

Ishmael or Isaac—the Choice Is Yours

(Chuck Swindoll)

To the believers in Galatia, Paul said, "You brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise" (4:28). When we place our trust in Christ alone, we, too, become related to Abraham and Sarah in the only way that makes any spiritual difference. We may not be physically born as Jews in the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...but we are spiritually born again into God's family and made everlasting heirs of heaven's eternal riches. But until we finish our lifelong journey as sojourners and strangers, we need to remember a couple of important principles along the way.

First, as true members of God's family, we should expect to be persecuted by our half brothers—religious people who claim to be part of God's family but are not. Just as Ishmael ridiculed his half-brother Isaac (Gen. 21:8-9), legalists will persecute believers (Gal. 4:29)- It has been this way throughout history, beginning with Jesus Himself. The religious leaders of His day opposed, mocked, condemned, and executed the true Seed of Abraham. The Judaizers made life and ministry difficult for Paul and all those who, like him, took a stand for the freedom that comes through grace. During the Reformation, popes and kings brutalized Protestants who took a stand on the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. In our own day, legalistic Christians who have never experienced the sweet liberation of grace can make the Christian life a miserable experience for true believers, overwhelming them with an endless, uncompromising list of dos and don'ts.

This is why when it comes to law and grace, we have to get off the fence. We can't fluctuate between rules and faith, mixing them in our approach to God. He won't allow that. Either we come to Him His way or we don't come at all. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" The former are the family of faith and citizens of heaven; the latter are the family of works and slaves of hell. Until we trust in Christ alone, we all belong to the second family. After we're born again, we're members of the first.

Second, we must recognize the absolute incompatibility of man-made religion and God's gracious provision. Hagar and Ishmael symbolize human attempts to achieve what only God can do. This humanistic approach to the Lord can't coexist with the way of faith; therefore, just as Hagar and Ishmael were cast out of Abraham's household (Gen. 21:10, 12), so must works-oriented religions and beliefs be removed from God's family (Gal. 4:30).

Once we stop fence straddling, we'll realize how incompatible law and grace really are. The free life can't survive the structured demands of rule-centered living. Conversely, law keeping can't maintain a grip on a truly liberated life. As Christians, we are called to a life of freedom. Let's start living it-today.

