

**Live as a Child of Promise**  
**Galatians 4:21-31**  
**Sunday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025**  
**By Ryan Perry**

**Galatians 4:21**

***[21] Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?***

**Let's Pray**

**Illustration**

The year was 2002. It was my second year of college, my third year as a Christian, and I was on the leadership team of the CRU campus ministry. As part of this team, we would have weekly meetings where we would talk about life, who we shared the gospel with that week, and our leaders would take us through a chapter of the Bible to help us grow in our relationship with Christ.

Now, I don't remember a whole lot from these meetings, but there is one particular time that has stuck with me throughout the years. We were walking through an Old Testament passage that was talking about the law, and the leader asked this question: **"Are Old Testament believers saved in a different way than New Testament believers?"**

I can't stress enough that I had barely been a Christian for three years, and even though I had read my Bible a lot, I didn't really see how it all fit together. But that didn't keep me from confidently asserting my opinion. So I blurted out:

***"Yes. New Testament believers are saved by faith in Christ, but it's clear that Old Testament believers didn't have Christ, so they must be saved through works of the law."***

The room went dead silent, and everyone was looking at me with wide eyes, like I had just committed the unforgivable sin. But thankfully, my leader was a little more gracious as he gently corrected my misunderstanding of scripture. He said, **"Actually, Old Testament believers are saved in the same way we are. The main difference is that they were putting their faith in the hope of the Messiah (Christ) to come, whereas we put our faith in the Christ who is already with us."**

The point is that I had a complete misunderstanding of scripture and how God saved his people in the Old Testament that needed to be corrected. Because if it went unchecked, I might conclude that the Old Testament God is different from the New Testament God or that God has different ways that he saves different people. **Neither of which is true.**

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In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul is encountering a similar misunderstanding or misinterpretation of scripture. It surrounds the story of Hagar and Sarah, their children Ishmael and Isaac, and their descendants. And if it goes uncorrected, it will result in disastrous consequences for these new Galatian believers.

You see, the Jews, the Judaizers (false teachers), and now the Galatians, were interpreting this story as a pointer to the reality that the true children of God are those who, by their efforts, follow the law.

However, Paul, who himself is a Jew by birth, knows that this is a terrible misunderstanding of what God is communicating through this story, and with it through the whole of the Old Testament.

This is why he asks the Galatians in verse 21: **If you're going to try to live under the law, do you even listen to it and understand what it's saying?**

Because this story isn't ultimately pointing to the physical descendants of Sarah and Isaac (Jews and law-followers) as the true people of God, but it is pointing to those who are children of promise.

**Those who are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and not by any human efforts.**

**[FCF]** But before we say, "O foolish Galatians," as Paul did in 3:1, we need to realize that many of us make the same mistake. We know the scriptures and that we are saved by grace and not by works. And yet, we still rely on our human efforts as if they can give us the peace, security, and life that Christ offers. When, in reality, they will only lead us to a place of despair, frustration, and slavery to a false religion that is joyless and leads to death.

So Paul, like my Cru leader, is going to reinterpret this story for the Galatians and for us, so that we all can see how there is a greater spiritual meaning that actually points us away from the law and our human efforts, and instead, brings us to Christ and to our true identity as children of promise.

The main thing we will learn today is this:

**Homiletical Idea:** Stop relying on your human efforts and start living as a child of promise.

But before we get to Paul's interpretation of the story (V. 24-27) and the practical applications he has for us in V. 28-31, let's begin by looking at the story itself. Look with me at Galatians 4:22-23.

## **An Old Testament Story**

### **Galatians 4:22-23**

***[22] For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. [23] But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.***

## The story of Two Women and Two Sons

Paul, in these two verses, is giving us a synopsis of a story that actually starts in Genesis 15 but doesn't conclude until Genesis 21.

### The Promise

In Genesis 15:4, God told Abraham (or Abram at the time) that even though he was currently childless, that one day he would have his very own son who would be his heir. And because of this heir, his offspring would be as numerous as the stars (Gen. 15:5).

This is God's promise to Abraham and it says that he "believed the Lord and it was counted to him and righteousness (right standing with God)." (Gen. 15:6)

### The Problem

But there's a problem. Because, despite God's promise to Abraham, we learn in Genesis 16:1 that Sarah, his wife, is actually barren. **This means she hadn't borne any children, and it seemed like she couldn't. In fact, she says in Genesis 16:2 that the Lord has prevented her from having children.**

So the question is, how are they going to respond to God's promise of a child because Sarah is childless and barren? Are they going to trust God, or are they going to go their own way?

### Human solution

Well, if you know the story, then you know what happened. Sarah convinces Abraham that he could fulfill God's promise of a child to them by getting her bond-servant or slave, Hagar pregnant. Because in her mind, this slave child would become hers, and at the same time, he could be Abraham's heir.

So Abraham sleeps with Hagar, and they have a child together named Ishmael. **Now, when we think about all of the things that we can come up with to rationalize sin, this has to be at the top of the list, doesn't it?**

This is why Paul says in verse 23 that he (Ishmael) was the son of a slave (Hagar) and was born "according to the flesh." Abraham and Sarah tried to accomplish God's purposes through their own human effort (the flesh) apart from God's promises and will.

### The Consequences

**I don't know if you've ever done something that you know, for a fact, is directly against God's will, but it usually doesn't go well, does it?**

Well, the same is true in this situation, because Abraham and Sarah's decision results in disastrous consequences in Genesis 16:4-5. Here's what it says:

***[4] And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. [5] And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!”***

They tried to go their own way apart from God, and it led to contempt, hurt feelings, anger, and relational breakdown between Hagar and Sarah, and with it, Abraham and Sarah.

And instead of producing the heir that God promised, it produced a son of a slave who was a slave himself, despite being a descendant of Abraham.

### God’s Solution

Now, that could have been the end of the story. Abraham and Sarah disobeyed God and went their own way, so God is done with them. But thanks be to God that he doesn’t fail to keep his promises, **even though we fail to trust him as the great and mighty promise keeper.**

Because in Genesis 17:15-21, after Abraham and Sarah make a mess of their lives by going their own way, God reaffirms his promise to give them a son. He does this, even though Abraham is 100 years old, and his wife, Sarah, is 90 and has passed her fertile years.

And sure enough, in Genesis 21, God visits Sarah, she and Abraham conceive a son, and they give him the name Isaac.

This is why Paul says in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of Galatians 4:23 that the “son of the free woman (Sarah), was born through or by means of promise.” **Because God promised it and made it happen.**

And this time, instead of experiencing strife and relational breakdown, Abraham and Sarah receive laughter and Joy. As it says in Genesis 21:6:

***[6] And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.”***

### Application

Church, I hope we don’t take this story lightly, because we all too often are exactly like Abraham and Sarah. We know God’s will because his word spells it out for us, and yet we can choose to go our own way and still think it will somehow come out all gravy for us.

Or we can begin to believe that if we simply put in more time, effort, and intellect, then somehow we will be able to find the fulfillment, freedom, and peace that only God provides.

Yet the problem is that these things may lead us to worldly success, but they will also lead to stress, strife, fear, and relational breakdown.

Because when we try to rely on our human efforts to be our Savior, it will end in disaster: spiritually, psychologically, and relationally.

But when we turn to the promise of Christ and the forgiveness he supplies, we get to leave all of those human attempts and efforts at the cross. No longer do we need to work harder or try harder to find life, fulfillment, and rest, because we get all of those things and more by fully trusting in the one who provides them for us.

And instead of receiving strife and stress from our earthly efforts, we will now receive the joy he provides. Because we will no longer be trusting in our efforts to save us and make us whole. Instead, we will be putting our trust in the unfailing power and love of God, believing that he loves us, saves us, and by his Spirit, works in us and through us.

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So that's the story, which in and of itself is a good word to us from God. But the problem is that there are two ways to interpret the greater spiritual reality to which this story is pointing. There is the traditional Jewish allegory, which is being pushed on the Galatians by the Judaizers, and then there is Paul's way, or the right allegory, that helps us to make sense of God's salvation history.

So let's begin by looking at Paul's words in Galatians 4:24-27, and then we will talk through both views.

## **A New Testament Allegory**

### **Galatians 4:24-27**

***[24] Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. [25] Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. [26] But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. [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.”***

So I've now used the word allegory a couple of times, and Paul even says that the story of Hagar and Sarah, and Ishmael and Isaac, can be interpreted allegorically. But what the heck is an allegory?

## **Allegory**

A story, play, poem, picture, or other work in which the characters and events represent particular qualities or ideas that relate to morals, religion, or politics.

For instance, if you have read John Bunyan's classic work *Pilgrim's Progress*, you know that it is a fictional story that is meant to be a Christian allegory. Where certain characters and places represent different aspects of the Christian life. For example:

- The character "Christian" represents Christians.
- The "City of Destruction" represents "the world that doesn't know Christ."
- The character "Apollyon" represents the devil.
- "Wicket Gate" represents the way of salvation.

The point is that many of the characters and elements are pointing to some other meaning.

This is exactly what is happening as both the Judaizers and Paul interpret the Hagar and Sarah narrative. But the big difference is that this isn't a made-up story. It is literal history that has an immediate meaning within the book of Genesis, while also having a larger spiritual meaning throughout the entire Bible.

With that said, let's look at how both the Judaizers and Paul interpret this story allegorically.

### **Jewish Allegory**

For the Jews and the Judaizers, it has been a common belief throughout Jewish history that Hagar, Ishmael, and their physical descendants represent all of the Gentile nations that are not a part of the chosen descendants through Abraham and Sarah.

Which means that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and their descendants, who received and follow the law, are the chosen people of promise (Jews).

And because they interpret Genesis 16-21 this way, the Judaizers saw law-keeping as a necessary add-on to faith in Christ to be considered a true descendant or child of God.

It's this interpretation that they are trying to sell to these young Gentile believers in Southern Galatia, **so they too can be true children of God by faith plus the law.**

### **Paul's Allegory**

Paul on the other hand, sees a completely different allegory in this story. Instead of seeing Hagar as the Gentiles and Sarah as the Jews, he sees these women as two different covenants.

#### **Hagar**

For Paul, Hagar represents the Old Covenant, which was delivered on Mount Sinai in the form of the law.

Again, this is what the Jews and the Judaizers are trying to use as a way to make themselves right with God and to show that they are true descendants of Abraham and therefore children of God.

But, instead of making them children of God, Paul says that all the law does is create children of slavery.

Like Hagar, Ishmael, and all of their descendants, those who try to rely on the works of the Old Covenant (the law) to make them right with God, are slaves to sin and are under the captivity of the law, which leads to judgment and spiritual death.

This, of course, includes anyone who doesn't have faith in Christ. But in this specific context, Paul applies it to the physical city of Jerusalem, which represents the Jews and anybody else, including the Judaizers who try to live by the law.

### Sarah

But Sarah, on the other hand, doesn't represent a physical city or even a physical people. Instead, as Paul writes in verse 26, she represents the heavenly Jerusalem that is above and is free.

A city that was without children and was barren, but now is our mother because God fulfilled his promise of sending Christ to redeem a people for himself. **This means that Sarah represents the New Covenant of Christ**

This is why Paul goes on to cite Isaiah 54:1 in verse 27. Because Sarah's barrenness didn't spell the end for Abraham's line, nor did the exile spell the end for the physical Israelites to whom Isaiah was prophesying.

Instead, God supernaturally gave her Isaac and descendants through him, and he even brought the Israelites back to their land and caused them to once again prosper.

So, even though they were at one time barren and desolate, they could now cry aloud and rejoice in God, who provided them with an enduring lineage.

Similarly, the Jerusalem above, God's heavenly kingdom, was waiting for the appointed time, when Christ would come and create spiritual children of Abraham by his blood.

And now that he is here, we, as those children, the church, can and should rejoice because God is doing a mighty work through his church, by the power of his Holy Spirit, to make new sons and daughters of promise. Those who are saved by faith alone in Christ alone and not by the physical law or our human efforts.

So yes, this is Paul's allegorical interpretation of the Hagar and Sarah story, but really, it is the overwhelming message that all scripture from Genesis to Revelation is proclaiming.

**God's true children are children through faith in the promise of Christ and not through human efforts or law-keeping.**

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Which now brings us to the practical application. Because if Paul's corrective interpretation of this story is true (and it is), there are things that he wants both the

Galatians and us to believe and do in light of its truth. Based on his words in Galatians 4:28-31, there are 4 main things that we should take away from this allegory.

## **The Practical Application**

### **1. We need to remember that we are children of Promise.**

#### **Galatians 4:28**

***[28] Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.***

Whether you realize it or not, every day we are all in a battle for our identity. Are we going to believe what the world tells us about creating our own identity through self-reliance, human efforts, choices, and worldly success? Or are we going to believe that our identity was given to us by God, as a gift, through the shed blood of Christ?

This is an important battle to fight because one road leads to destruction and the other leads to eternal life. **It is the essential battle of faith.**

And if we are going to persevere in it, then we need to be reminded all the time that we can't save ourselves, that we can't fill ourselves, and that we can't earn anything of eternal value on our own. Instead, all of these things are given to us by our heavenly Father through faith in Christ alone.

As it says in James 1:16-18:

***[16] Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. [17] Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. [18] Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.***

Beloved, remember, you are the fruit of God's work through Christ, and you are a child of promise.

### **2. We should expect persecution.**

#### **Galatians 4:29**

***[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.***

As I mentioned earlier, when Isaac was born, Sarah said in Genesis 21:6 that there was great laughter for her and others. Which means that Sarah, Abraham, and their household were full of joy because God had fulfilled his promise of a son to them.

But if we go a couple of verses later, we see a different kind of laughter happening. Look with me at Genesis 21:8-9:



***[8] And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. [9] But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing.***

Or as it says in the NASB

**Genesis 21:9**

***[9] Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking Isaac.***

Ishmael, who was born according to the flesh, was mocking and persecuting the child of promise. Similarly, the Jews were persecuting, arresting, and killing Christians in the first century, and the Judaizers were persecuting Paul and the Galatians by coercing them to turn to a false gospel of works that can't save them.

Church, this means that if we are going to live as Children of God, and if we are going to be backyard missionaries who preach the radical and free grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we are going to be persecuted.

**Because we live among a people who hate being told they are needy and can't make it on their own.** So we need to be ready for the persecution to come.

For the proclamation of the gospel will bear fruit and save souls, but it will also bear hatred from those who love their sin and continually walk in darkness.

### **3. We need to reject false teachers**

**Galatians 4:30**

***[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."***

**Genesis 21:10**

***[10] So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac."***

This is what happened to Hagar and Ishmael after he mocked Isaac. And even though Abraham was distraught about this possibility, God told him to listen to Sarah, because it was through Isaac (the son of Promise) that his descendants would come.

So why is Paul telling this to the Galatians? He wants them to realize that the Judaizers are not children of promise and therefore they, along with their false teaching, need to be kicked out of the church.

Now, does this mean we just kick everyone out of the church who doesn't agree with us? No. But it does mean that we need to be guarding the church against those who would try to spread a false gospel that can't save anybody.

So if they bring a gospel plus form of salvation: Gospel plus works, plus baptism, plus charismatic expressions, plus prosperity, plus politics, etc... we need to rebuke them, correct them, and if they persist in their false teaching, we need to kick them out.

Because they will lead people astray and will try to make children of hell out of children of promise.

**The true gospel must be preserved because it is the only message that saves.**

#### **4. We must live as children of promise.**

#### **Galatians 4:31**

***[31] So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.***

Brothers and Sisters, are greatest witness to the world is the witness of our lives. If we are going to see the kingdom of Christ built in our space, in our time, and through our church, then we need to live into and live out the true freedom and joy that Christ provides.

Because the world around us is weary, wounded, and dead in their sin, searching for any way to find real and lasting rest and peace. And the good news is that we have, in and through Christ, exactly what they need.

So let's stop living as if we are slaves (enslaved to our human efforts) because we're not. Instead, let's live as children of promise who have been given the fullness of joy and life through the redeeming work of Christ.

For this is God's great and gracious gift to us that he will use, by his Spirit, to draw weak, wounded, and the lonely to himself. Amen.

**Let's pray.**