

Who's Your Mother?

[Galatians 4:21-31](#)

When my girls were little, I remember reading them a children's book by P. D. Eastman entitled *Are You My Mother?* It is about a little bird which hatches from an egg while his mother is out getting food. He leaves the nest to find his mom, and as he searches, he learns that a kitten, hen, dog, cow, boat, plane and steam shovel are not his mother. His mother, as you might expect, is a bird, which he discovers by the end of the book. Now, most of us are not confused about who our physical mother is, but today we are going to talk about an even more important question: Who is your spiritual mother?

Now that is probably a strange question to you, one you may have never considered. Paul has taught us that Abraham is the spiritual father of all believers:

Galatians 3:29 (NASB) *And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*

In verse seven of chapter 3, Paul had written:

Galatians 3:7 (NASB) *Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.*

But in our text for today, Paul, in effect, says, "Okay so Abraham is your father, but who is your mother?" Let's read this text to get the over all picture before we dissect it:

Galatians 4:21-31 (NASB) *Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. 23 But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. 24 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. 25 Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. 27 For it is written, "REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND." 28 And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 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. 30 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." 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.*

Almost all the commentators agree that this is the hardest passage in the book of Galatians. Paul's form of argument is very Jewish, even Rabbinical, which means that his first-century readers probably had no problems following him, but that same style can seem rather difficult to 21st-century readers. From my perspective, this passage is quite simple if you understand the Preterist view of eschatology. The key to the whole passage can be found in verse 21:

Galatians 4:21 (NASB) *Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?*

Paul is arguing with those who want to go back to Judaism and take Jesus with them. He is addressing people who want a hybrid religion that is part Jewish and part Christian. They intend to believe in Jesus, plus they want to live under the law as a means of pleasing God and winning His favor. Everything in this passage is aimed at these confused believers who were sorely tempted to go back to the Law of Moses. His point is: Have you considered the implications of what you are about to do?

The folks in Galatia had been toying with the law for far too long. The false teachers had been very persuasive. Their arguments had been convincing. They said, "We, the Jews, are the chosen people of God. We are of our father Abraham. The sign of the covenant people is the sign of circumcision. If you Gentiles really want to be part of the people of God then you must do something, submit yourself to circumcision and keep the law - be good!" The people in Galatia wanted to do what's right, they wanted to be right with God, so they were moving toward the Law.

Paul challenged his readers, who claimed to value the Law so highly, to consider what it taught. He chose his lesson from Genesis, a book in the "Law" section of the Old Testament. Thus he used the term "law" to refer to two different things in this verse: the Mosaic Law and the Old Testament.

Do you not hear the law? Paul senses that he hasn't made his point yet, so he will now approach the matter with another illustration from the Old Testament. Essentially, Paul says, "Let's have a Bible study. Open your Bibles to Genesis chapter 16."

Galatians 4:22-23 (NASB) *For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. 23 But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.*

Abraham had two sons -Ishmael and Isaac. Paul doesn't mention that Abraham had eight sons, six of them from a woman named Keturah that he married after Sarah died. (Genesis 25:1-2) The birth of the two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, provided Paul with the sermon material that he needed to teach the biblical lesson that was needed by the folks in Galatia.

The history behind this story is found in the book of Genesis. It basically goes like this. Abraham was a prosperous pagan businessman in Ur of the Chaldees when God appeared to him and told him to take his wife Sarah, leave that land, and go to a land that God would later show him. God also promised to give him descendants who would become a great nation:

Genesis 12:2 (NASB) *And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing;*

That was all well and good except that Abraham was 75, Sarah was 65, and they had no children. In the course of time they arrived in Canaan, the land God promised them. In Canaan, God repeated that promise, saying:

Genesis 13:16 (NASB) *"And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.*

Ten years passed and still no son had been born. Since the biological clock was ticking away, Sarah suggested that Abraham marry Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant:

Genesis 16:2 (NASB) *So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.*

Hagar became pregnant and a son named Ishmael was born. Sarah concluded that since she was 75 years old, there was no way she would ever have a baby. That was a perfectly reasonable, perfectly "human" conclusion. So she and Abraham decided to take matters in their own hands and help God out. But, of course, God doesn't need our help, and whenever we try to help God, things get worse, not better.

That's exactly what happened. Genesis 16 says that animosity arose between Sarah and Hagar. That figures. You've got two women sharing one man. That's never going to work out right. So young Ishmael grows up in an unhappy home situation. Fourteen years pass. Abraham is now 99, Sarah 89. His body is "as good as dead." Her womb seems shut tight. There seems to be no chance, none whatsoever, that they will ever have a child together. But at precisely that point, God appeared to him once more and said:

Genesis 17:15-17 (NASB) *Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 "And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"*

To make it clear that Ishmael was not the son of promise, God said to Abram:

Genesis 17:21 (NASB) *"But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."*

God revived the bodies of Abraham and Sarah, and 12 months later Isaac was born. The name Isaac means laughter. Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah was 90.

Genesis 21:6 (NASB) *And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."*

That much of the biblical story is familiar to most of us. It's clear why Paul uses this example. The Jews revered Abraham as their spiritual father. As far as they were concerned, if you were a physical descendant of Abraham, then you were in good standing with the Lord. As long as you could find Father Abraham somewhere in your family tree, then you didn't really need anything else. It was a matter of lineage, of heritage, of tracing your family tree. If you could find Abraham back there somewhere, you were in God's family. Paul is saying, "Not so!" God's family is made up of those who have a relationship with Him by faith in Jesus Christ. It's a matter of faith, not your family tree.

As Paul puts it, Ishmael was born according to the flesh, and Isaac was born as the result of God's promise. Ishmael is born a slave, because his mother was a slave; Isaac is born free, because his mother was a free woman.

Paul says that Ishmael was born "according to the flesh." The NIV puts it, "Was born in the ordinary way," suggesting, in the ordinary way as people are normally born into this world. According to the flesh, they are conceived, carried to term, and born.

But I think that Paul means more than that here. I see "according to the flesh" as meaning: "human efforts apart from God." Specifically, he was born according to a lack of faith on Abraham's and Sarah's part as they tried to accomplish God's will by doing their own will.

If we look at Paul's prior uses of "flesh" in Galatians, we see him using "flesh" to refer to something that is totally human, with no special grace attached. In Paul's use of the term "flesh" in Galatians, he does not simply mean: "possessed of a physical body"; rather, he means: "limited to only a physical body and the physical strength it contains."

However, the other son, Isaac, was not born in the ordinary way, or according to the flesh in the sense that, in contrast, he was born according to a promise given to Abraham by God. Now, this doesn't mean that Isaac was born out of the ordinary. He too was conceived, carried to term, and born. But what makes his birth different is that God intervened in a situation where Sarah couldn't conceive and miraculously allowed her to conceive.

The problem in Galatia was this: The Judaizers taught that you either had to be a Jew, or you had to act like a Jew in order to be saved. That meant being circumcised and keeping the outward trappings of the Law of Moses. The Judaizers said, "Who's your father?" Paul said, "I've got another question. Who's your mother?"

The Jews knew that they were the descendants of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, but Paul turned their most prized "bragging right" on its head by saying, "No, you are the descendants of Hagar! He is saying that those who take matters into their own hands by seeking to keep the law, by thinking that they can earn their salvation by keeping the law, they are the children of the slave woman and not the free woman.

Galatians 4:24-25 (NASB) *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. 25 Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.*

Before we go on, we need to say a few words about "allegory." Many tell us that this text sanctions the allegorical method of interpretation, which seeks a "deeper" spiritual meaning below the "shallow" surface of the literal. I believe that the translators of the NASB have wisely handled the difficulties, stressing that Paul uses the passage allegorically, without interpreting it allegorically.

The Greek word *allegoreo* is from *allos* meaning: "another", and *agora* meaning: "to speak." Hence, things which are so spoken as to give a different meaning from that which the words express.

The allegorical method of interpretation views the literal meaning of the text as elementary and secondary to the "spiritual" interpretation. Those who are immature or uninitiated into the "deeper things" are able to grasp only the literal meaning. The primary problem with the allegorical method is that the "spiritual" interpretation is highly subjective and often has little correspondence to the text being interpreted.

The easiest way to sort this out is to start where Paul starts - with two women and two sons - all of them literal people who actually lived on the earth, and whose stories are told in the book of Genesis. What happens next is that Paul looks back at these historical persons and draws certain conclusions from them.

Paul says, *"these women are two covenants."* Here, Paul reveals that the two women in that Genesis account actually represent the two covenants of God. So Hagar and Sarah represent the Old and New Covenants. Do you see that? The writer of Hebrews talks about these two covenants:

Hebrews 8:7-8 (NASB) *For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. 8 For finding fault with them, He says, "BEHOLD, DAYS ARE COMING, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I WILL EFFECT A NEW COVENANT WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AND WITH THE HOUSE OF JUDAH;*

Paul sees a huge difference between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah represents "grace" and Hagar represents "law." Sarah stands for trusting God alone, and Hagar stands for trying to please God through your own efforts. And the sons born to them represent the way of faith (Isaac) versus the way of works (Ishmael). Thus you have real people who, nevertheless, stand for (or point to or represent) certain spiritual truths. When you boil it down, Paul is saying that Sarah is the line of faith, and Hagar is the line of works. And all humanity is either in one line or the other. There is no "third line" you can choose.

Those who follow Hagar are the people who believe that religion and good works and self-effort will be enough to gain forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. Those who follow Sarah are the people who have rejected self-effort and have chosen to believe what God said even if it seems to fly in the face of what everyone else says and does.

Of these two covenants, Paul says, *"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."*

The reference to Mount Sinai points us back to the giving of the law to Moses. The "earthly Jerusalem" is the Jerusalem of the first century, which was the world headquarters of Judaism with its dependence on the law as a means of salvation. But since no one can be saved by keeping the law, the people who live in Jerusalem are enslaved by the law. They are trapped by demands they can never meet. The slave woman (Hagar) produces a slave son (Ishmael) who stands for everyone who is enslaved by the tyranny of law keeping as a means of salvation. Slavery comes from slavery, bondage from bondage.

In the apostle's argument is the most startling reversal in the entire history of prophecy. Hagar, the Egyptian bondmaid, is identified with Jerusalem and Jewry. Sarah is identified with the true Church - "the New Covenant, the heavenly Jerusalem."

The allegory thus declares that **earthly Israel** (the twelve tribes) is to be regarded as Ishmael, because they are in bondage to the law and not free. The true Church of Gentile and Jew (in which all distinctions of race, degree, and privilege are abolished) is the **true Israel** to whom the promises made to Abraham apply.

Hagar and Ishmael stand for Jerusalem *"which now is"* (that is, the earthly Jerusalem standing with temple and sacrifice at the time of Paul's writing). Sarah and Isaac stand for the true Israel, the church, the "Jerusalem which is from above." The covenant made with Abraham is the promise of the gospel, and from that promise every Jew alive, or who ever will be alive, is excluded except insofar as he comes by the same road of faith which the Gentile believer treads.

Paul takes Hagar and makes her the spiritual equivalent of the law given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Now, this would have been repugnant to any Jew, because all Jews viewed the descendants of

Hagar and Ishmael as being in essentially the same category as all Gentiles, who were viewed by the Jews as dogs or vermin.

Any Jew would have been offended by the suggestion that he was a son of Hagar. Yet, that is exactly what Paul stated. Yes, physically they descended from Sarah, but **spiritually**, apart from faith in Christ, they descended from Hagar. The true sons of Sarah, "like Isaac, are children of promise."

At the time of this writing, Israel was a slave nation. They were under the yoke of Rome. They weren't free. They perceived themselves as free to the extent that they were allowed to practice a limited form of Judaism, according to the law, but they were still subject to a power outside of Israel. And so, Paul is saying that as much as you might think Jerusalem is free, it's only an illusion. And to think the law can save is also an illusion.

By contrast, Sarah stands for the promise of God found in the gospel, which reveals to us the Good News that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead. The salvation he offers is free to anyone who will take it by faith. This salvation offers true and lasting freedom. The free woman produces a free child. Freedom comes from freedom.

Galatians 4:26 (NASB) *But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.*

What exactly is this "Jerusalem above" who is our mother? You must keep in mind that the comparison here is between **two covenants**. Earthly Jerusalem represents the Old Covenant, so this heavenly Jerusalem represents the New Covenant.

Revelation 3:12 (NASB) *'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.*

So John tells us that this New Jerusalem is the city of God. Also, in Revelation 21:9, an angel said to the apostle John in a vision:

Revelation 21:9 (NASB) *And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I shall show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb."*

Who is the bride, the wife of the Lamb? The Church is! This angel is showing John "the wife of the Lamb." With that in mind, notice the next verse:

Revelation 21:10 (NASB) *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,*

In short, Jerusalem above is the "wife of the Lamb," which is the church, which is the New Covenant, which is the city of God.

The writer of Hebrews points this out when he makes the comparison of Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem:

Hebrews 12:22-24 (NASB) *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, 23 to the general assembly and*

church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

The word "and" after Mount Zion ought to be rendered: "even" or "that is the city of the living God." Mt. Zion is the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. So, Mount Zion, heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God, the church, and in verse 28, the kingdom ALL refer to those redeemed in the body of Christ; New Covenant believers.

That's why this verse in Galatians concludes that Sarah, who represents the covenant that corresponds to the Kingdom of God, is the mother of all believers. It ties back to what we read earlier from Genesis 17:16, where God said of Sarah: "She shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her."

Sarah equals Isaac, who equals the New Covenant, which equals Jerusalem above, which equals the church. Do you agree with that? So we could say that the New Covenant and the Jerusalem above and the church are all synonyms.

The Jerusalem above represents the dwelling place of God. Sarah represents that city because she gave birth to Isaac, not by reliance on herself, but by an act of God from above in fulfillment of His promise. Therefore, spiritually speaking, she is the mother of all Christians - of people whose lives are not merely the product of human resources, but of God's supernatural work in their heart.

Galatians 4:27 (NASB) *For it is written, "REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND."*

Paul cites Isaiah 54:1 to establish the relationship of Sarah to the heavenly Jerusalem. This prophecy assures Israel, during her barren time of the Babylonian captivity, that she will one day have more children than ever before. The Jews took it as a prophecy, not only of the restoration of Israel, but also of the time when multitudes of Gentiles would turn to God and claim Israel as their mother by becoming full members of the Jewish nation. Paul sees the fulfillment of the prophecy in the birth and growth of the church.

Paul applies the text from Isaiah to Sarah and Hagar as follows: Sarah at first had no child, but when the promise of Isaac was fulfilled, her posterity exceeded that of Hagar; but in the instance of the spiritual fulfillment of this, the numberless "Sons of Sarah" in the church of the living God even more overwhelmingly outnumber those of Hagar. So the question is not, "Who's your father?" The real question is, "Who's your mother?"

Galatians 4:28 (NASB) *And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.*

"You brethren" - believers are children of promise, not of works. He says this twice - in verses 28 and 31. We who believe in Jesus are descendants of Abraham through Isaac. We are not the sons of Ishmael. We have believed God's promise by faith, and on that basis alone, we are God's children. God declares here that every believer is a child of promise as Isaac was. That's because, like Isaac, we become children of God, not as a result of any action that we have taken. This fact is amplified in:

John 1:12-13 (NASB) *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

Note that verse 13 makes it clear that we are born not of the will of man, but of God. Contrary to doctrine that is widely taught nowadays, we do not become saved by making a decision to receive Christ. We have received Christ, because God, having named us in His will, has given us the faith to trust Him.

Galatians 4:29 (NASB) *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.*

The phrase "after the Spirit" here is synonymous with "according to the promise" in the previous verse. It stands opposed to the phrase "after the flesh," and means that his birth was by the special or miraculous agency of God.

Paul says, "*as at that time*" - referring to Ishmael's persecution of Isaac. Then he says, "*so it is now also*" - referring to the Jewish persecution of Christians in the first century. Paul's greatest enemies were not the pagan philosophers of Athens, or the Romans, but the fanatical Jews. Paul rarely had problems from the Gentiles, unless they were first stirred up by the Jews. During Paul's day, there was a bitter struggle between fleshly and spiritual Israel as typified in Ishmael's persecution of Isaac. Much of the New Testament writings were designed to encourage Christians to hold fast under Jewish persecution, because deliverance would come soon.

Just as Abraham had two sons who existed side by side for a time in the same household, these two sons are typical of the two Israels of God, one born after the flesh (Old Covenant), and the other born after the Spirit (New Covenant) that existed side by side for a time (40 years). During this time of coexistence, the one born after the flesh persecuted the one born of the Spirit. Now, notice God's solution to this persecution:

Galatians 4:30 (NASB) *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."*

Paul touches, in verse 29, upon the persecuting envy of the Jews against the church, to whom their privileges have passed, and likens it to the hatred of Ishmael against Isaac and concludes his argument by quoting against the Jew the very words originally spoken against Hagar and her son Ishmael - "*Cast out the bondwoman with her son.*" This refers to the Old Covenant and the earthly Israel and physical Jerusalem.

The dreadful judgment of these words should be unmistakable. God was about to judge the Old Covenant world for rejecting and crucifying her Messiah and killing those that were sent to her (see Matthew 21:33-45; 23:29-36; cf., Hebrews 8:13; 10:37; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 John 2:17-18). Time came for Hagar and her son to go. A.D. 70 would be that time. They would be removed from hindering the church any further.

Christ's parousia (which means: "presence or arrival") is tied, not to an outward, physical, earthly appearance of some sort, but to the consummated coming or arrival of the New Covenant age at the destruction of the Old Covenant age. His presence, therefore, is a covenantal presence in terms of the new and everlasting covenant.

Adam Clark, "*Cast out the bond woman and her son*: and what does this imply in the present case? Why, that the present Jerusalem and her children shall be *cast* out of the favour of God, and *shall not be heirs with the son of the free woman*-shall not inherit the blessings promised to Abraham, because they believe not in the promised seed."

The abolition of the Old Covenant means the abolition of physical Israel from all her privileges, and the emergence of the New Testament Church is the rise of the new "Israel of God," Jew and Gentile, with all distinctions obliterated, to whom alone the Abrahamic promises belong. While Ishmael and Isaac coexisted, neither received the inheritance, and in order for Isaac to receive full inheritance, it was necessary to cast out Ishmael.

Paul is saying that earthly Jerusalem will **NEVER** share in the promise made to Isaac. It was not for them and never was. They are not the Israel of God (Gal. 6:15,16), and were always the children of the bondwoman.

Galatians 4:31 (NASB) *So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.*

This he writes to the most Gentile of all the churches, showing that to the Gentile church has passed the covenant, the glory, the birthright, the privilege and the redemption hope.

The consequences of this text are far-reaching. They extend to every prophecy of the Old Testament in which the New Covenant is foretold, even though the words of the prophets are addressed to "Israel and Judah." That "Israel and Judah" is the New Testament Church. The Church is the lawful continuation of Old Testament Israel and the inheritor of the Abrahamic covenant and promises.

Let me wrap up this message with a simple but profound question: Who is your mother? Hagar or Sarah? Are you born of the flesh only or are you also born of the Spirit? Do you still think there is some way you can help God out by the things you do? If you think you can somehow be good enough to merit salvation, or if you think that salvation is partly what God does and partly what you do, you are a child of slavery. You are still in chains.

The Ishmaels of this world trust in themselves. The Isaacs of this world trust in God alone for salvation. Who is your mother? Make sure you know the answer to that question.

The freedom-slavery and Spirit-flesh antitheses which Paul has constructed in his allegory serve as the framework for his ethical instructions in the rest of the letter. The children of the free woman, who were *born by the power of the Spirit* (v. 29), must learn to express their freedom by walking in the Spirit. They must not submit to slavery under the law or gratify the desires of the flesh. Identity is the basis of behavior: a clear understanding of who we are in Christ guides our conduct in the Spirit.

This message preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on April 17, 2005. [Media Order #316b](#).

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Berean Bible Church
2000 Centerville Turnpike
Chesapeake, VA 23322