

## Message #15

## Galatians 4:21-31

Years ago, Dr. H. A. Ironside read through Max Muller's "*Oriental Sacred Literature*." Max Muller compiled 38 very large volumes which dealt with all kinds of religious systems of the east. Dr. Ironside said that these various religions differed in 10,000 ways, but they all agreed on one thing—salvation was won or earned by self-effort.

It is a hard thing to figure out sometimes why most people of this world are so willing and so ready to take up some legal system of works for salvation and so afraid and so slow to rely solely upon the grace of God. **The real underlying reason for this is a secret pride in which men want to lay claim to some work or goodness in himself for salvation.** This is exactly why Jesus said, "Broad is the way that leads to destruction, but narrow is the way that leads to salvation and few there be who find it."

What He was saying is that there are all kinds of religions and beliefs all over the world that will tell you that you can get to heaven by your works. These belief systems will stroke your ego and convince you that you can work your way to God. But God's Word says there is only one way to get to heaven and that is by relying upon God's grace found in the cross work of Jesus Christ. Most people will not believe in Christ, they will believe in themselves, they will believe in their works and their attempts to keep the O.T. Law.

The reason why most people want to try and work their way to heaven and keep a few laws or codes is because this method appeals to the nature of man and the pride of man. The natural man is drawn to rules and laws because somehow he has convinced himself that he can be as good as God.

He believes that if he does the best he can, God will somehow let him into heaven. But that will never happen because our best attempts at righteousness are, in the sight of God, as filthy rags. The sooner we learn this, the better. The sooner we acknowledge to God that we are a poor, helpless sinner, the better it is for us because that will bring us to the place where we totally rely upon the grace of God found in Jesus Christ to save us. This is the point Paul drives home in this book of Galatians, and in this text Paul uses an O.T. illustration to make this point.

**GOD'S SYSTEM OF SALVATION IS BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH AND NOT BY ANY WORKS OF THE O.T. LAW AND THE TWO SONS OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND ISHMAEL PERFECTLY ILLUSTRATE THIS REALITY.**

Now before we tackle this I want you to look at **verse 24**. Paul is allegorically speaking. What this means is that Paul is going to use this story concerning Ishmael and Isaac, the two sons of Abraham, as an allegorical metaphor of two separate systems of salvation. Paul uses Abraham again because he was so great among the Jews and the Jews were the ones troubling the churches. Paul reminds them that Abraham had two sons, but only one son was a son of promise.

We must be very careful with allegorical interpretations. John Calvin said Origen (an odd ascetic man who lived around A.D. 200) was famous for his allegorical interpretations of every passage. He “tortured” the Bible and drew people away from what it really said.

There are two key observations I want to make about this business of an allegory.

**(Observation #1)** - Paul is using the story as an allegory or illustration. He is using a literal story in the Bible to make a specific literal point. He is using literal words that say one thing to illustrate another literal point.

**(Observation #2)** - Paul specifically tells us he is doing this (**v. 24**). Paul himself clearly states this is what he is doing. We really only have a legitimate right to interpret the Bible allegorically or typologically when the writer gives us that right or permission.

**The Bible must be interpreted literally, historically, and grammatically and ALWAYS CONTEXTUALLY.** Whenever any other interpretation is possible, the Bible will make it clear.

Now in **verse 21** Paul begins this discussion by asking a question to the believers of the Galatian churches—namely, you who want to be under the Law, why don’t you listen to what the Law says? Why don’t you honestly listen to the Law which tells you that you are guilty of not keeping all of it? Why don’t you listen to the truth that the Law condemns you? That Law is not your friend. That Law is not some beautiful cozy friend you snuggle with; that Law will burn you. That Law establishes you are sinful; it establishes that you are guilty; it establishes that you deserve wrath and it shuts our mouths. Why is it that you do not listen to what that Law says?

Now the conjunction “for” (gar) of **verse 22**, introduces us to an explanation of what the Law does to us versus what grace does for us. There are seven allegorical points that we want to draw to your attention:

**ALLEGORY POINT #1** – Abraham had two sons born to different mothers. **4:22**

The two women were in conflict with each other just as two theological systems, grace and law are in conflict with each other.

**Son #1** - One son was born to Hagar, his slave. That son’s name was Ishmael. His birth was a natural birth (Gen. 16:1-4). Abraham was about 86 when he was born. From Ishmael came the Arabs. Ishmael represents law/works which enslaves us in sin.

**Son #2** - Another son was born to Sarah, his wife. That son’s name was Isaac. His birth was miraculous (Gen. 17:17; 21:1-3). From Isaac came Israel. Isaac represents free grace which sets free from the Law and sin.

Years ago there was a wealthy woman in New York, who paid for a brand new Episcopal church. She was given the deed and she sold the deed to the church for \$1.00. What a wonderful gesture and people to this day say what a wonderful gift. In the Biblical sense it is not a free gift if it cost \$1.00. Biblical salvation is a free gift. You do not pay anything for it. Isaac represents a free grace gift.

**ALLEGORY POINT #2** – The two sons came through different means. **4:23**

There were two different means of birth when it came to these two sons:

**Means #1** - Ishmael was born into a system of bondage, which was Abraham's fleshly attempt to fulfill the plan of God by his own works and own efforts.

Sarah had no children and they were getting older. Abraham was about 75 when God called him and said he would have many descendants. As time went on, they had no children so when Abraham was about 86 and Sarah was about 76, they came up with their own plan. They decided they would make this happen by their own efforts. Abraham had an affair with Hagar and produced a son. Ishmael was actually born a son of a slave woman—Hagar. That made him a slave as well.

**Means #2** - Isaac was born into a system of freedom as a result of the promise of God.

Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90-years-old when God fulfilled His promise and caused Isaac to be born (Gen. 17:17; 21:5). There was nothing Abraham or Sarah could do in and of themselves to make this happen. In fact, Abraham laughed when he first heard he would produce a son through Sarah (Gen. 17:17) and so did Sarah (Gen. 18:12). So their works had nothing to do with this happening. First, they were involved in their own immoral plan and also they were both laughing at God.

Now the point of the allegory is that the Law is a fleshly attempt of a sinful man to earn heaven by his own plan and works. Ishmael represents self-effort and self-planning and self-righteousness and self-works to make one right with God. Isaac represents trusting totally in God's promise of life. Isaac represents trusting in the promise of God regardless of what you feel. Isaac represents trusting in the promise of the grace of God found in Jesus Christ regardless of sin.

**ALLEGORY POINT #3** – The two mothers represent two covenants. **4:25-27**

One mother represents the O.T. Law and one mother represents N.T. grace. Do not miss this point—just as two mothers could not live together, neither can two theological systems of Law and Grace live together.

**Mother #1** - Hagar represents the Mosaic Covenant and the earthly O.T. Jerusalem. **4:25**

When Paul wrote Galatians, Jerusalem was a city that promoted the O.T. Mosaic Law given at Mt. Sinai and ritualistic legalism. She was also enslaved to Rome. Rome controlled the city. It was under the dominance of Roman soldier and Roman law. Hagar represents the slave woman who enslaves people to its religious works system and laws. Her descendants literally are Arabs who do live in Arabia. She is the mother who produced an earthly lineage.

**Mother #2** - Sarah represents the Abrahamic Covenant and the heavenly N.T. Jerusalem.  
**4:26-27**

**The Abrahamic covenant was a covenant of promise. It was a covenant of free grace promise.** God promised to do things for Abraham. He basically told Abraham this is what I am going to do. He did not ask anything in return. He simply believed God. Grace is the system that asks you to simply believe God. It is a system that does not make terms or deals with people.

The New Jerusalem or heavenly Jerusalem is found in Revelation 21. It is a city that comes down out of heaven and is a gift from God.

Now here is the point—in the Mosaic Law system, man tries to work his way to God. He tries to build his own works or earthly city. In the Abrahamic grace system, God gives His grace out of heaven to man. It is His gift and you do not earn this or build it by anything you do on earth.

If a person has to do one thing to be saved, it is not a gift like God's son to Sarah. If you have to raise a hand or go forward or stand on your feet or be baptized in water or give tithes or keep the Law, it is not a gift like God gave to Sarah. God's gift was pure grace and that's salvation.

**Verse 27** makes it clear that even though works systems have more children than the grace system, in the end it will be Sarah's descendants who will be more in number because when the New Jerusalem is actually in existence, all who will be there will be those who believed.

**ALLEGORY POINT #4** – True believers are like Isaac by promise, not Ishmael by works.  
**4:28**

True believers are children of promise. True believers believe that “whosoever believes in Jesus Christ shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

True believers are like an aged Abraham and Sarah and they realize there is nothing they can do, in and of themselves, to save themselves. They totally rely on God's grace to save them. True believers are not born of natural processes. They are born as a result of a supernatural, miraculous work of God. God saved us (John 3:3, 6, 14-18).

If one wants to be a true brother in the Lord, one must be like the birth of Isaac. That one will totally trust in the promise of God to save us by faith in Jesus Christ, who died on that cross for our sins.

**ALLEGORY POINT #5** – True grace believers like Isaac will be persecuted by law-keepers like Ishmael. **4:29**

It is very clear—a law-keeping legalist hates a pure grace teacher and will try to mock him and destroy him. This animosity will be just like the hatred that the Arabs, the descendants of Ishmael, have for the Jews, the descendants of Isaac. A good example of this is seen in Acts in what happened to Stephen when he preached no works, no law. He was stoned by the rigid law-keepers (Acts 6:8, 10-14; 7:58-59).

When you present pure grace, you will come under fire. Present pure grace to a law-keeper and you will start a war. When Luther presented a pure grace system, an edict was issued to kill him. You march into a works, law-keeping society and present pure grace and you will soon discover you are mocked and some will want you gone.

**ALLEGORY POINT #6** – True grace believers must get rid of any law efforts. **4:30**

**Just as God ordered Abraham to let go of Hagar and Ishmael, so He orders us to let go of the O.T. Law.** We have been commanded by God to get rid of our legalism and O.T. law-keeping. We have been commanded by God to trust totally and only in Jesus Christ. In Him is the promise of life and in Him is the possibility of a godly lifestyle. This is an order from God—cast off the Law.

If you are driving down the road and come to an overturned truck and the truck driver is pinned under the truck, you must figure out how you will get that truck off him. Now let's say you stop about a dozen people and you grab the truck and with all your might you try to lift it and it will not budge. You huff and puff and cannot lift it. But a wrecker comes along with a hoist that will be able to lift that truck. Now let us say that you and the men are standing at the very place the hoist must be fastened. The issue comes down to this—will you keep trusting in yourself to save this man by your works, or will you get out of the way and let the truck save him. The truth is you cannot save him by your works; you must get out of the way.

So it is with God. You cannot save yourself by your works, but there is a Divine hoist that can lift you all the way up into heaven. That hoist is Jesus Christ.

**ALLEGORY POINT #7** – True grace believers are not enslaved to the O.T. Law, they are free in grace. **4:31**

It is impossible to have both systems operating. It is one or the other. Abraham had to make a choice—Sarah or Hagar. We have to make a choice—O.T. law and legalism or N.T. grace and promise. Which will it be? Abraham made the right choice and may God help us to do the same.