

**Galatians:
Commentary
Galatians 4:21-31**

After a lengthy appeal, Paul returns to a familiar Old Testament analogy to offer a final example that is intended to cement in the minds and hearts of the Galatians the primacy of the promise and the insufficiency of the law to save.

21

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

Paul's question here is similar to the one he asked earlier (4:9). Here, though, he masterfully provides a "play on words" that is much more than linguistic cleverness. The desire of the Galatians who had been influenced by the Judaizers was to return to self-subjection to the law of Moses. Paul, here, challenges them with the reality that "the law" is not only the sections that can be highlighted to glorify self-righteousness. "The law" was the entirety of the Old Testament. To illustrate this, as an expert in the Scriptures they were using to distort the grace of God, Paul would take them to the analogy of Sarah and Hagar as the means by which he would again conclusively prove his point.

"Do you not listen..." requires much more than an awareness of. It demands an active hearing of understanding, comprehension, and application. Paul is "raising the stakes" and challenging the Galatians to be engaged in this faith of theirs, so that they may walk by faith in spirit and in truth.

Paul is addressing his subsequent rhetoric to those "who desire to be under the law." In addressing the Galatians by this term, he is again reiterating that their abandonment and/or betrayal of faith is not yet complete. It was to these sincere-minded people who were struggling to reconcile their understanding of faith with the right application of the law that he offered the following analogy.

22

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman.

Rather than giving a detailed retelling of the events of Genesis 16, 17, and 21, Paul reduced this classic, historic, and significant story to three essential details for the purpose of his emphasis.

First, he mentions Abraham's *two sons*. While Abraham actually had six additional sons from his second wife Keturah after the death of Sarah, Paul focused on the (as for now unnamed) first two sons Ishmael and Isaac. These are the only two sons who are relevant to the point that Paul is striving to communicate. These sons are significant because one (Ishmael) is the Patriarch of the Gentile people (among whom the Galatians would culturally and geographically identify), and the other (Isaac) is son of Abraham and the recipient of the Promise. While both would enjoy common grace, the people who would descend from Isaac were uniquely blessed (cf. [Ps. 147:19-20](#))

Second, he addresses *the boys' mothers* not by name, but by their relationship with Abraham. The stark differences between their status and circumstances are highlighted by Paul for his purpose. Hagar was an Egyptian slave under the ownership of Abraham. Sarah was his free, lawful wife. Further distinctions accentuated by Paul related to Sarah's natural barrenness (as a picture of the law) and the related fertility of Hagar (as a picture of the carnal fruitfulness of the flesh) would be themes that Paul will develop.

23

But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Thirdly, *the circumstances of the boys' births* are told, in a general manner of classification. While both boys were born through the natural process of child birth, only Isaac was a child of promise. Ishmael was the anticipatable result of the physical union of Abraham and Hagar. Isaac, though, had been foretold by God, promised in advance. Recall that Abraham and Hagar's union was the result of human logic and reasoning. God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son, but Sarah had not conceived. Together, they reasoned that they must take the matters into their own responsibility by assigning Hagar to Abraham's bed. Ishmael was the outcome of that process, but Paul makes clear here that Ishmael was not the child of promise, as was Isaac.

24

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants.

The historical realities of Ishmael & Isaac, Hagar & Sarah, and their births also offer a typological understanding that illuminates profound, timeless spiritual realities. These spiritual implications are expressed through five pairs of contrasts between the two women, presented by Paul.

One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar.

Difference 1: The Mountains. Hagar represents Mount Sinai, while (by implication), Sarah represents Mount Zion.

Difference 2: The children. Hagar birthed Ishmael, a son who could only be born a slave, to fulfill the role of a slave. Sarah's son Isaac was a picture of a child born into the family of promise.

Difference 3: The children's manner of birth. Ishmael was born according to the flesh, while Isaac was born a seed of Promise.

25 - 26

Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

Difference 4: The two Jerusalems. Ishmael represents the current Jerusalem as a picture of slavery, while Isaac is a picture of New Jerusalem, the eternal city, that is forever free.

Difference 5: The Two Covenants. Ishmael is the picture of the slavery of the law, while Isaac is an embodiment or personification of the freedom of grace.

Paul's typology is a bit unorthodox in its complex presentation. He straightforwardly identifies Hagar as a picture of the law and death, whose offspring can only serve the law as slaves. He further exemplifies this analogy by identifying the current Jerusalem to Hagar. Then, he offers a profoundly different comparison by offering the analogy of heavenly Jerusalem as a picture of "our mother." Paul is clearly identifying himself as a child of promise, as a Jew by birthright as a descendant of Sarah.

27

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."

Paul closes the analogy by referencing Isaiah 54:1. This is much more than a clever use of the Old Testament to prove a point. Rather, it is an explicit reference that demonstrates the truth of his "allegory." Sarah had no hope for offspring (fruit-bearing) in the law - her only hope was in the promise of God. The law has provided her with no children because in the law, even her numerous physical progeny are spiritually dead. In fact, it is because of the promise of God alone that Sarah

in fact has more offspring than she could ever number.

28

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

Here, Paul moves the analogy to to a practical application for the Galatians. He again identifies with them as brothers (noting the earlier distinction where he himself identified as a child of Sarah, and here he deliberately instructs them to co-identify as Isaac. As "children of promise," they are heirs of Abraham by their faith in Jesus.

Paul's declaration here is profound because it refutes the Judaizers' claim that they alone were the descendants of Abraham and that the Galatians could only be included in the family by the additional work of circumcision. Paul definitively asserts that they are by faith already fully positioned in the family, not at work in the process of becoming acceptable.

29

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.

Pointing to [Genesis 21:9](#), and perhaps reflective of Rabbinic traditions that suggested that Ishmael regularly and pervasively persecuted his younger, privileged brother. Paul's teaching is provocative because it turns on its head the Judaizers' teaching, and instead cast the burden-bringers as the persecutors of the grace-pursuers (in contradiction to their own established positioning of themselves as the children of promise by virtue of their physical descent from Abraham). The added burden the Galatians are being expected to assume is indicative of the ceaseless effort of the children of the flesh to persecute children of promise. To identify with Isaac is to expect persecution.

30

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."

Paul masterfully relies upon his Genesis narrative to provide the Galatians with the only appropriate response to the legalistic demands of the Judaizers. Just as Sarah saw there was impossible for the child of the slave to peacefully co-exist with the child of promise, it is likewise impossible for a person to live as a slave to the law and at the same time be an heir to God. The call of Paul is for the Galatians (and all Christians) to respond to legalism in kind...to cast it out, to reject it outright.

31

So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

This summary statement offers the fulness of shared identification of freedom, of inheritance, and of existing in the promise of God. This is not merely a summary of this section of this specific argument, but of the entire 4 chapters. Everything he has presented in his extended argument, his entire flow of thought, culminates in this declaration of spiritual freedom in grace through faith in Jesus that identifies them as heirs to God's promise to Abraham.

Galatians: The Gospel for Everyday Life

Galatians 4:21-31 - Children of Promise

Group Member Guide

Analogy (Galatians 4:21-23)

Why do you think Paul asks them to "listen to the law?"

Why do you think Abraham's offspring were a relevant topic of discussion in this debate about law and faith?

What are the details that appear to be important to you here?

The Analogy Explained! (Galatians 4:24-27)

Paul says the women represent two covenants. One who bears children into slavery and another who bears children into freedom. Which is which?

How did Hagar's offspring (Ishmael) relate with Sarah's offspring (Isaac)?

Why do you think the prophecy referred to in verse 27 is significant?

The Analogy Applied (Read Galatians 4:29-31)

Who is Paul saying is like Isaac? Why is this significant?

If the Galatians are like Isaac, what does verse 29 suggest about the Judaizers and explain as their motives?

What does verse 30-31 instruct as the proper response to the law (and persecutors)?

What does that look like for you?

The following pages
are for small group leaders.

Galatians: The Gospel for Everyday Life

Galatians 4:21-31 - Children of Promise

Small Group Leader Guide

Prepare: Things to do before your small group convenes

- **Read** this story about [a five-year old child prodigy from India](#). Think about the potential that every child has and what is undertaken to help a child develop potential into realized ability. **Consider** what it means that in Jesus, you are a child of promise. How is this different from potential, or even being a prodigy? What does it mean to you to be a child of promise? How has being a child of promise changed your life or empowered you to pursue your potential in Christ? **Open your preparation time in prayer**, thanking God for giving you freedom in Jesus, for adopting you as a child according to His Promise, and for the difference He has made in your life.
- **Review** Galatians 4:21-31 to review the content of the biblical focus. **Invite** God to speak to you with a fresh application of His timeless truth. **Ask** God to open your eyes to see opportunity to share His love and truth with others, that you might also live by faith. **Submit** your heart to God's conviction, that you may be exhorted to experience anew the timely activity of God's Holy Spirit in your life.
- **Read** the provided [commentary on Galatians](#) 4:21-31. **Preview** this material and engage with God's Spirit as He guides your study.
- **Pray** for your small group members by name, asking God to reveal a meaningful appreciation for their part in the family of God. **Seek** God's wisdom in leading your small group to apply God's word to their lives. **Commit** yourself to the Lord, that you would live what you teach.

To The Point - What to impart to your small group

Key Verse: So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:9, ESV)

Objectives: Through your time exploring this passage, your small group members will:

Discuss the analogy Paul presents.

Analyze the implications of identifying with Hagar and of Sarah for every day living.

Characterize your actions as being identifiable as a child of spiritual slavery, or of spiritual freedom.

Leader Guide Key:

Blue - hyperlinks to other resources

Red - Reading prompts

Green - Leader headers and *sample responses to questions*

Encounter: A suggested plan for your small group experience

Start the conversation - Bound By the Law

Before you gather, find a pen/marker with a cap (that has a pocket clip), a piece of paper and two rubber bands (see [picture](#)).

At your gathering, invite a volunteer to write a single word using the pen you provide on the paper you

provide. The "catch" is that they have to write the word by holding the pen only by the rubber bands, rather than by the pen itself.

The word to write is "Freedom."

It will be quite difficult for the person to write the word (if not nearly impossible). At the end of the exercise (when either the word has been written or the person is sufficiently frustrated at the difficulty)

Say

As we have been looking at Galatians, we have seen Paul consistently exhort the Galatians to understand their freedom in the context of being in love with the law that binds them and make freedom impossible. To make one final argument, he gives a masterful comparison that has many implications for for us as well!

Open in prayer for your time together.

Analogy (Galatians 4:21-23)

Ask

Why do you think Paul asks them to "listen to the law?"

The Galatians were enamored with the Judaizers' appeal to the primacy of the Law. However, they were only focusing on a narrow application of the law (that being Moses' teachings and the tradition to be circumcised). Paul had labored to established the law's consistent pointing people to grace and faith. Now, he makes this final appeal to go to the actual story of Abraham (the Patriarch and in whom the tradition of circumcision was established) to see what is revealed in the law about his own children.

Why do you think Abraham's offspring were a relevant topic of discussion in this debate about law and faith?

Much of the traditional teaching hinged upon the identity of Israel (and particularly the Judaizers, as physical descendants of Abraham). If Paul had an authoritative teaching that pertained to the issue of faith and law in the context of inheritance and descendants, it would have been prescient of him to share it now.

What are the details that appear to be important to you here?

Among the important details: Abraham had two sons by different wives. They are unnamed (up to this point). The details highlighted are that one child was born to the slave (and was likewise a slave), and the other was born to a free woman (and was likewise free).

The Analogy Explained! (Galatians 4:24-27)

Say

Fortunately, Paul explains how this early story applies to the conversation they've been having.

Ask

Paul says the women represent two covenants. One who bears children into slavery and another who bears children into freedom. Which is which?

As a slave herself, , Hagar's offspring are born into slavery. As a free woman herself, Sarah's offspring are born into freedom.

How did Hagar's offspring (Ishmael) relate with Sarah's offspring (Isaac)?

They had a contentious relationship. While we do not know all the details of that contentiousness, we know that it resulted in Hagar and Ishmael being expelled from the community by Sarah, who did so as a protection over Isaac.

Why do you think the prophecy referred to in verse 27 is significant?

God had made a promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would be fruitful and their offspring would be a multitude. This was a promise that was given long after it appeared impossible to occur naturally. Yet, this is exactly what God accomplished through Abraham and Sarah, because they had placed their faith in His promise..

The Analogy Applied (Read Galatians 4:29-31)

Say

The mastery of Paul's teaching is shown in the application of the analogy he has provided.

Ask

Who is Paul saying is like Isaac? Why is this significant?

Paul is saying the Galatians are like Isaac, children of promise. This is significant because it was the Judaizers who were claiming to be like Isaac, and that they had claimed to come to free the Galatians, ironically by burdening them with the additional regulations of legal observance and circumcision.

If the Galatians are like Isaac, what does verse 29 suggest about the Judaizers and explain as their motives?

Paul is explaining that the Judaizers, because they themselves are slaves to the law, are like Ishmael, a person born into slavery. And just like when Ishmael persecuted Isaac, so too do they persecute the Galatians.

What does verse 30-31 instruct as the proper response to the law (and persecutors)?

The only correct response to the law and persecutors is to "cast them out!"

What does that look like for you?

Answers will vary. Encourage your group members to actively, conscientiously take inventory of their faith - in their practices and relationships, to reveal "pockets" of slavery. Casting out slavery means different things, but it should involve a conscientious decision to reject traditions that are biblically unsupportable, and particularly if they contradict grace. It is wise to rightly distinguish between preferences and absolutes, and determine not to confuse the former for the latter.

Say

It is vital to remember the declaration of verse 31 - we are not children of the slave, but children of freedom. Let each of us strive to live in freedom, not bound by the law, but empowered by grace to firmly grip the freedom given us to explore the destinies authored for us.

Let's close in prayer:

Invite the group to pray for one another. Pray over any needs or issues that were shared in your time together. Pray over the content discussed in your small group, highlighting the aspects that God's Spirit revealed to your group as important.

Encourage your group to use the "Continue in grace" resources (below and on the Group Members Page) on their own or with their family, to extend the small group experience into the week. Confirm your plans for your next gathering!

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