

AN ANCIENT LESSON ON GRACE
Galatians 4:21-31

Now last week when we were in verses 12-20, we saw the gentleness of Paul and the loving heart that he has for the Galatians. He really brought it down a notch by temporarily backing off from his doctrinal teaching and bringing back some old memories that he had made with them when he planted the church there in Galatia. We saw how he came down with or developed some sort of physical difficulty that kept him from moving on from the area where he was and as a result, he reached out to them and shared Christ and they received Christ and they also received Paul. They treated him like Christ himself or as an angel from God. They ministered to Paul as he recovered from whatever it was that had him down and they were blessed by his ministry to them. It was very a blessed time. They were so grateful for Paul sharing the good news with them, so grateful to God for giving them His Spirit and saving them. They would have done anything for Paul then. They loved Paul. But sometime after this, perplexingly, Paul became their enemy. He went from being a wonderfully, deeply appreciated messenger from God, to being their enemy.

What had happened was that some false teachers, likely from Jerusalem and known as Judaizers, had snuck into the church with the intention of bringing these believers into bondage (2:4). They were like Satan's spies sent on a mission to destroy the work of Christ that had begun in these believers and probably hoped to snuff out the Church before it caught traction all over the world. Satan is always out to destroy it, distort it or distract it. The way in which this was being attempted in the Galatian churches was by instructing the *believers* that *believing* wasn't enough – that if they really wanted to be saved and really wanted to grow, they needed to fall in line with the ways of Judaism – to live according to the Mosaic Law, like the Jews had been for centuries. So the Judaizers tried to bring Judaism into Christianity and with it, **bondage**, because **if you can get someone to doubt their salvation or Christ's sufficiency, then you can get them sucked into your religious system. If there's no assurance of salvation and no trustworthy object to put their faith in, they're not secure in God's grace and everything they do will have an entirely different motivation of trying to earn God's grace.** They mixed the works of the Law with faith in Christ. The main work that they were promoting was circumcision. What they were essentially saying is that, "If you want to identify with Abraham and the Covenant Promise that God made with Abraham, and if you want to be an heir with Abraham and receive the blessing promised to him, then you as Gentile believers need to be circumcised according to the Law like Abraham." We also know that they didn't stop there, but had these believers observing different months and seasons and years (4:10). So these believers in Galatia fell right into the trap of bondage

While the Judaizers had been busy trying to make the Law part of the Promise and **mix** Law with Grace and **mix** works with faith, Paul has been busy **contrasting them and separating** them. We've seen how the Law brings curse, while the Promise brings blessing. The Law was conditional, while the Promise was unconditional. The Law was bilateral and required mediators, but the Promise was unilateral and only God put Himself under contract to keep it. Law was not part of the Promise's fulfillment but established the superiority of the Promise. The Law was shuts up people a restrictive jail cell, but faith in Christ sets people free. The Law was a tutor that taught elementary principles to slaves, but those in Christ are free from the tutor and are adults and heirs of the Promise. And though Paul took a break from the precise arguments and doctrinal teaching in last week's passage, he gets right back at it again with one big, final contrast and application. This ancient lesson puts the finishing touches on his doctrinal arguments and calls the Galatians to make a decision based on it. It is decision time for the Galatians. So Paul is going to prove his position now from an ancient historical account, using it as a final lesson, a coup de grâce¹ - it's the final blow to this bad theology of theirs that is already severely wounded by Paul's arguments.

Paul's precise understanding of the Scriptures in regard to the relationship between the Law and Promise has probably sent them into a state where, if they're honest and humble, are really sensing some ignorance now. At this point, according to his arguments, they can probably see how foolish it would be to try to live under the Law and there is no reason why anyone should ever want to do that. So maybe with a little sarcasm and a little dash of salt in the wound, he asks them with a lead-in question in v. 21: "Tell me, you who [actually] *want* to live under law, do you not *listen* to the law? [*emphasis, brackets mine*]" Paul then takes them back to Abraham again, because it seems these Judaizers were really intent on having these Gentiles identify with Abraham and the Promise through circumcision. So he's teaching on grace again from the OT in Genesis **before the Mosaic Law was even written**, asking them to listen to God's grace.

I. **THE HISTORICAL LESSON PRESENTED (VV. 22-23)**

Paul's lesson is from the two sons of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, and he contrasts them. He is pointing out the differences between them and the nature of their births and the application of it is going to be incredible. But first we could use a refresher course on family story.

A. **God promised Abraham a son. (v. 22)**

When Abraham was **75** years old, God told him to up and move from the land of Ur (modern day Iraq) to Canaan (modern day Israel) and he would have many descendants there and God would make nations from him (Gen. 12:1-3). Well, Abraham and his wife Sarah, who would've been ten years younger at **65** (Gen. 17:17) at this point, were childless. Sarah was barren and could not have children. After they moved to Canaan and ten years went by, still, no children. The Lord then appears to Abraham again to comfort him and Abraham basically asks God how he's going to give him a son? They're not getting any younger. Is this heir going to come through Eliezer, a servant in their house? Apparently, it was customary for a childless couple to adopt a servant² but God says no, "one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." God takes him outside and tells him to count the stars and says so shall your descendants be, numerous as the stars (Gen. 15:1-6). Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Abraham is justified in God's sight for his faith. That was Gen. 15.

However, in Genesis 16, immediately following this reaffirmation of the promise to Abraham, we see Abraham and Sarah *trying to help God out through their own efforts*. Since Sarah doesn't think that the heir is going to come through her, she recommends to Abraham her young **Egyptian slave girl, Hagar**. "Perhaps," she said, "I will obtain children through her." And so Abraham, age **86**, does what his wife suggests and wrongfully takes Hagar as his wife as well (Gen. 16). Hagar conceived, Sarah immediately changed her mind and became indignant of her, but nevertheless she bore a son and the boy's name, recommended by God, became Ishmael (Gen. 16:11).

B. **Ishmael was born to Hagar (bondwoman) naturally, by self-effort to try and fulfill the Promise. (v. 23)**

Now, 13 years later after Ishmael was born (*23 years* after moving to Canaan), when Abraham is **99** years old, God comes again and reaffirms the promise again (What nerve huh! What is taking Him so long?! Makes me wonder if Abraham ever prayed for patience)! This time God tells Abraham specifically that Sarah will be a **mother of nations and kings of peoples – all plural** (Gen. 17:16). Abraham responds by falling on his face and laughing at this, saying, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" He laughed at it and said, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" I think that's a very significant statement for later – "Oh that Ishmael [the product of my own self-effort might] live before You!" But God said,

“No, but Sarah [your 90 year-old wife!] will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.” That was Genesis 17.

In Genesis 18, the Lord (in a theophany known as a pre-incarnate Christ) and two angels appear to Abraham looking like three men, just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord is examining Sodom and Gomorrah firsthand before He destroys it but He stops to talk with Abraham and Sarah first. They even eat a meal together with Abraham. Yahweh and two angels have a meal with Abraham. During their meal, the Lord says, “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.” Sarah overheard it, and being past child-bearing years and barren her whole life, laughed too! The Lord asked her why she laughed and said, “Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you.” Well, at the appointed time the next year, Isaac was born just like God said.

C. Isaac was born to Sarah (freewoman) supernaturally, by God’s grace to fulfill the promise. (v. 23)

They name him Isaac, which means “laughter”. The child brought laughter before and after his birth. Before, they laughed that it could happen. After they laughed that it did. Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me... Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” So here is two easy applications to take home: 1. Nothing is too difficult for the Lord and 2. He always keeps His Word. It’s incredible how Paul, in discussing salvation in Romans 4:17, throws in there that phrase which says God gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. So if He can do that, He can anything. Nothing stops Him. Deadness of womb is no problem for the Lord. Death is not a problem for the Lord, as evidenced in Christ.

But three years later when they weaned Isaac as was custom, with a feast and celebration we’re told that Ishmael, now **13 to 14** years old – mocks Isaac for some reason and pokes fun at him, probably because he knows his dream of being an heir one day is being crushed. When Ishmael does this, Sarah says that which is quoted in verse 30 of our passage, “Cast out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.” Now this greatly troubled Abraham because he loved Ishmael, but God says it’s ok and to do it. He also tells Abraham though that Ishmael will be a nation. So Hagar and Ishmael move out and settle in the land of Paran, which would be the north-east part of the Sinai peninsula and he takes a wife from Egypt. Genesis 25:12-18 says his descendants settled from Havilah to Shur (Saudi Arabia to Iraq – Red Sea to Persian Gulf), east of Egypt and toward Assyria and he did it in defiance just like God said would happen in Genesis 16:11-12 where God foretold that he would be a wild donkey of a man, his hand would be against everyone and everyone against him, living to the east of his brothers. So Ishmael descendants it appears become the Arab nation that is always warring against the Jews, Isaacs descendants.

And so now Paul is going to use this story to illustrate their situation in Galatia.

II. THE HISTORICAL LESSON ILLUSTRATED (VV. 24-27)

Paul says, “This is allegorically speaking” (v. 24). I want to spend some time talking about allegory. What Paul is saying is that in interpreting the text or the story, there is a meaning beyond that which is obvious. It is pointing to something deeper, a spiritual truth. However, because allegorizing as a method of interpretation is abused so much and taken to extremes, I would prefer as some of translations do to use the word *illustratively* or *figuratively* instead of the word

allegorically. Every school of thought has its extremes, but the word allegory in particular just has a bad connotation with it and reputation because there are many interpreters who try to make a fanciful, secret hidden meaning out of every text and it can quickly lead to liberalism and mishandling of the Scriptures and it takes away from the meaning and application of it. For example, there are Christocentric preachers out there who want to find a type of Christ in everything. I stated a few weeks ago about how all of Scripture points us to Christ. There are many OT types and symbols that point to Christ. But that doesn't mean we need to take every passage and every story and try to find or force some hidden type of Christ in it. That's not what I meant by that, but that no matter what passage we're in, we can take the normal application of the text and see how that can then be seen in Christ and when we apply it, we are more Christlike – Christ formed in us. Let me use **an example from Abraham Kuruvilla**, Senior Research Professor of Preaching at Dallas Theological Seminary: He noted how more than once the story of David vs. Goliath is allegorized into a battle between Christ and Satan. That idea is being forced on the story and the story's real application is lost. Kuruvilla points out that when you study the story, you see it is a battle of between *stature, resources and war experience*.³ **Goliath's** strength is found in his size, weapons, armor and experience. **Saul** was considerably able in these areas as well. But **David** doesn't have a whole lot going for him in that regard – he is smaller, younger and has no armor and only has a slingshot. His experience was only fighting wild beasts in the wilderness. However, he has one resource that Goliath and Saul don't, and that is, trust in the God of Israel. He relies on the Lord. The Lord delivered him from the Lion and the Bear and the Lord delivered him from Goliath. It's trust in the Lord. The application is that of a man overcoming the giant because of his trust in God. So with that application, we then look to Christ who alone completely met every application of every passage by His perfect life and see how Christ trusted God every second of His life, we become more Christlike. Kuruvilla says, "Christ alone fulfills every theological thrust of every pericope of Scripture." In Christ, we can find the fulfillment of every application of every passage. Spiritualizing David vs. Goliath takes away from the intended application. In fact, I think we need to be very leery of making anything a type of Christ or allegorizing the Bible which the Bible itself does not typify or allegorize. It will tell you grammatically when it's okay to do that. Allegorizing has really done a lot of harm to the Church. Allegorical interpretation really started with Origen and Augustine in the 3rd and 4th centuries. They tried to find spiritual meaning behind everything and that eventually channeled right into Roman Catholic Church as a highly used method of interpretation for them. Cults are notorious for using allegory because with the method, you can make the text say whatever you want it to say. You become the authority over the God-inspired text and generally, things just get weird because the only limitation is the interpreter's imagination. Think about it: when two people allegorize the same text differently, there's no way to test who's right.⁴ You can do whatever – You can turn 10 loaves of bread into 10 commandments. Like Origen, you can turn the two Good Samaritan coins into the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. It's been said of him that he tortured the Bible. Luther said Origen's allegories aren't worth so much as dirt. They actually take away from the text. Paul's allegory isn't like that. It doesn't destroy the history of it and doesn't take away the original application. It may be that he is just using the own Judaizers' methods against them. Besides that, he is an apostle, writing under the Holy Ghost's inspiration. Unless otherwise noted by the text itself, we do well to stick to a literal, historical, grammatical and contextual interpretation because when you do that consistently, the Bible makes sense. The old saying is, "If the literal sense makes perfect sense, seek no other sense, lest it become nonsense." Let the text speak. As Donald Campbell pointed out, Paul's "allegorizing" is a far cry from the *typical practice* of "allegorical interpretation"⁵

Paul recognizes there is more to the story of Isaac and Ishmael than first meets the eye. He points out **these two sons are symbolic of two totally different belief systems – two totally juxtaposed ways to approach God – by works or by faith.**

A. Ishmael symbolizes man’s system of works. (vv. 24-25)

He was born naturally through Abraham’s own self-effort to obtain God’s promise. He symbolizes the flesh – the part of man that tries to exalt himself and make his own way to God rather than coming to God on God’s terms by faith. His mother, Hagar, who is a bondwoman, represents slavery and the Mosaic Law Covenant. It was given on the Arabian Mt. Sinai and brought slavery with its works and rules and rituals. Hagar also corresponds with the earthly Jerusalem because earthly Jerusalem is known for upholding or at least representing the Law. Not only that, Jerusalem is also a place of bondage by the Romans at the time this is written.

B. Isaac symbolizes God’s chosen system of grace. (v. 26)

He was born in God’s **timing** by God’s **power** and God’s **grace**. If you were wondering why God waited so long to fulfill His promise to Abraham, He did it to demonstrate He is in control and He saves by His power and grace. We only make a mess of things when we try to rush things and help God out. God waited until Abraham and Sarah were totally unable to have children naturally before He enabled them to bear children by His Spirit, not in the same sense as Christ was, without coming together, but they came together and God allowed them to conceive. It was all God’s grace and power according to His promise. Sarah also represents the Heavenly Jerusalem, which is free.

So we have: Law vs. Grace; Works vs. Faith; Hagar vs. Sarah; Ishmael vs. Isaac; Natural vs. Supernatural; Flesh vs. Spirit; Mosaic Covenant vs. Abrahamic Covenant/Promise; Earthly Jerusalem vs. Heavenly Jerusalem; Bondage vs. Freedom.

The point of it all is this: You can’t approach God by your works. You can only approach Him His way, which is by faith. We don’t live under Law, but under grace. We don’t work for salvation, we put our faith in Christ. We aren’t even sanctified only by fleshly efforts alone, but we have the Spirit and walk in the Spirit by faith. We don’t want to live in bondage, but in the freedom found in Christ. The Gospel is where we find God’s power and grace to save. Amen. **Verse 27, kind of a unique verse, reaffirms this truth:**

❖ **God’s blessing comes to those in the grace system like Isaac. (v. 27)**

Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1, saying, “Rejoice barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more numerous are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband.” Originally, this verse was written about Israel with God as their husband. It was written during their time in the Babylonian exile in which they were not productive. It was a barren time for them. But according to the rest of the chapter they would be restored again and the ultimate fulfillment will come during the Millennium, but Paul notes that it’s also pointing to more than that. I noticed in the preceding chapter in Isaiah 53:10, the chapter on the suffering Messiah, it says, “He will see His offspring.” And well, the offspring is those who would believe on Christ. Now those who believe on Christ are considered Isaac’s descendants and will be more numerous than the descendants of Ishmael. God said he would make *a nation* out of Ishmael but would make *nations* out of Isaac, including Gentiles. Isaiah brought up the Gentiles as partakers of the Promise several times (Is. 42:6; 49:6-9; 51:4; 60:1-3). Despite Sarah’s initial barrenness, eventually and ultimately her son Isaac has

more descendants that Ishmael and they will inherit the New Earth and New Jerusalem.

The application for our text is really easy this week because Paul does it for us in verses 28-31.

III. **THE HISTORICAL LESSON APPLIED (VV. 28-31)**

A. Grace-Believers should identify with Isaac as children of the Promise. (v. 28, 31)

“And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise... we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the freewoman” That’s pretty clear-cut. This is what the Lord wants us to know. We are children of promise. We have been made partakers of the promise given so long ago to Abraham by God’s power and grace through faith in Christ. Just like he was born supernaturally by the Spirit of God and according to grace, so we have as well. Just as he was heir with an inheritance, so we too are heirs with an inheritance.

B. Grace-Believers will always be persecuted by religious legalists. (v.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.” Paul says just like Isaac was persecuted and mocked by Ishmael at his weaning, so we who trust in God’s grace through simple faith are going to be persecuted by the religious legalists who are offended by the idea of grace. They want to exalt themselves or earn God’s grace by their works, or maintain their system rather than accepting God’s grace. Paul certainly experienced this everywhere he went. That’s something you see all throughout the history of the church. I think of the Reformation and all the believers who were burned at the stake for defying the pope and the religious system of the time and trying to get the Word of God into people’s hands. The future and false religious system of Revelation 17 is even said to be “drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.” Even Christ Himself, was persecuted and crucified by the religious Pharisees.

C. Grace-Believers are to cast out legalistic teachers and legalism. (v. 30)

For the final application, the final blow, Paul quotes Sarah words from Genesis 21:10, saying, “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman.” Just like Abraham had to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, so the Galatians must cast out the Judaizers. Cast them out. It’s interesting that later on in Genesis 22:2, God says, “Take your only son” Isaac and offer him on Mt. Moriah?⁶ Only son?... I think a point is being made there in that God only accepts Isaac as the true son of Abraham. The Judaizers are not real sons so cast out them out from your midst if they refuse to change their teaching. Be done with them and their teaching. They are not heirs with you. They are not real sons. As he is going to state in 5:9 the reason to cast them out is because a little leaven leavens the whole lump. You can’t let them remain in your midst or they’ll defile the whole congregation. It’s harsh, but it’s necessary, because their teaching’s deadly. Legalists prevent people from entering the kingdom of heaven. Those who try to save themselves by their works are going to be cast out of God’s presence and into the eternal lake of fire. If you don’t trust Christ’s sacrifice for your sins and you trust your works instead, He’ll reject *you and your works*. Many are going to say Lord, Lord, oh that my Ishmael might live before You – oh that my works might be pleasing in Your sight! But because only Christ’s work is pleasing in His sight for salvation, He’ll cast your works out, saying, “I never knew you; Depart from Me.” Trust Christ, not works.

Secondly he’s saying cast out legalism in your life. As hard as it is to your human pride, cast out the attempts to get right with God or walk with God according to mere manmade rules and rituals by which to gain merit. Cast them out. This doesn’t mean we’re casting

out morality. As we'll see in Galatians 5, that's not what it means at all. We are not mere moralists but we're also not throwing out morality, for to walk in the Spirit is to produce that which is moral. Legalism is working for grace – and grace that can't be earned – but it can be appreciated to the point where we obey out of love! Legalism is mishandling the Law⁷ or using your morality or your good works in an attempt to become acceptable to God. But God accepts us not based on the things we do, but on our faith in Christ.

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, "Insights on Galatians," *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 8* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 107.

² Charles Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 20.

³ Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching – The Heart of Pastoral Ministry and Its Impact*, Dallas Theological Seminary & *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013).

⁴ Andy Woods, "15 Galatians 4 21-31," accessed 5 May 2019, spiritandtruth.org.

⁵ Donald K. Campbell, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1983), 603-604.

⁶ Woods.

⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2 vols, (Wheaton: Scripture Press, Victor Books, 1989), 1:712.