

MIRACLE BABIES

GALATIANS 4:21-31

BEING BORN AGAIN IN JESUS IS TRULY A MIRACLE THAT GIVES LIFE TO OUR SPIRITS, AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, AND FREEDOM TO BE HOLY.

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Miracle Babies

Galatians 4:21-31

Today's passage is going to be both fun and confusing. It is going to be fun because Paul is kind of summing up what he has been arguing for the last 4 chapters. He is going to sum it up a lot like we do here at church every Sunday. I tell a little story that hopefully summarizes what I have been speaking about. And then Ken makes sure it hits the mark by following up with a very practical application.

That's kind of fun. However, what is confusing is that Paul takes an Old Testament story, takes it out of its historical context, twists the characters and events around, and then applies it to his argument. He calls it allegorizing. We'll talk more about that later and hopefully I can clearly guide us through this fun and confusing passage.

I titled this sermon "Miracle Babies" because when we gave our lives to Jesus in faith, we were born again. That new birth is spiritual and miraculous. With this new birth, we became part of God's family. Being part of God's family gives us access to His inheritance. Part of that inheritance means that we grow up into the image and likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ. And God takes a great deal of pleasure in that.

Did you ever think about that? God takes a great deal of pleasure in seeing us imitate Christ? I don't think that's so hard to understand. Let me give you an example. Parents are pleased and proud to see their children achieve and accomplish many things. I'm no different.

One day, Luig and I were attending our children's parent teacher conference in grade school. The nun said to us, "Your children are very smart." I said, "Yes, they must get their brains from one of us," to which Luig immediately responded, "It must be you ... I still have all of mine."

With Luig, I never know if I'm getting complimented or insulted. However, as God's children, we have been given permission to grow in our faith and imitate His firstborn Son, Jesus.

Paul summarizes his thoughts on salvation by grace through faith by telling a story. In this story he is going to demonstrate that living according to the Spirit is better than living according to the flesh. Being certain of being in a right relationship with God is better than trying to figure out when we can be right with God by being religious or doing enough good works. And finding out how freeing life can be when we stop chasing after the things of this world and start pursuing holiness. In other words, the main idea of this morning's text is **BEING BORN AGAIN IN JESUS IS TRULY A MIRACLE THAT GIVES LIFE TO OUR SPIRITS, AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, AND FREEDOM TO BE HOLY.**

All along, Paul has been identifying all people who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as children of Abraham. Jews have always considered themselves to be children of Abraham since he was the father of the Hebrew nation. Now Paul comes along and starts referring to Christians: both Jewish and Gentile believers as children of Abraham.

In verses 21-23, Paul lays out the triumph of the miracle of Spirit over flesh. In other words, **WHEN WE RECEIVED JESUS AS LORD AND SAVIOR, HE GAVE LIFE TO OUR DEAD SPIRITS.** These three verses are factual and Paul's interpretation of them is in line with the principles of interpretation we use. Further, Paul has been saying all along that those who place their faith in Christ are free.

Those who continue to try and follow religious rules as a means to be right with God are slaves.

In verse 21 Paul exposes the ignorance of the flesh. In this passage Paul will be using the word flesh as it applies to human effort, human power, and human wisdom. Spirit will refer to the new life and supernatural gifts and interventions given to believers by God as a result of saving faith. At certain points in his letter, Paul addressed Gentile-believers and in other parts he addressed Jewish-believers. At this point it seems as if he is addressing Jewish believers who are insisting that everyone follow Mosaic laws and customs in addition to placing faith in Christ. And it also seems as if he is addressing Gentile-believers who have bought into this lie along with others tempted to follow. He starts out verse 21 by addressing those who want to be under the law. We have talked about how seductive people who seem to lay out a set of religious rules and appear to be very religious. I have told you over and over again that I am very suspicious of religious people. Gentile-believers would see Jewish-believers having their babies circumcised on the eighth day after birth. They would see Jewish-believers washing their hands in certain ways and being very careful what they ate and how they prepared it. They would recite certain prayers. They appeared to be more holy than the others. And then these people who seemed to be very holy told the others that in addition to believing in Jesus, they must also practice these ceremonies and be careful what they ate and how they prepared it in order to be right with God. In other words, they were enslaving these Christians to Jewish customs and religious practices. Paul challenges them like this. He says, "You guys want to be under the law, but you don't even know what the law really says.

He goes on to describe the slavery of the flesh. Again he takes his congregations back to Abraham. And keep in mind that he is ultimately interested in reminding us that we are children of Abraham. He says that Abraham had two sons. We know their names were Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was the child of their servant girl Hagar. Isaac was born to Abraham's wife Sarah. His point here is that God had always intended to give Abraham and Sarah a child who would in turn give birth to the Hebrew nation who would inhabit the Promised Land of Israel. Hagar was a slave girl. Her children would not inherit the promise of God. Sarah was a free woman. She was not owned by a master. In general, slaves give birth to slaves and free persons give birth to free persons.

The Jews identified themselves as free persons. They were proud of the fact they were not slaves. Listen how upset they get when Jesus challenges them. Jesus said, ³²"And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

³³"But we are descendants of Abraham," they said. "We have never been slaves to anyone on earth. What do you mean, 'set free'?"

³⁴Jesus replied, "I assure you that everyone who sins is a slave of sin" (John 8:32-34 / NLT).

Think about the world we live in. People think they are good. People think that we control our own destinies. Like the people challenged in His day, like the people the Apostle Paul challenged, so the people of our day who somehow think they can earn their salvation by being good or religious are ignorant of the fact there is only one way to be right with God; and that is by placing our faith and trust in Jesus alone. There is no other way. But when people act apart from the truth of God, they are operating according to the flesh, which is ignorant of the truth.

In verse 23 however, Paul reminds us about the promise of the Spirit. Keep in mind, everybody still agrees with what Paul is saying to them. And now he goes on to say

something else they all would agree with. He says that Ishmael was born in the ordinary way. Look at verse 23 carefully. "Was born in the ordinary way" is an accurate translation, but we miss the full force of it. In Greek it literally says, "was born according to flesh," and the NASB translates it exactly like that. The NLT says, "was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise." If we put them all together we get a glimpse into the full force of the phrase. The focus is on the word flesh. First of all flesh means worldly plans done according to human wisdom and human effort apart from God. Since Abraham and Sarah were old, Sarah came up with this plan. She would take her servant girl Hagar, and make her have sex with Abraham. They would then name that child as the heir to the promises God gave Abraham. Now we have also defined flesh as the natural way of the world. In other words, when couples have sex, it can result in a baby. Hagar got pregnant and gave birth to a son. Ishmael was the result of a human plan and a natural act. God had nothing to do with this plan at all. I know many of us have all sorts of crazy ideas that we reason are God's plan. But they are usually misguided understandings of the Bible and what God actually promised. Ishmael was born in a fleshly way.

On the other hand, Isaac was born as the result of a promise. Let's think what Paul is saying here. Abraham was 100-years-old. Sarah was 90-years old. They were well past the childbearing age. In fact, they admitted they were sexually dead and actually thought it funny when God promised them a child. Listen to how God described the encounter, "¹³Then the LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh? Why did she say, 'Can an old woman like me have a baby?' ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? About a year from now, just as I told you, I will return, and Sarah will have a son'" (Genesis 18:13-14 / NLT).

This is clearly a miracle baby. This is the baby God promised Abraham and Sarah, and this is the baby through whom God would fulfill His promises of salvation. Let's also keep in mind that all the congregation members would recognize that the birth of Jesus was a miracle as well. Think about the progression here. Isaac was born as the result of a miracle. Through Isaac came the Hebrew nation. They carried the promise of God's salvation. Then Jesus is born miraculously as well. He is the fulfillment of God's salvation promises. Jesus then gives birth to the church miraculously on the day of Pentecost when people heard the Gospel preached in every language as believers spoke in tongues. It seems that the congregations in Galatia also experienced some supernatural manifestation of the Holy Spirit when they received Christ as Savior and Lord. So far, so good. Everybody got this argumentation and everybody is on board. They understand the idea that Christians are now born of the Spirit and are to no longer live by the flesh. They understand that they are children of Abraham by faith. Most of all they understand that **WHEN WE RECEIVED JESUS AS LORD AND SAVIOR, HE GAVE LIFE TO OUR DEAD SPIRITS.**

From here on out, the passage gets tricky. It's not too difficult to understand but we have to slow down and follow closely. There will be times where Paul takes the historical Jews in Moses' day, and identify them with the Gentiles-believers in Paul's day. And what will really drive the Judaizers nuts will be when Paul identifies them with the slave girl Hagar and the slave son Ishmael.

But the important truth in verses 24-27 illustrates the miracle of relationship over religion as a means to be right with God. **WHEN WE RECEIVED SALVATION, WE NO LONGER HAD TO WORRY ABOUT FOLLOWING RELIGIOUS RULES IN ORDER TO EARN GOD'S LOVE.**

And now we arrive at the story of miracles in the first half of verse 24. Paul let's us know that what he is about to do is not strict exposition of the Old Testament text. He says he is going to use these historical events in a figurative way. I like that the NIV translated this word "figuratively." Literally, or I should say phonetically, the word in Greek sounds like our English word allegory. However, this is not strictly an allegory the way we use the word allegory. There is a lot of debate whether we should call this an allegory or a type. I don't think it fits either category. An allegory is usually a story that has a deeper meaning for reality. For example, C. S. Lewis' children's book series, The Chronicles of Narnia are modern day allegories. They are wonderful children's fantasy books, but you can easily identify Aslan the lion as Jesus, the witch as the devil, etc. Another allegory we are all familiar with is John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

On the other hand, types are precursors to the original. For example, Moses is a type of Christ. Jesus of course is the ultimate prophet and deliverer. King David was a type of the Messiah. Obviously Jesus is the ultimate King of kings. Melchizedek was a type of the priest Jesus would be. And Isaac was a type of the sacrifice Jesus would be.

Paul's storytelling doesn't fit into either one of these categories but it does have some of the characteristics of both. The important thing is that Paul is informing us he is storytelling and using these events that are historical in a non-historical way. When I teach the Bible study and preaching classes, I make sure we study Bible texts in the historical context and make sure to understand the meaning in context. And we should. In other places, Paul uses the historical method.

He informs his listeners that he just wants to use the characters and places as examples they can understand and relate to.

And with that in the second half of verse 24 through 25 he tells them the story of religion. It starts with a statement of what he hopes to accomplish by telling this story. He tells us that the two women in the story he is about to tell us represent two covenants. In one sense, immediately people would have thought about the Old Testament and New Testament. In other words, Jesus said that by His blood He was creating a New Covenant with people. And in one sense, that will be true. But Paul means it to be much more than that. The two covenants will represent two approaches to God and what they mean for their followers.

The first approach is an attempt to be right with God through human effort. In other words, this is the fleshly approach. Here is where Paul's story gets interesting. If you were here during our studies through Genesis and Exodus, you will recognize that Paul has mixed two different stories together. He is focused on the story of Abraham, his relationship with his wife Sarah, his mistress Hagar, the two children that come from these women, and their destinies. Then he identifies Hagar with Mt. Sinai. Mt. Sinai is the setting where God gives Moses the Law that will govern the Hebrew people until the time of Jesus. Why is this interesting? First of all, the Jews and Jewish-Christians claimed to be children of Abraham and they demonstrated it by following the Mosaic Law. Secondly, the Jewish-Christians were trying to convince the Gentile-Christians to demonstrate their faith in Christ by submitting to the Mosaic Law.

Hagar was Sarah's slave. We have already gone over the story. Let's pick up the story again. After Hagar had her baby, she started to get uppity. The slave actually started to treat her master with contempt. And so Sarah made life so bad that Hagar had to run away. However, she came back. About 13 years after Ishmael was born, Isaac was born. One day, Sarah saw Ishmael being abusive towards Isaac

and pressured Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Even though Abraham was heartbroken, God told him to listen to Sarah. God promised to look after Ishmael and Abraham sent them away. We know that Ishmael settled in Arabia and he became the father of powerful people. In fact, Muslims claim to descend from Ishmael. But they never received the promises that God promised Abraham.

Now look at the end of verse 25. Paul identifies this covenant with Hagar and Ishmael. It represents slavery, earthly power, and religion. The important point Paul is making here is that if Jews or Jewish-Christians are trying to be right with God by keeping the Mosaic Law, they are enslaved because no one can be right with God by keeping religious rules.

I want to pick up on this in a minute, but continue to follow along at the end of verse 25. Paul says Hagar, Ishmael, slavery, and not achieving a right relationship with God corresponds to the present Jerusalem of his day. Paul is saying that the Judaizers are enslaved to the concept of being right with God based on following the rules. Paul is calling them worldly, enslaved, in bondage, and separated from God. Do you see how twisted this is? They are trying to make the Gentile-Christians get right with God even though they are already right with God simply by placing their faith in Jesus. Paul is saying that these Jewish-Christians that are keeping the law and trying to get others to keep the law are themselves enslaved and estranged from God.

This applies to any human attempt to earn our salvation, or to think we will be accepted by God because we are good. I know this is not very popular to say, but it seems to me that the Bible is clear. No one can be right with God by being good, religious, or moral. Any attempt to get right with God by doing good is a worldly, fleshly, and misguided idea. There is only one way to be right with God. Let's get it from the source: "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6 / NIV).

Paul immediately follows that up with a story of relationship in verses 26-27. Here he identifies the place of origin as the Jerusalem above. In other words, heaven is the origin of the miracle that produces Isaac. Sarah is a free woman. God freely and miraculously gave her a son that would inherit all the blessings. Paul's point is this. We do not need to be enslaved to the fear of knowing when we have become religious enough, smart enough, or good enough to be accepted by God. When we receive Jesus, we are born again into the family of God. We are automatically put in a right relationship with God because of Jesus' work on the cross on our behalf. If the Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians placed their faith in Jesus Christ, leaving behind all notions of being able to earn or deserve God's love, they would be free. It is all about what God has done not what we can do.

Think of this from God's perspective. The Triune God planned out the method by which we can be saved. That plan cost God everything. He said that He did this on our behalf. If we just accept it, we will be saved. When we think that there is another way to be saved or think somehow we can merit it, we spit in God's face. This plan was conceived from the beginning. Jesus executed the plan to perfection. To reject that plan leaves us enslaved to sin, Satan, fear, and death. To receive that plan leaves us free to pursue holiness in love. Religion leads to death. Relationship leads to life. **WHEN WE RECEIVED SALVATION, WE NO LONGER HAD TO WORRY ABOUT FOLLOWING RELIGIOUS RULES IN ORDER TO EARN GOD'S LOVE.**

If you have ever played sports, you will understand this. If there is no pressure on you, you usually do well. Let me illustrate. Let's say you are playing golf and have

about a 6-foot putt. You line up the putt, you think about it, and then miss the putt. After you're finished you put the ball back where it was for practice, ... and almost all the time, you hit it and it goes in. The pressure in any sport of missing or losing usually causes us to play at a lower level than we are capable of.

In verses 28-30 Paul solves that in our spiritual lives by demonstrating the miracle of holiness over worldliness. **KNOWING THAT GOD LOVES US ALLOWS US THE FREEDOM TO PURSUE HOLINESS WITHOUT FEAR.**

We are reminded of the miracle of our birth in verse 28. Paul now reminds us that if we hold fast to the truth that we are saved by grace through faith and are confident that God loves us and accepts us, we are free and we stand in the illustrious salvation line. He addresses his congregations as brothers and sisters. By doing this he is encouraging them to hold on to the truth of salvation and God's acceptance already belonging to them. Remember, Isaac was a miracle baby. He was conceived by and given birth to by a 90-year-old mother and a 100-year-old father. Jesus was miraculously born. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin mother. Our new birth was being conceived on the cross of Christ and when we received Him in faith, we were miraculously born again. We are miracle babies, born into the family of God. We don't have to go around doing things trying to earn our father's love. He has already given it to us and demonstrated His love by sending Jesus to die on the cross for us. Do you ever wonder how much God loves us? Just look to the cross. Good Friday is the concrete demonstration of God's love. If we go through life trying to earn God's love by being good, we will be imprisoned to fear. If we accept God's love, pursuing holiness will be a natural love response. Since we are free from fear, we will achieve much higher levels of holiness. Being free to pursue holiness is a wonderful gift.

But as verse 29 points out, the temptation to be worldly is always with us. Let me once again remind us that the words "ordinary way" are literally "according to flesh." So Paul is saying that it is a common experience that children of the flesh persecute and torment children of the Spirit. In other words, worldly people persecute godly people. Any young person who tries to be good in school and live out their faith knows how cruel the rest of the kids are. Talk about your faith in public and see the response you get. The reason most of us don't get persecuted is because we keep our mouths shut and live pretty worldly lives.

And that brings me to another nuance of this flesh/Spirit battle. In all of us our fleshly, worldly side constantly battles with our spiritual, godly side. Even though the Spirit will win, the battle and journey are difficult. We know our spiritual side will win out because God promises to complete the good work He started in us. But all the way until we see Him face to face, it will be a struggle. The world is at war with true Christians. Satan is at war with us. And our own worldly and sinful desires constantly fight with our spiritual and godly desires.

As we fight on, let's not get discouraged or give up because verses 30-31 illustrate the triumph of holiness. We are commanded to live free. We are to get rid of our worldly desires and worldly ideas of religion. We must give up any notion that we are good, better than anyone else, or able to earn God's love. We must never get to the place where we think we have earned God's love or entitled to His blessings. We must not allow the world to evaluate us nor should we ever adopt the world's standards and measures of good and evil. God defines what is good, beautiful, desirable, and valuable.

We became God's children simply by placing our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We must now live free. When Paul quotes the Scripture saying to get rid of the slave

woman and her child, he is actually saying to get rid of the people who are telling you that you have to follow Jewish laws in order to be fully saved. What a slam. He has taken a slave girl, identified her with the Mosaic Law, further identified the Judaizers as children of slavery, and told the congregations to kick them out and get rid of them. What a clever story. The bottom line is this **KNOWING THAT GOD LOVES US ALLOWS US THE FREEDOM TO PURSUE HOLINESS WITHOUT FEAR.** Next week we will start to describe what it means to freely pursue holiness. The rest of the letter will describe what life in Christ looks like.

But for now let's remember this. **BEING BORN AGAIN IN JESUS IS TRULY A MIRACLE THAT GIVES LIFE TO OUR SPIRITS, AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, AND FREEDOM TO BE HOLY.**

As God's children, we have been given great blessings and a great birth-rite. Don't throw it away. We know that one of Isaac's sons, Esau, threw his birth-rite blessings away. He was hungry and he told his brother that he would trade his birth-rite for a bowl of stew. We know that his brother Jacob became the father of twelve sons, who later became the heads of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. Esau gave it away for a bowl of stew.

What are you tempted to trade your birth-rite away for: pride, popularity, wealth, power, or sensuality? Whatever it is think carefully about it. We have a lot to lose. Listen to what we stand to lose if we give up our freedom. The Apostle John describes our final inheritance in the book of Revelation:

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband.

³I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. ⁴He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever."

⁵And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making all things new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true."

⁶And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give the springs of the water of life without charge! ⁷All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.

⁸But cowards who turn away from me, and unbelievers, and the corrupt, and murderers, and the immoral, and those who practice witchcraft, and idol worshipers, and all liars—their doom is in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur. This is the second death" (Revelation 21:1-8 (NLT)

We are children of God. We got this status simply by placing our faith in Jesus alone. Please don't become confused. We have glorious destinies waiting for us. But those who depend on the flesh for salvation and satisfaction will end up in hell for an eternity. We are miracle babies. Let's grow up to be free men and women. Let's be all God created us to be and let's complete all the good works He has prepared for us to do along the way.