



Time to Reflect

- Do you have a regular pattern for reading the Bible? How does the Bible shape our everyday lives?
- Why might we find it difficult to trust God and His promises? How can we grow beyond this and embrace a deeper level of faith?

Last week we reflected on the importance of spiritual growth and our need to keep pressing forward in the direction that God wants us to travel. We considered ways in which we can go for growth and we discussed how we might avoid regressing in our faith. This week our passage draws our attention to the very nature of God's grace and how it stands in contrast to legalism and works. Ultimately, these verses challenge us to trust God and depend entirely on Him.

"These verses are explosive. They round off the themes Paul has been highlighting since the middle of chapter 2. His point here is not only that the gospel makes absolutely anyone a child of God, but that the most proud and moral and religiously 'able' are often the ones left out of God's family. The gospel reverses the world's values."

(Timothy Keller, *Galatians For You*, p117)

Specifics

- As our passage begins, we see how Paul expressed his own personal feelings with great honesty and openness (v19). He had a deep-rooted love for the Galatians, hence his reference to them as *"My dear children,"* and he was significantly pained by their spiritual regress.
- All Paul really wanted was for the Galatians, his spiritual children, to progress in their Christian faith. He longed for them to become who God wanted them to be.
- Warren Wiersbe reflects, *"...the Galatian Christians were falling back into legalism and a 'second childhood' experience, and Paul had to travail over them again. He longed to see Christ formed in them, just as we parents long to see our children mature in the will of God.¹"*
- In an effort at confronting the false teaching that led the Galatians into spiritual regress, Paul used the law to prove that Christians are not under the law. He took the familiar story of Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 16-21) and drew from it some significant reflections and key Christian teachings.
- It is important to realise that Paul used this story as an allegory – an illustration to reinforce the main points that he sought to highlight.
- Timothy Keller helpfully suggests, *"He (Paul) finds the story to be a good, symbolic illustration of grace and works. It's not that he doesn't think it is historical. But he wants to use it as an illustration of biblical truth. And, as we've seen, he wants to use it to turn the tables on his opponents.²"*
- Paul demonstrated that he had a deep and impressive knowledge of the Old Testament. It is important that we read the Bible, reflect upon it, learn from it, and allow it to shape our everyday lives.

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians* (David C Cook, 2009), p103.

² Timothy Keller, *Galatians For You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), p123.

- At a foundational level, this passage is a contrast between grace and works. Paul began by asking a rhetorical question that acted as an introduction for the argument that he sought to make (v21).
- He then proceeded to mention two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and he explained that they illustrate two births (v22-23) – the physical birth that makes us sinners and the spiritual birth that makes us God’s children.
- The use of the phrase “...born as the result of a divine promise” (v23) is significant as it draws our attention to God and His direct will, as opposed to the physical process of being “...born according to the flesh” (v23).
- The association between human desire and God’s will is something that we all wrestle with even today. When we read Genesis 16-21 we discover that this is something that Abraham also wrestled with.
- Keller takes note of this and he observes, “Abraham did not rely on God’s grace through His supernatural action in history but rather on his own ability. When we fail to rest in God and instead seek to be our own savior, the result is havoc and disintegration – spiritually, psychologically, and relationally.”³
- It is important that we seek to grow close to God and dependent upon Him. His grace is always sufficient for us and His ways are always best. Paul reminded the Galatians, and he reminds us, that we need to trust God and depend on His promises.
- Having reflected on the two sons, Paul then narrowed his focus to the two mothers: Hagar and Sarah. In doing so, Paul wanted to illustrate the contrasts between law and grace, and was proving that believers are not under law but the freedom that comes through God’s grace.
- Within the passage, Hagar should be understood to represent the law and Sarah stands for the freedom that believers have in Christ through the grace of God.
- It is interesting that Hagar was Abraham’s second wife. God didn’t begin with Hagar, He began with Sarah. God began with grace and not the law.
- We see this in Eden when God provided for Adam and Eve by grace. His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15) was all of grace. The exodus from Egypt was on the basis of grace and not law – in fact, the law had not yet been given!
- Hagar’s marriage to Abraham, and the birth of Ishmael, was the result of Abraham and Sarah’s unbelief and impatience. Sarah was barren and she longed for a child. Rather than trusting God’s earlier promise, Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands.
- They needed to trust God and His timing. Instead, “...Abraham was choosing to rely on his own capabilities. He was opting to ‘work’ and gain his son. He was acting in faith: but the faith he had was in himself, as his own ‘savior.’”⁴
- Yet, even out of this situation and its complexity, God moved in an incredible way. Paul referenced this in (v27), a quote from Isaiah 54, and here we see how the gospel is grace to the barren.
- There is a powerful teaching here and Keller reflects on it. He writes, “The prophecy of Isaiah looks back to Genesis 16, in which God looks down on two women, one beautiful and fertile, the other barren and old, and He chooses to save the world through the barren one....Grace is not just for fertile Hagars, but for barren Sarahs. If Sarah can have a future, anyone can!”⁵
- God cannot be limited or constrained by rule keeping or legalistic religion. He moves in the most incredible ways and with the most awesome outcomes. This is the power of the gospel that Paul wanted the Galatians to remember, embrace and live out.

³ Keller, *Galatians For You*, p122.

⁴ Ibid, p121.

⁵ Ibid, pp124-125.