



At one time or another all of us have asked someone, “Can I help you with that!” But when we ask that, we don’t always mean just to offer help. Sometimes what we’re saying is, “I can’t take it any longer. You’re not doing a very good job of this. Let me have control over this situation!”

Have you noticed how hard it is to let go of something and let someone else take over? It comes out in me a lot, like when I teach my kids to do something. You show them how to do it, how **you** do it, then you have to stand back and watch as they try it. The problem is, they do it differently than you do.

I remember the first time I let my son mow the lawn. I showed him how to do it; he’d seen me do it many times. I showed him the art of the turn. If you do it just right you put yourself right in position to go back the other way. It took me years to perfect that turn technique. With that I taught him how to make one straight pass across the entire lawn so the lines left in the lawn are straight and symmetrical, no loops, no crisscrossing.

Then he gets out there on his own and he’s got a whole different way of doing it. Sometimes he does one section one way and another section another way, making the grass look like a crossword puzzle. He sometimes even makes a double pass at a diagonal. This is heresy when it comes to lawn mowing!

It’s hard to stand by and watch this! Total disregard for the art of the turn and the need for symmetry! I shake at the shameless display of unorthodox lawn mowing. It takes every ounce of my energy to **not** go running out there, grab the mower and say, “Can I help you with that?”

It’s kind of funny to think about that, and actually he now does a better job than I ever did. But we **really** don’t like not being in control. And that can be a serious problem. This is especially true when it comes to God, the way we experience salvation and the way we experience his plan for our lives.

In our passage today Paul brings up a classic example of someone trying to “help” God out in fulfilling his promise. Turn with me to Galatians 4:21–31. Many scholars believe this is the most difficult passage to understand in the whole book of Galatians. Part of that’s because it presupposes a working knowledge of the Old Testament which not everyone has. You have to know the stories of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac. Not only that, Paul employs a kind of allegorical argument that was popular in his day but rather foreign to us.

One thing is for sure, he addresses this to religious people. In v.21 he says, *“Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?”* He’s talking about the Judiazers and their followers who told people they had submit to Jewish laws to be fully acceptable to God. This applies to anyone today who thinks the way to gain acceptance with God is to keep certain rules; even just by trying to be a good person. Paul says, “Listen, if you want to be under the law, let’s take a closer look at the law.” He takes them back to the very first book of the law called Genesis.

Historical facts: Abraham had two sons, born of two different mothers in two different ways.

He starts out by reminding them of a few historical facts. Look at verses 22–23. *“For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.”*

To understand this passage we need to know what was going on with Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar back in Genesis. God had made Abraham a promise. God promised him that he would bless all nations through his offspring, and that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. But Abraham and Sarah were getting way too old to have children. They waited, and waited, and waited. Finally, Abraham’s wife Sarah decided God needed help in fulfilling his promise. Since she was in her 70’s and unable to have children, it was hopeless for her, so she suggested to Abraham that he sleep with her servant, Hagar. That sounds like a ridiculous plan to us, but it was a customary practice back then that if you couldn’t have children yourself you could have one through a maidservant.

You can criticize Sarah, but if you look at your own life, you just might find a similar story. We’re good at taking matters into our own hands to get what we want. We have our own time table and we don’t like waiting. So we decide to help God out even if we have to rationalize that the ends justify the means.

Abraham agrees to Sarah’s plan. Remember, this is Abraham, the man of faith. But here his faith is weak and he goes with Sarah’s plan. And, sure enough, Hagar conceives. Now the situation is getting messy. You have Sarah, who thinks she can’t have children; you have Hagar, who gets pregnant by Sarah’s husband; and you have Abraham.

As soon as she's pregnant, Hagar begins to despise Sarah. Then Sarah turns and blames Abraham for the mess. That's so human. It was her idea, but she blames him. Abraham deserves some blame because he agreed to a bad idea. Then Sarah starts to mistreat Hagar. Can't you just see Abraham coming home from the office. What a mess! "Hi, I'm home." Then Hagar runs away, but the angel of the Lord finds her in the desert and says, "Go back to Sarah and submit to her."

She goes back and Ishmael is born when Abraham is 86 years old; Sarah is about 76. Now fast forward 13 years. Abraham is 99, Sarah is 89. You have to wonder if they'd forgotten all about God's promise. But God comes to Abraham again and reconfirms his promise. He tells Abraham he'll be the father of many nations, Kings will come from him. God will keep his promise.

Abraham and Sarah thought it was kind funny. "Look at us. How are we going to pull this off at the age of 100?" And Abraham even says to God, "if only Ishmael might live under your blessing." He's basically saying, "I already took care of this for you God, I did it my way, I have a son." But God isn't about to change his plans or his timing just because they took matters into their own hands and made a huge mess.

A year later God kept his promise. Sarah conceived and Isaac was born. That was a huge blessing, but things continued to deteriorate in the family. This isn't exactly a recipe for family peace. Ishmael resented Isaac and mocked him and bullied him. Ishmael was always the only son but now Abraham and Sarah have a real son. Sarah sees what a mess they're in, so she tells Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son. That slave will never share in the inheritance with Isaac." It was her idea to have Ishmael through Hagar, but now that God has blessed her as he promised, she wants to get rid of her mistake.

So Abraham, who is getting quite good at saying "Yes, Dear," sent Hagar and Ishmael away. Ishmael had many sons and became father of the Arab people who have lived in hostility toward Isaac's descendants ever since. The sin of not trusting God's promise and trying to help him out had far reaching consequences. There is always consequences for sin and they often affect the people we're closest to.

This is the background for what Paul says in verses 22-23. He says Abraham had two sons who were born different in two ways. They had different mothers: Ishmael's mother was a slave named Hagar; Isaac's mother was a free woman named Sarah. More importantly, they were born in different ways: Ishmael was born according to the flesh and Isaac was born according to promise. Ishmael was born in the ordinary way, but Isaac was a miracle of God as the result of a promise. When Abraham got Hagar pregnant, he was saying, "God, can I help with this?" He was trying to make the blessing happen rather than waiting to receive it. Isaac was a gift, but Ishmael is what Abraham got for

trying to do things his way instead of God's way. There was a fundamental difference between how the two sons came about. One came by works; the other came by faith in a promise. And, as a result, one was a slave; the other was free.

Spiritual truths: These two women and their sons represent two covenants.

But what's the point? Paul goes on and says Ishmael and Isaac represent two entirely different approaches to God: law vs grace, flesh vs Spirit, self-reliance vs God-reliance. Look at verses 24-26. *"This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother."*

Some people are bothered that Hagar (who in the actual story is an innocent victim) represents something negative, while Sarah (who in the actual story is guilty) represents something positive. But notice Paul himself says in v.24 that he's speaking allegorically. Though it's a true story, he sees a deeper meaning in it. He finds the story to be a symbolic illustration of grace and works. Isaac and Ishmael each stand for something. In the eyes of God everyone is either an Isaac or an Ishmael. And to show that he starts with their mothers.

Hagar represents the old covenant, which God gave through Moses on Mt. Sinai. She's associated with Mt. Sinai because her children, the Ishmaelites, lived in and around the Sinai Peninsula. This old covenant which God made with his people contained all the rituals and rules they had to keep to receive God's blessing. It said, "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not." It produced a kind of slavery because no one could really live up to it. Since Hagar herself and her son were considered slaves they're perfect representatives of this lifestyle. And anyone who is still in bondage to legalism is one of her spiritual children. Here's the real kicker: Paul says the present Jerusalem corresponds to her. In other words, the Jews who think they're God's people are really Ishmaelites! Why? Because they're in slavery to the law. The Jews wouldn't have liked this. That's like calling a Jew and Gentile. But this is true of anyone who wants to live by the law today. Anyone who tries to help God out with their salvation by creating a list of rules we have to keep is a slave like Ishmael.

But what about Sarah? Who are her children? She was Abraham's wife. She was free. Her son, Isaac, who was born by promise was also free. Sarah represents the new covenant. Just as Isaac came by promise, this new covenant is not about law but promise. In the new covenant God doesn't say "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not." Instead, he says "I will." He says, "I will be your God. I will forgive your sins. I will be at work in your life. I will give you eternal life." The new covenant is the Gospel which promises

salvation by faith in what Jesus did on the cross. We can't do anything to help God out with that. The new covenant doesn't match up with present day Jerusalem but with "the Jerusalem above." The present, earthly Jerusalem represents the Jews. But the Jerusalem above represents believers in Christ (the church). This spiritual Jerusalem has already superseded the earthly Jerusalem in the plan of God. As more and more people come to Christ, God is building and growing this city. And the citizens of that city are free.

Paul gets so excited about this he bursts into song in v.27. ***"For it is written, 'REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND.'"*** He quotes from the prophet Isaiah, which is doubly appropriate because it relates to both Sarah and Jerusalem. The connection with Sarah is obvious. She was a barren woman who God blessed with a joyous multitude of sons and daughters. But Isaiah wasn't thinking primarily of Sarah, but of the city of Jerusalem. The Jerusalem of his day was barren because her children had been carried away into exile. But Isaiah promised that one day God would establish a new Jerusalem, which would be filled with far more children than the old Jerusalem could ever contain. Isaiah's promise is being fulfilled at this very moment, not in an earthly city, but in a spiritual one that spreads across the globe. As people come to faith in Jesus, they become citizens of the New Jerusalem.

Practical application: Paul applies this to believers.

In the next section Paul applies this to us. What do we do with this? Look at verses 28–31. ***"And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But 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 also. But what does the Scripture say? 'CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON, FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN.' So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman."***

There are three things to do.

We must decide who our mother is.

First, you have to answer the question, who is your mother? Are you a child of Hagar or of Sarah? Are you a slave or are you free? Do you follow the old covenant or the new? Do you live by the idea that you have to help God out with his promise or do you live by faith? Paul wants the Galatians to know he believes they're children of promise. That's what he says in v.28, ***"You're like Isaac. You're children of promise."*** He repeats that in v.31, ***"We're not of the bondwoman but of the freewoman."*** How do we know if that's the case with us? How do we know if we're tied up in legalism? Let me give you some attributes that may help you evaluate yourself on this:

A legalist trusts more in his own own goodness than in the work of Christ.

A legalist feel God is somehow disappointed in him when he doesn't live up to his own list of dos and don'ts.

A legalist looks down on others who can't live up to his standards.

A legalist resents the fact that God seems to bless people who don't deserve it more than he blesses him.

A legalist may repent of the bad things he's done but not of the good things he's done for the wrong reasons.

For a legalist, deep down serving God feels more and more like a chore rather than a privilege.

We must expect persecution.

This leads me to the second application. It comes out of v.29. Paul describes how the son born according to the flesh, Ishmael, persecuted the son born of the Spirit, Isaac. That's exactly what was happening in Galatia. That's what happens today as well. If you're a child of promise you can expect some kind of ridicule or rejection or outright persecution from those who are not. And it will most likely be religious people who do the persecuting because the gospel is threatening to them. Irreligious people don't care much about all this stuff, but religious people have developed firm ideas, which consist mainly of rules and regulations for getting into right standing with God. But the gospel insists those things are useless and they don't like that.

John Stott says, "The persecution of the true church, of Christian believers who trace their spiritual descent from Abraham, is not always by the world, who are strangers unrelated to us, but by our half-brothers, religious people, the nominal church. It has always been so. The Lord Jesus was bitterly opposed, rejected, mocked and condemned by his own nation. The fiercest opponents of the apostle Paul, who dogged his footsteps and stirred up strife against him, were the official church, the Jews... The greatest enemies of the evangelical faith today are not unbelievers, who when they hear the gospel often embrace it, but the church, the establishment, the hierarchy. Isaac is always mocked and persecuted by Ishmael."

If you're experiencing rejection at any level because of your stance for freedom in Christ, you can rejoice. This is a very good sign. This is what has always happened to true believers.

We must embrace our inheritance.

This leads to the third application. We must embrace our inheritance. In v.29 he quotes directly from the Genesis story where God told Abraham to do what Sarah suggested: Cast out the bondwoman and her slave. Paul may be implying, "You need to cast these legalists and their legalism out of your church and out of your life." The two cannot coexist. Legalism and grace just don't get along. Honestly, I've found that those with a legalistic

agenda don't last long at CPC. They quickly see that's not who we are and they find somewhere else that way of life will be encouraged.

But notice the reason Paul says to cast her out: Because Ishmael is not the heir; Isaac is. So even though the children of promise are persecuted, we have this to bring us comfort and hope. We have the pain of persecution but we also have the privilege of inheritance. We may be despised and rejected of men, but we're beloved as God's dear children. We've received our citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem and it can never be taken away from us. Let me give you a taste of that from the book of Revelation, chapter 21. John says,

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be

among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.

"And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper.

"And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb."

That's what God has in store for us. But if you want that, you have resist the temptation to take over God's job. God has made you a promise. He doesn't say "Thou shalt" he says "I will." The question is, will you trust him? Will you trust him to fulfill his promise in his way and in his time? Will you refuse to try to make it happen yourself?