

May 4, 2014  
Community Baptist Church  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Galatians  
643 South Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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*To Ponder . . .*

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study Galatians 4:21-31.

1. What is the difference between an allegory and an analogy?
2. What is the danger that comes with interpreting Scripture allegorically?
3. How does Hagar illustrate religious people or movements with which we are familiar?
4. How does Sarah illustrate you?

### **CHILDREN OF HAGAR OR CHILDREN OF SARAH Galatians 4:21-31**

This morning we began to study one of the simplest verses in the Bible. Now we find ourselves staring at one of the most difficult to understand texts in the entire Bible. This is one of those passages that causes me to understand Festus's outburst of frustration: "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad" (Acts 26:24). I will not belittle the apostle, but I will commend him with Peter who wrote, "Just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15b-16a).

Though the teaching is difficult to grasp, we will discover that it is a text full of encouragement for Christians – especially if you have ever come face-to-face with a false teacher who impudently pressed his

kind of salvation teaching on you. What should we do with such a person? How should we respond? Should we agree to disagree? Let's see what God the Holy Spirit told us through Paul the apostle.

Earlier in the letter Paul wrote, "*Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our **freedom** that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into **slavery***" (Galatians 2:4). Now, Paul will return to that idea and expand it with an illustration from the Old Testament. People who are free in Christ need to rejoice in that freedom and not be enslaved again by false teaching.

### **Hagar the Slave Woman (vv.21-25).**

Paul's argument in this text is based on historical fact (vv.21-23). He brought up the ancient picture as a reminder to people who think they want to live under the Mosaic Law (v.21). He argued, *Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law (v.21)?* We are wise to pause for a few minutes and consider what Paul meant by the word "law." Shouldn't that be self-evident? How many "laws" were there? Sometimes in the Bible the term refers to the entire Old Testament (including wisdom, poetry, history, prophecy). Sometimes it refers to the first five books of the Bible also called the Torah. For the Judaizers, reference to the "law" was an unhealthy focus on the ceremonial aspects of the law and the traditions that developed from those requirements.

In this case, Paul used the term "law" to refer to the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, which includes the history of the nation of Israel beginning with Abraham. The history of Abraham is Paul's focus. Therefore, he argued that the people who claimed they wanted to live under the law were not paying attention to what the law said. They wanted to live under the ceremonial aspects of the law, claiming that by doing those things they would achieve righteousness. The greater context of that ceremonial law, the entire Torah, taught a different lesson. The Torah contains Abraham's history which revealed that the work of the flesh did not bring God blessing, but God's blessing came through the fulfillment of His promise.

By way of application, the point of Paul's teaching in this text is this: You cannot by your own efforts somehow wrest out of God's

hand the promise of righteousness and take it for yourself. Rather, God freely gives that righteousness through grace.

Paul reminded the Christians in Galatia that Abraham had a son of the flesh and a son of promise. *For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise (vv.22-23).* The address, *It is written* means “in summary this is what the law says about Abraham’s children.” Being children of Abraham was the devout Jews’ confidence. In their thinking, being fortunate enough to be born as a child of Abraham guaranteed God’s blessing – maybe even to the point of eternal life. They were sure that only the children of Abraham had been given the law, the promise of the land, and the promise of Messiah. That is why the religious leaders were irked at John Baptist when he told them, *And do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father,” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Matthew 3:9).*

There were many differences between Abraham’s sons and the circumstances of their births. For one, Hagar, Ishmael’s mother, was an Egyptian slave who belonged to Sarah. Sarah was a free woman, the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac. Another difference was that God had promised Abraham and his family the blessing of a large posterity, the blessing of a land, and the blessing of Messiah, but had promised nothing to Abraham’s family through Hagar. In a similar way, Abraham had also entertained the possibility that his posterity would run through his servant Eliezer of Damascus. Maybe the greatest difference was that Abraham and Hagar conceived Ishmael, and he was born as a result of human wisdom, human effort, and with human consequences. Isaac, on the other hand, was born in perfect accord with the promise that God had previously given.

Boiling down the facts, we discover along with Martin Luther that “the principle difference between the two births was the absence of the Word of God in the birth of Ishmael.” God had promised to give Isaac. Sarah had arranged for the birth of Ishmael. Instead of trusting God’s promise, Sarah resorted to the old tried and true principle of good religious folks: “The Lord helps those who help themselves.” That practice will get you in hot water most of the time.

The point of the illustration is to contrast the human way of doing God’s will or God’s way of bringing about His will. The whole

argument in this letter centers on the fallacy of trying to earn righteousness resulting in eternal life through human wisdom and effort, versus accepting through faith in God’s promises that the righteousness of Christ is put on our account.

However, that same conflict applies to many different aspects of our lives. How often do we conclude that we are saved by grace through faith in God’s promise and then set about to plan our lives according to human wisdom while ignoring God’s promises? How many young Christians choose their mates for life according to the flesh instead of according to God’s promise? How many Christians have spent their lives in careers they chose according to the flesh instead of according to God’s promise? How many people engage in “church” according to the flesh instead of according to God’s promise? We tend to be very much like Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.

Paul relied on the facts of history to draw an analogy (vv.24-25). He concluded that the two women, Hagar and Sarah, illustrate two covenants. *Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants (v.24a).* The translation *interpreted allegorically* seems natural because of the Greek word *alleigoreo* used here. We are not surprised to discover that the Greek work can mean to allegorize. However, it also means to employ an analogy or use a likeness.

There is actually a problem in the fact that most English translations simply transliterate the word from the Greek to the English which gives us the word allegory, as in the ESV. However, the English word allegory refers to a story, poem, or picture **that can be interpreted in a way to reveal a hidden meaning.** The key danger in that definition is “hidden meaning.” The allegory in Paul’s day was steeped in Greek mythology and used extensively by the Greek philosophers and Jewish Rabbi to invent teaching or conclusions that were never intended by the original writing or poetry. Some people are not concerned with this because they conclude (incorrectly) that the Church had the same practice. It is true that, later on in the second century, the visible church did indeed embrace allegorical interpretations which resulted in astonishing and ridiculous conclusions. For example, the “official church” taught that the two coins the Good Samaritan gave to the inn keeper were baptism and the Lord’s Supper. That’s obviously bazaar. A brief overview of cults and false doctrines prove that many, if not most, of them are rooted in allegorical conclusions of the Bible.

Many scholars agree that there is no allegory in the Gospels, but some of those same scholars also believe that Paul used allegory in multiple passages of his letters. For example, they believe that Paul found hidden meaning in the Old Testament when he concluded in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 that “a little leaven leavens the whole batch.” Or in 1 Corinthians 9:8-10 that we “do not muzzle the ox.” Or especially in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 that “everyone drank from the same spiritual rock.” Therefore, we should expect people to conclude that Galatians 4:21-31 is an allegory about “Hagar and Sarah and their sons.”

Are these really examples of Paul pulling hidden meaning and mystery out of these Old Testament statements, or are they cases of Paul using Old Testament statements, incidents, and pictures to illustrate his point? Allegory becomes particularly dangerous if we try to force a New Testament concept like the Church into the Old Testament fact like the nation of Israel. When we try that, the Old Testament reality disappears.

Therefore, it is probably better for us to translate the Greek *alleigorew* as “analogy.” That sheds a different light on Paul’s use of the facts because an analogy is: 1) a comparison between one thing and another made to explain or clarify, or 2) a correspondence or partial similarity. Here is analogy because this story about Abraham’s sons is not a secret or hidden secret that Paul relates. It is the fact about two women who he uses to illustrate two covenants. “The Holy Spirit directed Paul to use analogy on this occasion in order to show the Judaizers that God’s plan of redemption has always been by grace. The law itself both teaches and illustrates that salvation has never been through the law.” (John MacArthur, p.123)

Therefore the New Living Translation translated the phrase: *These two women serve as an illustration of God's two covenants.*

Now to the analogy. One woman is Mount Sinai and Jerusalem. *One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children (vv.24b-25).* Hagar is a picture of Mount Sinai in Arabia. We know that over 2,000 years before Paul brought up this picture, Hagar’s and Abraham’s son, Ishmael, established his “nation” in the Arabian Peninsula. Today it is the mighty nation of Saudi Arabia and probably also includes Jordan. Some archaeologists believe that somewhere in the northwestern region of that large land mass is the very spot when Moses and the people of

Israel gathered at Mount Sinai. Traditionally, Mount Sinai was located in the Sinai Peninsula which could very well be considered part of Arabia.

The point is this: Hagar is a picture of the old covenant of God. That is the covenant based on the law God gave to Moses. It was a full and detailed description of God’s standard of righteousness. It clearly required the shedding of blood for the remission of sin. The people should have concluded that this standard of righteousness was impossible to achieve through human efforts. No amount of blood from bulls, goats, and oxen could permanently make the guilt of sin go away. Surely, the people should have trusted God to provide the final sacrifice, the Seed of the woman, the promise to Abraham of Him through whom all nations would be blessed.

But most of Israel never trusted God to provide as only Jehovahjireh (the Lord will provide), Genesis 22:14. That was the overall spiritual condition of Jerusalem in Jesus’ day. The Pharisees and religious rulers misunderstood and misused the law God had given. They twisted and abused God’s covenant. They arrogantly high-jacked God’s law, made it their own, and claimed that they could achieve God’s righteousness through their keeping of the law. They were slaves and did not know it.

Things were still the same in Jerusalem in Paul’s day. Judaizers who troubled the Christians in Galatian had come from Jerusalem with the same false teaching. The people from Jerusalem were still slaves to the law that condemned them. There was no reason for hope there! What hope could God offer them? Hope is found in the other woman in the picture!

### **Sarah the Free Woman (vv.26-31).**

In contrast to the old covenant from Mount Sinai, the covenant that was alive and well in Jerusalem, the Spiritual Jerusalem is the place of freedom (vv.26-27). Paul taught that Spiritual Jerusalem is our mother, not symbolic Hagar, the law. *But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother (v.26).* This has to be a reference to the “New Jerusalem” which is above. God pictured it for the exiled Jews when He gave Ezekiel very specific details of the new temple and the new worship in a newly created Jerusalem (Ezekiel 40-48). A similar

picture is revealed in the Revelation when God showed John the New Jerusalem coming down to be situated over the new earth (Rev. 21).

That Jerusalem pictures eternity where God's people are forever free from condemnation by sin and the law. We are citizens of that city. Paul told the Christians in Philippi, *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20)*. That city is quite different from Mount Sinai. The writer to the Hebrew Christians taught, *For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest (Hebrews 12:18). But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering (Hebrews 12:22)*.

That new city, the heavenly Jerusalem, is a picture of Sarah, the mother of the son of promise. Therefore, we have reason to rejoice. *For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband (v.27)*. The original statement that Paul quoted here came from Isaiah as God sought to encourage the exiles in Babylon by telling them that one day He would fulfill all His promises to them by restoring Israel and creating the new Jerusalem. Isaiah declared, *Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married," says the LORD (Isaiah 54:1)*.

Now the barren one in the picture Paul drew was Sarah. God had given a wonderful promise to Abraham stating that He would make a great nation out of his loins. But Abraham did not have the first child of that promise because Sarah was barren. How she grieved and became impatient as she aged more and more even past the point of child bearing. How well this describes us. How much we are like Sarah as we must walk by faith and not by sight. But it is so hard to live according to God's promises when others are living according to their very real and obvious experiences. Is it not easier for us to trust the obvious works of our hands like reading our Bibles, praying, going to church, helping the poor, praising God, loving our enemies?

This is not to conclude that we do not engage in any of those practices. Our lives are also characterized by those same kind of good works. But we are not trusting them to get us right with God. We have God's promise, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive*

*us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)*. God also promised *the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction (Romans 3:22)*. But it is human nature to want a God with skin who will sit beside us and verbally explain righteousness by faith, who will sign the covenant in our presence and in the presence of our lawyer. That is not faith! Children of the "free woman" live by faith.

Remember who you are, brothers (vv.28-31). We are the children of promise, the son of the free woman. True Christians illustrate the relationship of Isaac with God who promised. *Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise (v.28)*. We are children born from above. This is the new birth Jesus explained to Nicodemus. It is to be born again according to God's choice and initiative toward us. We did not invent or chase down salvation through our own work. The new birth overtook us.

True Christians must be confident in their freedom. To that end, Paul wrote, *So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman (v.31)*. So we sing, "Free from the Law oh blessed condition.. ." and really mean it. We rejoice to be brothers in the family God creates by His grace alone.

So what should we do with the false teachers? Quite simply and to the point, Paul said we should cast out the persecutors (vv.29-30). That is necessary because the son born of the will of the flesh persecuted the son of promise. *But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now (v.29)*. The story is clear that Ishmael mocked and taunted Isaac. When tensions became unbearable, something had to be done. To apply the picture, at some point we have to admit that we are not going to change the person who truly believes salvation is gained by being enslaved to the law. It is very common for religions that are steeped in human works to persecute people who live by faith in Christ's finished work. One of the most obvious examples of that persecution might be the reformers whose rallying cry was "the just shall live by faith" who felt the cruelty of the "official religion" for many years. Many were the martyrs who were born according to the Spirit. Also, another such illustration is found in that many "sons of Sarah" (true believers) are persecuted even to death by the "sons of Hagar" (Muslims who are earning their salvation) today. A less painful

example is the ongoing debate between the methods of Wesley and Finney versus the doctrines of free grace.

God's solution was to dismiss the persecuting son. Paul appealed to history again. *But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman" (v.30)*. God told Abraham that it was necessary to separate Hagar and Ishmael from the family. Likewise, Paul would encourage the Christians to separate from the false teaching Judaizers. Still when a person insists on pushing false doctrine about salvation by works, we must at some point separate.

In Paul's analogy, we have seen two women, two covenants, two contrasting teachings, and two kinds of children. Which are you? Rejoice if you are a "child" according to God's promise instead of a "child" by your own doing.