

BOOK OF GALATIANS
ALLEGORY OF ISHMAEL AND ISAAC
GALATIANS 4:21-31; GENESIS 15-17

Introduction

Let's go back to high school for a minute. Remember when you were in high school and your English teacher tried to teach you what an *ALLEGORY* was? Well, kinda sort of, but NO!?! Me neither, so let me help you with this.

Now the first thing I want you to understand is that this story of Abraham that is used here by Paul is a true story that actually happened! It is NOT a fictional story...It is HISTORICAL! It literally took place!

But the **FACTS** of this story of Abraham's two sons just happen to illustrate the very point Paul is trying to make here. *Verse 24* tells us that Paul sees an *ALLEGORY* in these events, that is, he sees them **as apt representations of something more than their literal meaning**. That's what an *ALLEGORY* is!

Paul **IS NOT SAYING** that the original meaning of Genesis had any reference to Mt. Sinai or to Jerusalem. But, the truth implied in the stories about Hagar and Sarah is the same truth that we can now see in what happened at Mt. Sinai and continues to happen in the present Jerusalem. So it is fully legitimate to use those stories from Genesis **to symbolize and illustrate** the later events.

So, Paul used this *ALLEGORY* of Hagar and Sarah to persuade the Galatians (and us) **not to follow those who would try to put us back into slavery with Hagar and Ishmael, but to follow Sarah and Isaac into freedom**.

Paul is wanting us to see that TRUE Believers in Christ are the freest people in the world! And Paul is fighting with all his might in this letter to the Galatians to expose the teaching of the Judaizers for what it really is—
IT IS NOTHING MORE THAN RELIGIOUS SLAVERY!

For Paul, **the experience of freedom is not icing on the cake of Christianity. Freedom in Christ IS Christianity!** That's the first point of this *ALLEGORY*. So let's see if we can understand it and strengthen our stand in our freedom in Christ!

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I. IF YOU DESIRE TO BE UNDER THE LAW, ARE YOU LISTENING TO WHAT THE LAW SAYS? (Vs. 21)

In *verse 21* Paul simply says that those who are turning back to the law of Moses as a way to please God and earn the blessing from God should actually listen to what the law says.

Paul only wanted to teach things that are implied in the Jewish Bible. His problem with these Judaizers was not that they are Jewish, because Paul was Jewish. **His problem was that they weren't Jewish enough!**

Paul himself was a Jew but he never surrendered his allegiance to the law. What does the law teach about freedom?

II. THE STORY OF ABRAHAM'S SONS. (Vs 22-24a)

Let's go back to **Genesis 15** and remind ourselves of this story of Abraham and Sarah or the story of Ishmael and Isaac.

In *Genesis 15:1-6*, Abram is old and depressed because he and Sarai are getting old and they still have no children! There is no heir to fulfill God's promises to him of becoming a great nation (*Genesis 12:2*). His only heir apparent is Eliezer his steward servant.

But look at what God says in *Genesis 15:4!* (**Read it!**)
God's intention was to give Abram a son and an heir when it looked humanly impossible so that Abram would have to rely solely on God.

But in *Genesis 16* Abram and Sarai weaken in their faith for a time and Sarah devised a plan by which they would help God fulfill his promise. Abram went along with Sarah on this plan. (**But listen, God didn't need any help in fulfilling His promise!**)

So, in *Genesis 16:2*, we see Sarai gave Hagar, her handmaid, to Abraham so she could bear Abram a son. Then in *Genesis 16:15*, Hagar bore Abram a son, and they named him "*Ishmael*."

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So when Paul says in *Galatians 4:23* that Ishmael was born "*after the flesh,*" it means that **he was the product of self-reliance (i.e. "I'll do it myself" mentality.) Abraham at this point had ceased to rely on God's power to fulfill His Word and instead relied on his wife's ingenuity and plan and his own power to get a son.**

Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born, then, 14 years later, God changed Abram's name to Abraham. Then in *Genesis 17:15-16* look at what God said to Abraham about his wife, Sarai. (*Read it*)

God intended to fulfill His promise in a way that removed all ground for boasting! (*Read Genesis 17:17-19*)

God rejected what Abraham was able to produce on his own and He promised him again that in spite of Abraham's and Sarah's age, he was going to have a son by his own wife.

Now go to *Genesis 21:1-2*. (*Read it!*) **Isaac was not born according to the flesh because his birth was the result of God's supernatural intervention in fulfillment of His own promise.**

Abraham had learned his lesson! Here is the lesson, **the only acceptable response to God's merciful promise is trust in that promise, not works of the flesh that try to bring down God's blessing with our efforts.**

So back in our text in *Galatians 4:23*, the story is summed up this way *Galatians 4:23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.*

III. THE ALLEGORY OF HAGAR AND SARAH (or ISHMAEL AND ISAAC) ILLUSTRATE THE TWO COVENANTS! (Vs 24) *Verse 24* says that Paul sees an allegory in these events, that is, he sees them as *apt representations of something more than their literal meaning.*

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Paul is **NOT** saying that the original meaning of the Genesis story had any reference to Mt. Sinai or to Jerusalem. But, the truth implied in the story about Hagar and Sarah is the same truth that we can now see in what happened at Mt. Sinai and continues to happen in the present Jerusalem.

So it is fully legitimate to use those stories from Genesis to symbolize and illustrate the later events and that is what Paul does here!

According to verse 24b, Hagar and Sarah represent two covenants.

A. Hagar And Ishmael Represent The Mosaic Covenant (i.e. The Law)!

First, he focuses on Hagar and says, "*For the one (covenant) from Mt. Sinai (that's the Law), which gendereth (bearing children) to bondage, which is Agar.*"

Verse 25 – "*For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to [or corresponds to] Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.*"

The key question here is this—How is Hagar and her affair with Abraham and their son Ishmael like the covenant of Mt. Sinai—referring to the giving of the law through Moses or the Mosaic Covenant?

There are two similarities, at least.

1. **Hagar's giving birth to Ishmael was done "after the flesh." (vs. 23) Abraham and Hagar tried to get God's promised blessing by their own strength without relying on God's supernatural enablement.**

That is just what happened when the law was given at Mt. Sinai. Instead of humbling themselves and trusting God for help to obey his commands, Israel said confidently, "*All the words which the LORD hath said, we will do*" (*Exodus 24:3*)

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In fact they told Moses in:

Deuteronomy 5:27– “Go thou near, and hear all that the LORD our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the LORD our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it, and do it.”

But God knew their hearts and they did not have hearts inclined to trust in God or truly depend on Him!

*Hebrews 4:2 – “For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: **but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.**”*

Deuteronomy 5:29 O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!

And so like Hagar and Abraham, they depended on their own resources. And just as Ishmael was born **“after to the flesh,”** so the Law God offered was not received because (as Romans 8:3 says) the Law was **“weak through the flesh.”** **All that Abraham and Hagar produced on their own was a son who would not be the heir. All that Israel produced when they tried to keep the law on their own was a legalism which would inherit nothing!**

Which leads to the second similarity between Hagar and Mt. Sinai—

2. **Both Hagar and Mt. Sinai (the Law) bear children for bondage or slavery.** *Verse 24* says that the covenant Hagar represents is from Mt. Sinai *“which gendereth to bondage.”*

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i.e. Since Ishmael was not accepted as the heir, he was no better than his mother, who was a slave.

And when the Israelites took the law upon themselves without trusting God for His gracious enablement, they became slaves because **they had no freedom to do the law from the heart, and because their unbelief locked them into disobedience and excluded them from the inheritance!**

Then to bring the allegory up to date, at the end of *verse 25*, Paul says that Hagar, *“answereth to [corresponds to] Jerusalem, which now is [present day], and is in bondage with her children.”*

This was a direct attack on the Judaizers who had come from Jerusalem (*cf. 2:12*). They were the children of Jerusalem, and they were slaves to the law (*4:3, 8*).

So we can see Paul's point! He's saying don't follow these false teachers—they may show you how to become sons of Abraham, but beware! **With them you will be an Ishmael, not an Isaac. A slave, not an heir.**

Then in *verse 26* Paul turns his attention to the other half of the allegory...

B. Sarah And Isaac Represent The Abrahamic Covenant (i.e. The Promise)! (Vs. 26)

But he skips over any mention of the (Abrahamic) covenant and gets right up to date! (***Read the verse!***)

He contrasts the present Jerusalem in *verse 25* with the **“Jerusalem which is above”** in *verse 26*.

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What he means by the *“Jerusalem which is above”* can be seen in *Colossians 3:1-3* – *“1 If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. 2 Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. 3 For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.”*

The *“Jerusalem which is above”* represents the dwelling place of God. **Our life and our freedom flow down from him, and our lives are already secure as citizens of that city having our name in the Lamb’s Book of Life!**

Sarah represents that city because **she gave birth to Isaac not by reliance on herself but by FAITH IN AN ACT OF GOD from above in fulfillment of His promise.**

Therefore, **spiritually speaking, she is the mother of all Believers—of people whose lives are not merely the product of human resources but of God's supernatural work in their heart by faith!**

So look at what Paul says in *verse 28 (Read it)*. **Our real life is not like Ishmael's, simply owing to the work of man.**

Our real life is owing to the work of God in us fulfilling His promise to make for Himself a people (*Genesis 12:1–3*) and to put His Spirit within them (*Ezekiel 36:27*) and write His law on their hearts (*Jeremiah 31:33*).

This is confirmed by the contrast in *verse 29 (Read it)*.

Recall how in *verse 23* the contrast was between **one born “after the flesh”** and **one born “by promise.”** But notice here in *verse 29* that the same contrast is between one *“born after the flesh”* and one *“born after the Spirit.”*

“Born after the Spirit” is interchangeable with *“born by promise.”*

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This confirms that *“the children of promise”* in *verse 28* refers to people whose inner life is **the WORK OF GOD’S SPIRIT in fulfillment of His promise. The difference between Ishmael-types and Isaac-types is a SUPERNATURAL WORK of the Spirit of God.**

Then *verse 30* assures us that **not the Ishmael-types—not the Judaizers—but the Isaac-types will inherit the blessing of Abraham, even though they may be persecuted for now.**

Finally, Paul concludes in *verse 31* that **WE—that is, we who live by faith in the Son of God and don't rely on what we can achieve on our own—we are not in the slave category but in the category of the free!**

Conclusion

So, **are you living in bondage of being “after the flesh”** this morning or **are you living in the freedom that ONLY COMES from being “born by promise”** having been born again by being *“born after the spirit”*?

Why aren't the Ishmael-types free? **They are not free because they lack the desire to rest in God's promises.** It's not that they desire to reject God. They simply want him on their own terms. Abraham and Hagar wanted God's blessing, but they went about it on their terms, not on God's terms.

Whose terms are you following? *John 14:6 “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”*