God does not and cannot lie. Thankfully, God does not change His mind, or go back on His Word (see Num.23:19; Mal.3:6; Jms.1:17). God always keeps His promises.

**Heb 6:13-19** ~ “For when God made a promise [*epangellomai*] to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, <sup>14</sup>saying, ‘Surely I will bless you and multiply you.’ <sup>15</sup>And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise [*epangelia*]. <sup>16</sup>For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. <sup>17</sup>So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise [*epangelia*] the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath [*horkos*], <sup>18</sup>so that by two unchangeable things [i.e. God’s ‘promise’ and ‘oath’], in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. <sup>19</sup>We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul ...” (see Rom.3:3-4; Tit.1:2)

➤ This doctrine is immediately relevant to our study as Paul referred to Christians as “*children of promise*” (*teknon epangelia*):

**Gal 4:28** ~ “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.”

➤ The “promise” to which Paul was referring, is God’s promise of salvation – by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is God’s promise to adopt into His family all who truly receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior (see Gal.4:5-6; Eph.1:5).

If God were not absolutely trustworthy, if He was not omniscient and omnipotent, we could not rest in His promises – What if He was lying, or what if He was mistaken, or what if He simply changed His mind, or what if God intended to be truthful/trustworthy but simply lacks the knowledge and power necessary to keep His promises? If any of these were true, being called “children of promise” would be a nice sentiment, but ultimately just wishful thinking.

Thankfully, we can know for sure that God does not and cannot lie; that God always keeps His promises. Those who truly receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior will be saved, and are adopted children of God forevermore (Jn.1:12-13; 1Jn.3:1).

➤ As we’ve seen, throughout our study of the book of Galatians, Paul wrote this letter to the “*churches in Galatia*” (1:2) in an attempt to bring them back to the true Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (see Gal.1:6-7; 2:16; 3:10-13, 26). Years earlier, Paul had preached the Gospel to them, and they had believed/received it (1:6; 3:1-3; 5:7), but, after Paul left, false teachers

(known as Judaizers) infiltrated (“*secretly ... slipped in to*”; 2:4) the churches and “*bewitched*” (3:1) these Galatian Christians.

**Gal 4:20** ~ “I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.”

- In Galatians 4:21-5:1, Paul launched yet another argument for the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Previously, he has argued from experience (3:1-5), from Scripture (3:6-14), from logic (3:15-29), from history (4:1-11), and from relationship (4:12-20). Now he argues for the truth of the Gospel by using a scriptural analogy.
- The apostle desperately wanted the Galatians to believe, to re-affirm, the true (the truth of the) Gospel, which is grounded in – anchored to – the infallible (inerrant) promises of God. Our passage this morning (4:21-5:1) proves, yet again, that those who are truly saved – those who are truly children of God – are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This passage can be divided into three main sections.

### 1. The Rhetorical Question (4:21)

- Verse twenty-one begins with asking yet another rhetorical question: “*Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?*” (vs.21). This question compels the reader to logically think through consequences of seeking to be justified by the law.

In the same way, Jesus often asked rhetorical questions, using this same teaching device, by asking, “*Have you not read ...?*” (Matt.12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31), or “*Have you never read?*” (Matt.21:16, 42). The assumption was that they had read, or at least should have known, what was written in the Scriptures.

**Luke 24:25-27** ~ “And [Jesus] said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ <sup>27</sup>And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

- To “*desire to be under the law*” (vs.21) is terribly foolish, and reveals a severe ignorance toward the law of God and the sinfulness of man. No wise person runs to God’s law to be saved; we are to run to the Savior because we are lawbreakers (sinners). It is irrational (idiotic) to think that the law which condemns can be our savior; the law which enslaves can be our redeemer. Like a person running back into a housefire thinking there they will be saved from the flames; or a person who was drowning jumping back into the ocean; or, in the words of the apostle Peter, like a dog returning “*to its own vomit*” (2Pet.2:22), is the Christian who “*desires to be under the law*” (vs.21).
- ✓ Illust: “This verse is rich with irony. The Galatians want to live under the Mosaic law, but if they actually understood the law (i.e. the Scripture) they would realize that their desire to place themselves under Sinai covenant is off-kilter” (Thomas R. Schreiner; *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians*; 4:21).

**Matt 5:20** ~ “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Matt 5:17 ~ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

**Matt 5:48** ~ “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

- Apparently, the Galatians did not think that being under the law meant perfectly keeping all the law.

**Gal 3:10** ~ “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

**Gal 5:3** ~ “I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.”

**James 2:10** ~ “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”

**Rom 3:20** ~ “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

- This is one reason why Paul asked, *“do you not listen to the law?”* (vs.21). For if they had truly thought about the consequences of pursuing salvation/righteousness by works – either in part or in whole – they would have known that the law cannot save, it only condemns (5:4), curses (3:10) and enslaves (5:1). If they had truly studied the Scriptures, they would have known that the Judaizers were teaching a false gospel – a gospel that is no gospel at all (1:6-7).

## 2. The Biblical Illustration (4:22-27)

- First, it is important that we understand the story to which Paul is referring to is a literal, historical, account. The people that Paul described were actual people, and the events actually happened. This is not folklore, or a parable or any kind of a fictitious story. As Paul alluded to, this is *“written”* (vs.22) in the pages of sacred Scripture. He has already referred to Abraham many times in this letter (3:6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 16, 18), for Abraham was seen as the (spiritual) father of all Judaism. The Judaizers were undoubtedly trying to use Abraham (i.e. his circumcision) as proof that Gentiles needed to be circumcised (and keep Jewish laws) in order to be saved. Paul was showing that Abraham’s life of faith actually displayed the true Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The story of *“Abraham[’s] ... two sons”* (vs.22) is found in the Old Testament (e.g. **Gen.16; 17; 21:1-21**). Paul was using this biblical story as an illustration. He wrote that it *“may be interpreted allegorically”* (vs.24; *allēgoreō* [the ESV translators added the word “interpreted” to help us understand the meaning of the original text]). He was using the true story of Abraham to illustrate the truth of the Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – and to show that a person cannot become saved (or become righteous) by keeping the law, but only by faith in Christ.

✓ **Illust:** “Paul is an expert at allegories. They are dangerous things. Unless a person has a thorough knowledge of Christian doctrine he had better leave allegories alone” (Martin Luther; *Luther’s Commentary on Galatians*; 4:21).

- As Paul has already stated in this letter, attempting to be saved (or righteous) by human merit or effort is to be enslaved by self-righteousness and one’s sinful flesh. It is the foolish and futile attempt to earn God’s saving grace by works (Gal.2:16; 3:10; Rom.3:20; Jms.2:10), which results in God’s condemnation (Gal.3:10) and an enslavement to God’s law (Gal.5:3-4).

**Gal 4:8-9** ~ “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. <sup>9</sup>But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” (see Gal.4:3)

Gal 2:4 ~ “Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery”

Gal 5:1 ~ “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

- This is what led Paul (under the superintending work of the Holy Spirit) to write: *“For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. <sup>23</sup>But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. <sup>24</sup>Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing*

*children for slavery; she is Hagar.* <sup>25</sup>*Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children*” (vs.22-25).

Utilizing the (true) story of Abraham as an illustration, Paul compares the son Abraham had through *“a slave woman”* (vs.22; who was “Hagar”; cf. vs.24, 25) and *“a free woman”* (vs.22; who was Sarah). In his analogy, Hagar represents the one who is enslaved by the law and Sarah represents the one who is free in Christ. That is, Hagar’s life illustrates the life of those who seek to be saved by self-righteous legalism (enslaved to sin, the law, and false gods), and Sarah’s life illustrates the life of those who seek to be saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (free in Christ).

➤ Specifically, Paul used the *“two sons”* born to Abraham (vs.22) – Ishmael from Hagar, and Isaac from Sarah – as illustrations of what it means to be born under the law and what it means to be a child of God – a child *“of promise”* (vs.28). Ishmael represents one who is enslaved to the law, with no saving faith, no spiritual life, and no salvation. Isaac, on the other hand, represents who is free, saved and Spirit-filled because they have put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

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An Old Testament illustration (Galatians 4:22-31): Paul uses the example of Hagar and Sarah, two Old Testament women, to allegorize the law of Moses and the grace of God.

**A. Hagar** (an allegory of the law)

1. She was *“a slave woman”* (4:22)
2. She bore a son (Ishmael) *“according to the flesh”* (vs.23)
3. She is *“from Mount Sinai”* (4:24)
4. She bore *“children for slavery”* (4:24)
5. She *“corresponds to the present [earthly] Jerusalem”* (4:25)
6. She *“is in slavery with her children”* (4:25)
7. She gave birth *“according to the flesh”* (4:29)
8. Her son was the persecutor (4:29)
9. She and her son are *“cast out”* (4:30)
10. Her son is not the rightful heir (4:30)

**B. Sarah** (an allegory of grace)

1. She was *“a free woman”* (4:22).
  2. She bore a son (“Isaac”; vs.28) *“through promise”* (4:23)
  3. She is from Mount Zion (see Heb.12:22)
  4. She bore children for freedom (4:26, 30, 31, 5:1)
  5. She corresponds to *“the [heavenly] Jerusalem above”* (4:26)
  6. She *“is free, and she is our mother”* (4:26)
  7. She gave birth *“according to the Spirit”* (vs.29)
  8. Her son was the *“persecuted”* (4:29)
  9. She and her son are not cast out (4:30)
  10. Her son is the rightful heir (4:30)
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- Paul again summarized, re-emphasizing the main point, by writing: *“But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.”* (vs.26). The point being that those who are truly saved are not those enslaved to the law, to a righteousness that comes from the law, but those who are free from the law through faith in Christ.
- To further establish his Scriptural proof for the Gospel, Paul quoted from the prophet Isaiah: *“For it is written, ‘Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband’”* (vs.27; Isa.54:1). These verses are a reminder that God always keeps His promises. Even though Sarah was the *“barren one”* (vs.27), God had promised that she would give birth the Isaac; the child of promise (see Gen.12:1-9). Even though she was, humanly speaking, well beyond the age of child-bearing (Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born; Gen.21:1-7) God’s promise to Abraham was fulfilled in Isaac.

**Heb 11:11-12** ~ “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup>Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

- God’s promise was fulfilled according to God’s will and His timing. The historical account of the birth of Isaac beautifully and powerfully illustrates the spiritual truth of God’s salvific promise to all who put their faith in Christ Jesus. For God has promised salvation to all those who receive His Son, Jesus Christ, as their Lord and Savior. He has promised to save by His grace, through Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross (2Cor.5:21). He has promise to adopt all those who truly believe, all who come to Him not claiming a righteousness that comes from the law, but a righteousness that comes through (depends on) faith in Christ.

**Phil 3:8-9** ~ “For [Christ’s] sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith”

### 3. The Personal Application (4:28-5:1)

- The personal application of the passage is easily identified in verse twenty-eight: *“Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise”* (vs.28). In other words, they are not Ishmaelites but true believers. By their emphasizing the need to keep the law, the Judaizers were trying to convince the Galatians that they were not true children of God. Using this scriptural analogy, Paul showed that self-righteousness in the law cannot save. True believers, true children of God, are those who receive God’s promised salvation by His grace through faith in Christ. Paul further explained, *“So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman”* (4:31).
- Moreover, just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, the Judaizers were persecuting those who were true children of God. *“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”* (vs.29). Paul unmasks these false teachers as false believers, who were persecuting the Galatians in an attempt to avoid themselves being persecuted *“for the cross of Christ”* (6:12; cf. 5:11).
- Paul was warning the Galatians that they were under attack, and exhorts them to recognize that the Judaizers are not true children of God. *“But what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman’”* (vs.30). This was certainly a direct exhortation for the Galatians to not only reject the false gospel of the Judaizers (1:6-7), and perhaps also an exhortation to expel the Judaizers (false teachers) from the church (see Gal.5:7-9; Matt.18:15-17).



➤ Still believing for their salvation, their true conversion, Paul wrote: *“So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman”* (vs.31). And he implores them to remain faithful to Christ and to the Gospel of Christ, not giving into the false teaching of the Judaizers. The reason is, or should be, self-evident: *“For freedom Christ has set us free”* (5:1). Christ did not set Christians free from the bondage of the law, only to put them back *“under the law”* (4:21).

**John 8:31-36** ~ “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,<sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’<sup>33</sup> They answered him, ‘We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.<sup>35</sup> The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever.<sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’”

**Rom 6:14-19** ~ “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.<sup>15</sup> What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?<sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,<sup>18</sup> and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” (cf. Rom.5:20-6:2)

➤ Then Paul gave this two-fold command (first positive, then negative): *“stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery”* (5:1). To *“stand firm”* (*stēkō*) means literally “to stand”, and can be translated “stand firm” or “stand fast.” The meaning behind this word is to be immovable, to not lose one’s position or fall to the ground. The command is for all Christians to remain resolute in the truth of the Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Failing to *“stand firm”* is tantamount to submitting again *“to the yoke of slavery”* (vs.1). That is, being under the bondage and control of a false gospel – a self-righteous legalism which cannot save.

## Conclusion

➤ We must persevere in the faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We must refute and refuse any false gospel, any divergence from the true Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We must not allow ourselves to be *“bewitched”* (3:1). Paul was reminding the Galatians that they are *“children of promise”* (4:28), no longer *“enslaved to the elementary principles of the world”* (Gal.4:3), no longer *“enslaved to those that by nature are not gods”* (4:8).

✓ Illust: “Following that same pattern, we also explicitly or implicitly see the contrasts of Hagar/Sarah, Ishmael/Isaac, children of Satan/children of God, commandments/promise, wrath/mercy, bondage/freedom, Old Covenant/New Covenant, Sinai/Zion, present Jerusalem/Jerusalem above, fleshly/spiritual, rejection/inheritance, and lostness/salvation. Throughout this letter, and indeed throughout all of Scripture, such contrasts reflect and demonstrate the contrast of the ages: the way of Satan and the way of God. But in God’s ultimate and unchangeable plan, Satan and his way will be destroyed, and only the way of God will remain, forever and ever. Vacillating between the two is unacceptable” (John MacArthur; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians*; 4:28-5:1).

➤ The very basis of our salvation in Christ – the *“sure and steadfast anchor of the soul”* (Heb.6:19) – is not our own innate goodness, or our own good works, but the infallible promise of God. He has promised to save all those who (by faith) receive His Son, Jesus Christ, as their Lord and Savior, and He has promised to adopt them as His children and into His forever family – saved by grace, and not by the law.