

An Allegory of the Law and Grace

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[0 : 00] We left off last time in chapter 4 and we are starting in verse 31 this morning. Galatians chapter 4 beginning in verse 21.

! And here in this section of the letter the Apostle Paul tells the Galatians the story of Abraham and the first two sons that he fathered with two different women.

One who was his wife and the other who was her slave. And he uses the story of Abraham, his two sons and these two women to teach us a lesson about law and grace.

That's what he teaches us. It's a lesson about law and grace. Will you follow along as I read Galatians chapter 4 starting in verse 21.

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman.

[1 : 37] But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically.

These women are two covenants. 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. But the Jerusalem above is free.

And she is our mother. 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. Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

[2 : 46] 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.

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.

So, brothers, we are not children of the slave, but of the free woman. Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for the reading of your word this morning and our hearing.

We ask now that you would grant us all illumination, that we may hear the truth that is contained in your word. We ask, O Lord, that you would grant us all the attentiveness that we need.

I pray that you would grant me the grace to be faithful, the grace to be clear, and the grace to feed your people, those who are gathered here this morning.

[4 : 01] Father, we ask that you would attend to every aspect of this moment as we sit under your word. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. This section of Galatians that we have come to this morning is considered by some to be the most difficult part of the letter. And I think the reason that is, is that some people read this section of Galatians in isolation to the rest of the letter.

They kind of take it out and read a lot of fancy things in it as opposed to hearing it in the context of what the Apostle Paul is saying in the letter as a whole and in particular concerning what he's been saying up to this point.

This is not detached. Paul is actually teaching what he has taught in a different way. He's using, like a good teacher, using a different approach to reinforce the same message because it is so important for them to grasp it.

And Paul is laboring over this point of trying to teach them this important lesson about law and grace. And here's what he has been teaching in the letter and here's what he is teaching in these verses.

[5 : 25] Law-keeping cannot save us. Rather, it enslaves us. Law-keeping cannot save us.

Rather, it enslaves us. Paul is going through this elaborate retelling of this story about Abraham and these two sons and these two women to reinforce the point that he has already been laying out to the Galatians who were captivated by the law, who were returning to the law, who felt that by obeying the law they could be saved.

And the point that Paul makes again is, no, no, no. Law-keeping cannot save us. Rather, it enslaves us. So let's consider how Paul continues to make this point that he has been making about the law and also about grace.

I've organized my thoughts this morning to help you follow along under three headings. The first is this, telling the story.

Paul begins by telling the Galatians this story about Abraham's first two sons that he had with two different women. But Paul is doing more than just telling a story.

[6 : 56] Again, he is further teaching a lesson. He is further teaching the Galatians a lesson about the law's inability to save. That's what he is doing.

So let's not get lost in the story in a vacuum because Paul is telling it for a particular reason. So notice what he does. At the very outset, he asks this question.

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? In this question, Paul is actually making a statement.

He's making a statement to the Galatians. He's essentially saying to them, have you taken the time to consider the implications of wanting to be under the law?

Have you listened to the law? You're deserting the gospel. You're abandoning the gospel for the law. But have you taken the time to listen to the law?

[7 : 54] Paul is calling them to think about what they're doing because their law-keeping will not result in salvation. It will result in slavery. Brothers and sisters, this morning, this question that Paul asks to the Galatians is relevant to anyone who believes that by doing good or by not doing bad, one can attain salvation.

Paul's question, do you not listen to the law? Do you not listen to the law? Look at the story that Paul tells in verses 22 and 23.

In these two verses, Paul actually summarizes five very lengthy chapters of the book of Genesis that cover the life of Abraham, and in particular with his first two sons.

Two verses, he summarizes five long chapters. He tells us about Abraham's two sons and the two women who bore them.

Abraham's account in Genesis starts in Genesis 12, and Abraham is a moon worshiper. He lives in this place called Ur of the Chaldeans. Now at the time that God called Abraham, his name was not Abraham, it was Abram, A-B-R-A-M.

[9 : 29] And when God called him, he was 75 years old. And his wife Sarah, whose name at the time was Sarai, was 65 years old.

So they were elderly. They wanted children, but Sarah could not have children. And so they had them. And the Lord told Abraham, I want you to leave where you're living, Ur of the Chaldeans, and go to this land that I'm going to show you.

And I'm going to make of you a great nation. That happens in Genesis 12. And then the story picks up in Genesis 15. In Genesis 15, the account opens with Abram being very discouraged.

And God appears to him in a vision, and the Lord assures him that he was going to keep his promise to him. And the Lord assures him that he's going to be rewarded, and his reward is going to be very great.

And then Abram says to him, but I continue to be childless. You're saying that you're going to bless me. You're saying that you're going to give me a great reward, but I continue to be childless, and everything I own is subject to be inherited by this slave, this servant in my house, this man, by the name of Eliezer of Damascus.

[10 : 51] And then the Lord assures Abram, he says, No, your heir is going to be your very own son. And we read in Genesis 15, verse 5, that the Lord takes Abram outside, and he says, I want you to look at the sky.

He says, If you could number the stars in the heavens, you could number your offspring. The most remarkable thing, the most remarkable thing about that is the very next verse, in verse 6, Genesis 15, verse 6, Scripture says, And Abram believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

That's a remarkable statement. And actually, it is the basis for our doctrine of justification. This doctrine of justification by faith alone, without any works, is based on this account, and this statement, about Abraham, how he believed God, and how God counted his belief, to him, as righteousness.

Abram, an old man, believed that God could give him, and his wife, Sarai, who were, both of them were old, she couldn't have children, even when she was younger, and now that they are old, Abram believes, that yes, God would give them children, not just a child, but that God would somehow, give them at this stage of their life, this remarkable number, of offspring.

He believed God. And brothers and sisters, the same way that Abram believed God, and looked to God alone, who could give him a child, those of us, who put our faith in Jesus Christ, must look to God alone.

[12 : 53] All who would be saved, must look to God alone, who can save them, no other way. And then we're told in Genesis 15, that God makes this covenant with Abram, but the interesting thing about this account, is that Abram was asleep.

Normally covenants are made with two people, consciously getting into a covenant, they enter into the covenant, but the Bible says, is God made a covenant. Abram was asleep, and God made the covenant, with Abram, and Abram left that, encounter with God, believing, that he would have his very own son, and that his offspring, would be as innumerable, as the stars, of the sky.

And then over in Genesis 16, Abram and Sarai, had been living in the land of Canaan, for ten years. It had been ten years, since God had made this promise, that Abram was going to, be a father, of many nations.

But it hadn't happened yet. And Sarai had this brilliant idea, and she said to Abram, she said, you know what, perhaps, the way God is going to give me children, is through my slave, Hagar.

So I want you to sleep with Hagar, and her children really will be my children, because she is my slave, and her children will be slaves, and they will essentially be my own.

[14 : 25] And Abram listened to Sarai, and did as she said, and they had a child, by the name of Ishmael.

In Genesis 17, the Lord appeared to Abram, and he was 99 years old. So this actually is, like 13 years later, Ishmael now would be 13 years old, Sarai would be 89 years old, because again, she was 10 years younger than Abram was.

God appears to him. And the Lord reaffirms the covenant with Abram, tells him, you're going to have a child, and I'm going to make you a father of many nations.

And Abram, he does something else remarkable with Abram at that time. He says to him, I'm going to change your name from Abram to Abraham.

And that was interesting, because he is now going from father, which is the meaning of Abram, to Abraham, which means a great father, father of many nations, father of a multitude.

[15 : 42] And the Lord gives Abram this covenant of circumcision, and tells him that he's also changing his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah.

And he tells Abram, she's going to bear a son, and here's his name. His name is going to be Isaac. That's his name. And Abram pleads, Abram pleads before the Lord.

He says, Oh, let it be Ishmael. May Ishmael live before you. And the Lord says, No. You're going to have a child. His name is going to be Isaac.

And scripture says that Abram fell on his face, and he laughed, and he said to himself, Am I going to have a child at a hundred years old?

And is Sarah going to bear a child at ninety years old? And the Lord did exactly that.

[16 : 47] We read about it in Genesis 21. In Genesis 21, we read about the birth of Isaac, which is one year after the Lord had appeared to him.

And we also read that when Isaac was weaned, when he had weaned off of breast milk, Abram pitched a big potty for him.

He threw a big potty for him. It was a potty to mark his weaning off of milk. And we're told, I looked up, you know, when weaning would have been done in those days, and there's no agreement on it, but it seems to range from between two to twelve.

That's a pretty big range. I think two is normal, twelve, that's a little off. You can't imagine twelve-year-old pulling against a mother's sleeve to be breastfed.

But when this was happening, Scripture says that Ishmael, who was, remember, fourteen years older than Isaac, Ishmael was laughing.

[17 : 55] He was mocking. He was scoffing. And Sarah saw it, and she said to Abraham, you know what? That woman and her son, they need to go.

And Abraham puts them out. That's the account that Paul summarizes in these two verses. That's the five-chapter account. Notice, back in Galatians chapter 4, in verse 21, Paul tells us about these two sons.

He doesn't name them. So the first son was Ishmael, who was born of Hagar, and the second is Isaac, who was born of Sarah.

And the idea of Ishmael being born of Hagar is, you see, a child being produced without God.

[19 : 03] without the involvement of God. This is a child being produced by Abraham and Hagar. They produced Ishmael. He was able to have children.

She was able to have children. They did that. It was a biological reality. God did not give them a child in a direct kind of way.

Ishmael was a slave, as his mother was a slave. But the second son, who was Isaac, we can say, as scripture says, Isaac was born of the spirit.

He was born by supernatural intervention. Sarah could not have children. Abraham. And Isaac was born because God enabled this woman who was old and could not have children and Abraham to have a child.

Another way that we can say it is that although both Ishmael and Isaac were Abraham's sons, Ishmael was of the flesh based on law, the law of human biology, and Isaac was of the spirit based on grace and the promise of God.

[20 : 22] Now that's the story that Paul tells to set up the lesson that he's about to teach the Galatians and us. In verse 24, the apostle Paul transitions from telling the story to interpreting the story.

So in verse 24 he tells us this story that Abraham had two sons and their two mothers and he says that it may be interpreted allegorically.

Now first of all, what is an allegory? An allegory is a story or poem or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.

So for example, John Bunyan's book, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory. It's an allegory about the Christian life. How Christian journeys from salvation to heaven.

So here in verse 24, what the apostle Paul tells the Galatians is that this story of Abraham's two sons and their two mothers may be interpreted allegorically, meaning that it can be interpreted in such a way to teach a very important lesson.

[21 : 36] and he immediately begins to interpret these two women or to interpret the story allegorically. He says the two women represents two covenants.

One he says is Mount Sinai, a clear reference to the Old Testament which Moses received on Mount Sinai. He was given the law, he was given the Old Covenant on Mount Sinai and he describes Mount Sinai as bearing children for slavery.

I want you to see that in verse 24. Bearing children for slavery. And he further tells us that Mount Sinai is Hagar. Now when you think about that, that's pretty strong language.

pretty strong language to speak about the Old Covenant. With all of its laws and all of its ordinances including the Ten Commandments, Paul is using pretty strong language to say that's the Old Covenant.

But it's important to know that Paul is speaking about the Old Covenant in this way because he is pointing out its inability to bring salvation. It's inability to save us.

[22 : 58] It can only produce slavery, it can only produce this never-ending bondage of law-keeping that will never produce freedom and never produce forgiveness and keeps us on and on and on and on trying harder and harder and never able to attain salvation.

Paul further tells us in verse 24 that Hagar's Mount Sinai which is located in Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula which is a part of the land of the Arabs which they would say Ishmael went to after he was put out of Abram's house.

Now that's a geographical reference. But notice he goes on in verse 26 sorry and he tells us that Hagar and her slave children also have a reference to the present Jerusalem.

Notice that he talks about the present Jerusalem in verse 25. The present Jerusalem. Now clearly Paul is not saying that everyone in Jerusalem was in this category that he was referring to but what he was doing was he was using this reference of Jerusalem to refer to the whole nation of Israel because we do that at times.

Sometimes a person may refer to Washington to refer to the whole United States. Let me say Washington needs to understand how we feel about that.

[24 : 41] They talk about the whole United States or they may say Moscow or they may say Beijing and they're referring to the whole country. Paul is doing that here when he talks about the present Jerusalem he's talking about the nation of Israel and the Jewish people the physical Jewish people the physical descendants of Abraham.

He says they are connected to this first woman Hagar. now in verse 26 Paul begins to talk about the second woman but he doesn't name her in the same way.

He goes in verse 26 and simply says but the Jerusalem from above is free. But clearly this second woman that he's referring to is Sarah.

Paul tells us she is another Jerusalem. He says she is Jerusalem from above and he goes on to say she is our mother. And by our he means all those who put their faith in Jesus Christ.

So what we see the apostle Paul doing is he's talking about two covenants. He's talking about two people. Those who practice Judaism living under the old covenant of Moses as a means for salvation and those who practice biblical Christianity those who are living under the new covenant which Christ initiated by his blood and putting faith in Christ for salvation.

[26 : 09] Those are the two people that he's talking about. Listen to how deceased British pastor and theologian John Stott describes it talking about these two covenants.

He writes the old Mosaic covenant was based on law but the new Christian covenant foreshadowed through Abraham and foretold through Jeremiah is based on promises.

In the law God laid the responsibility on men and said thou shalt not thou shalt not but in the promise God keeps the responsibility himself and says I will I will brothers and sisters this is the heart of the issue between the law and the gospel it is the heart of the issue between the old covenant and the new covenant under the old covenant the responsibility to bring salvation is by keeping it perfectly and it is upon those who are living under it those who are looking to it for salvation keep it perfectly and you do it with your own ability with your own strength but under the new covenant of grace the responsibility to bring salvation is on God himself who graciously chooses to save men and women who could never keep the Old

Testament law and he says I will I will I will and he brings it to pass and it's very similar the picture of this is what he does with Abraham in Genesis 15 when Abraham is asleep and God makes a covenant all by himself and he says I will fulfill this covenant this is so important to grasp that salvation under the new covenant is what God does and what God binds himself to doing and he does it because only he can do it in Isaiah 54 verse 1 which the apostle Paul quotes in verse 27 he quotes this verse from Isaiah 54 verse 1 when he says 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 what Paul is doing here is he is pointing to the supernatural birth of believers that did not come about because of fleshly activity our spiritual birth is salvation by grace and it is as miraculous as a woman who can't have children who conceives and as

Paul says here for the children of the desolate one this one who could not have children will be more than those of the one who has a husband the physical nation of Israel which Paul refers to in verse 25 is this present Jerusalem and the physical descendants that are part of that nation Abraham's physical descendants but he's talking about this Jerusalem from above he says these ones those who are born into that Jerusalem they're born into that miraculously that's the new birth that's being born again and he says it's far more of them than those in physical present Israel and that's how he's using this quotation that he takes from the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 54 verse 1 the only way that it's possible for the one who is barren to have children is

[30 : 10] God and grace and divine intervention and then even so more than the one who has a husband and this nation and this Jerusalem from above is comprised of people of every tribe and nation and town and it would include some who are physically descended from Abraham it includes some of them and those in the nation of Israel the only way that they would come to true salvation is not by holding on to Abraham as the Jews did saying we have Abraham as our father no it is by

putting faith in the Lord Jesus Christ so this Jerusalem from above is comprised of many different nations including the nation of Israel that's the interpretation Paul is talking about the law and grace seeking salvation through the law produces slavery seeking salvation through faith brings grace that's how Paul interprets these two women and the sons they bore let's now consider third and finally how Paul applies this story applying the story the apostle

Paul doesn't leave it up to us to apply this story he doesn't leave it up to the Galatians he does so for them he does so for us notice what he writes in verse 28 now you brothers like Isaac are children of the promise we're not like Ishmael born according to the flesh so when we ask the question why was Ishmael born to Hagar how was it that Hagar had Ishmael the answer Abraham didn't need divine intervention when we ask the question though why and how was Isaac born to Sarah the answer is not Abraham because when Abraham and Sarah were by themselves for a hundred years they couldn't have children it was only because

God said I'm going to do something so the answer the right answer for that why Sarah was able to give birth to Isaac is God God and his divine intervention without that supernatural intervention there would be no Isaac listen to how the writer to the Hebrews describes it in Hebrews 11:11 it says by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive even when she was past the age here's why since she considered him faithful who had promised brothers and sisters this is true for our salvation as well like it was for Isaac we received the new birth by the promise of grace not by the works of the flesh but by putting our trust in him who promises to save all who come to him that is how salvation comes to us that's the way

Isaac came to Sarah and that's the way salvation comes to sinners by looking to the one who promised and trusting in him to bring to pass what only he can bring to pass in verse 29 the apostle Paul reminds us of a reality that those who are born according to the spirit faiths they're persecuted by those who are born of the flesh just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac you know it's surprising to me and maybe it shouldn't be surprising that most of the persecution that I receive and I do receive some persecution for this I'm told that to believe that God saves by grace alone through faith alone and Christ alone it has nothing to do with the works that you do when I say to people that a true believer who has put his faith in

Jesus Christ will never be lost they say you're a heretic they say that's not true they say all sorts of other things which I would not say here that's what scripture says that's what scripture teaches that salvation is by grace from start to finish we don't start by grace and finish by works we start by grace and be finished by grace and so and it's not the persecution that others face in other countries and I can have that every moment every day they're just words really but interestingly to sinners who know they're sinners they listen and they get it because some of them have tried to do the right thing and they've tried to turn over a new leaf and they've tried to obey God and they've tried to change their lives and they realize they can't do it and then when they hear they can't do it but God can do it through

[36 : 03] Jesus Christ they welcome that and they hear me gladly listen to how John Stott explains it he writes the persecution of the true church of Christian believers who trace their spiritual descent from Abraham is not always by the world who are strangers unrelated to us but by our half brothers religious people the nominal church it has always been so he writes another way that Paul applies this story is that in the same way the slave woman and her son were cast out Paul's application to the Galatians is this you likewise are to cast out and separate or separate from yourselves these Judaizers who are tormenting you and trying to bring you under the law that's the application of what he is saying to them he's saying you're tolerating these

Judaizers in your midst in the same way that Sarah and her son Ishmael were cast out you must cast out or you must separate yourself from these ones who are tormenting you these ones who are making mockery of the gospel of grace that you have received you are to cast them out for you to separate yourself from them another application of what Paul is saying to them is he's calling the Galatians to stop cozying up to the law because they will not inherit the promise of salvation by trying to hold on to Christ while they're trying to hold on to the law you can't do both if you are saying I believe the gospel and then you are actively trying to live in a way believing that how you live will determine your salvation you are trying to hold on to the law and the gospel at the same time

Paul says no you need to cast out the law because it cannot save you it will enslave you it will get you believing that what you do can save you and you will work and work and you will work your

fingers to the bone and never attain salvation only attain more and more and more bondage and so Paul is saying to them you can't cozy up to the law it will never cause you to inherit the promise of salvation as long as you hold on to the law while you are believing in Christ then Paul concludes in verse 31 and he does so in a slightly different way he says the same thing that he says in verse 28 but he says it slightly differently and so he says so brothers we're not children of the slave but of the free woman in verse 28 he says now you brothers like Isaac are children of promise he says it the opposite way now in verse 31 so brothers we are not children of the slave but of the free woman when we take into account everyone who approaches

God for salvation we all fall into one of two categories we're either in the category with Ishmael or we're either in the category of Isaac there is a thinking there is a belief there is a conviction in the mind of every single person as he or she approaches God for salvation there's something he or she is trusting in there's something he or she is resting in placing his or her faith in and that puts us in the category of one of these two men either Ishmael who's of the flesh who believes what I can do will save me or Isaac who's of the spirit who absolutely knows there's nothing I can do to affect my salvation

God must intervene he must intervene dramatically and miraculously if I will be saved John Stott again brilliantly describes it this way he writes the religion of Ishmael is a religion of nature of what man can do himself without special intervention of God but the religion of Isaac is a religion of grace of what God has done and does a religion of divine initiative and divine intervention for Isaac was born supernaturally through a divine promise and this is what Christianity is not a natural religion but a supernatural one of the one of you are aware that your relationship with God through Jesus [42 : 05] Christ is based on grace and what God has done and what God does through Jesus Christ that God is the one who took divine initiative that you were not the one who thought about God or found God but God was the one who before the foundations of the world thought about you and chose and elected to save you and then in his mercy in time acted upon you and brought you to himself and that he promised what I start I will finish the good work I've begun in you I will complete it to the day of Jesus Christ I've started it I will complete it or are you more aware and think that it's based on what you do or what you don't do the good that you do or the bad that you don't do it's based on human effort like the birth of

Ishmael John Stott continues he writes the Ishmaels of this world trust in themselves that they are righteous the Isaacs only trust in God through Jesus Christ the Ishmaels are in bondage because this is what self-reliance always leads to the Isaacs enjoy freedom because it is through faith in Christ that men are set free so we must seek to be like Isaac not Ishmael we must put our trust in God through Jesus Christ for only in Christ can we inherit the promises receive the grace and enjoy the freedom of God and so this morning

I close with this question as it relates to salvation are you an Ishmael trusting in what you can do do and don't do or are you an Isaac who's totally aware my salvation is absolutely from God totally from God from start to finish and it is by grace let's pray