



## **Galatians 4:21-31**

### **Children of the Promise**

**January 15, 2023**

We are going to Galatians 4:21 today.

**Galatians 5:1** says **“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”**

This verse, which we will look at more next week, might be the theme verse of Galatians. Beginning in a couple of weeks we will see in Galatians how knowing Jesus gives us freedom to walk in the Spirit, to build one another up and restore one another, to avoid the works of the flesh that enslave us like jealousy, fits on anger, envy and drunkenness. And freedom of having desires that are so changed that we can do what we truly now want to do, which is bear the fruit of the Spirit like love, joy, peace, and patience.

Jesus frees us from slavery to sin.

And we are currently wrapping up the last few passages where the other side of the coin is presented: Jesus frees us from the pressure of having to work our way to God. He frees us both the ceremonial law of the Old Testament, and from feeling like we earn our place with God through obedience of any law or moral code.

He isn't throwing out the role of obedience in our lives. He is throwing out some obedience (obedience to things that are shadows of Jesus like temple ceremonies, dietary restrictions, and feast days,) but he is changing our view of moral obedience.

Moral commands like the ten commandments are reflections of the holiness of God, so those didn't change when Jesus came, the obligation to keep them didn't go away. But Paul is making clear that obedience never got us to God, it never got us to where we could make ourselves acceptable to a holy God.

He is emphasizing this, and reemphasizing it because this church in Galatia was being swayed by people called the Judaizers, people who believed that it is only through becoming fully Jewish that a person could come to God. They were glad that Gentiles were coming to faith in God as well as the Jews, but they were convinced that to really

be saved, to really be fully Christian they had to learn to fully adhere to all of the ceremonial laws (including circumcision, diet restrictions, and special holidays). They were relatively good moral people, but they were missing the big E on the eye chart, what it takes to know God.

In what's essentially an expanded version of Galatians, the book of Romans, Paul is talking about his Jewish brothers who are coming to Jesus but thinking the need to work to establish their own righteousness.

**Romans 10:1-3 "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."**

The reason we choose religious rule keeping and personal achievement over Jesus is that we are ignorant of the righteousness of God.

To think that you can obey enough to make yourself holy and acceptable to God, to think that with enough zeal and effort, to think that giving 110% of your effort at making yourself holy, will get you to a place of acceptability before God is to be ignorant of the righteousness of God and of what God requires of us.

God is perfectly Holy.

God doesn't have a spot of sin or shame within Him, and His call on our lives is to be as holy as He is. If we know how holy He is, we will recognize that we're going to need more than our efforts to get us there.

And to think that our religious rule-keeping can get us to God is to be totally ignorant of who God is and how holy He is. In some ways it is disrespectful to God.

If you walk up to the base of Mount Everest in your shorts and tee shirt and say, "I'm going to climb this mountain," and then you proceed to climb it on a whim without equipment and preparation, it's because you don't understand the mountain you're climbing.

It's the tallest mountain in the world, and it has claimed many lives. There are perils from avalanches and crevasses and weather that changes suddenly and rock falls and oxygen

deprivation. To climb it requires the right equipment and the right training. To climb it without those things is to not respect the mountain you're climbing.

And to say, "I can be right with God by my efforts" is to underestimate how holy He is.

*Arthur Pink writes, "Because God is holy, acceptance with Him on the ground of creature doings is utterly impossible. A fallen creature could sooner create a world than produce that which would meet the approval of infinite Purity. Can darkness dwell with Light? Can the Immaculate One take pleasure in "filthy rags" (Isa 64:6)? The best that sinful man brings forth is defiled. A corrupt tree cannot bear good fruit. God would deny Himself, vilify His perfections, were He to account as righteous and holy that which is not so in itself..."*

It's good to work to obey God. It is good to examine ourselves and turn from sin. It's good to practice spiritual disciplines like Bible reading and prayer. And all of those endeavors are given new life by our faith in Christ.

But none of those things is even the first step in getting us acceptable to God. They are not even part of what gets us forgiven, gets us into heaven, or makes us Christians.

The Heidelberg Catechism says this is

*"Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment-seat of God, must be perfect throughout and wholly conformable to the divine law; but even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin."*

If we want an acceptable righteousness, we need Christ.

**Romans 10: 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.**

Realizing how perfect God is sends us toward trusting Christ as savior and away from trusting ourselves. To know God is to know we can't get to Him on our own.

The main point of God's commands is to drive you to Jesus. To drive you to realize you could never measure up and need a Savior from outside yourself. And to cause you to see in Jesus the gracious savior that you need.

The message of God's law is not, "God helps those that help themselves."

The message of the law is, "You can't possibly help yourself enough to please God."

Realizing how perfect God is sends us toward trusting Christ as savior and away from trusting ourselves. So Paul opens up another line of argument against our legalistic hearts:

**Galatians 4:21 Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?**

This is important. In telling us not to be legalistic, Paul is not telling us to throw out any of the Bible, he is not telling us to change the narrative of the Old Testament, he is not calling us to throw out any obedience to what God truly requires. He is calling us to be more biblical - look at what the Bible really teaches.

**Galatians 4:22 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. 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.**

These are generally considered to be the hardest verses to grasp in all of Galatians, some even say in all of Paul's writings. So we will have to do some work here to dig out the diamonds.

To drive home his point about freedom from the law, he uses as an allegory or illustration the story of the two sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac.

And in that story in Genesis 12, God called the old man Abraham. He's about 80 and his wife is 70, and God says "I'm going to make a great nation out of you and bless the world through you. So leave your father's house." So, without any kids in their old age, he and Sarah leave the land of Ur and begin a journey into Canaan.

Years pass, and they don't have children. God made a promise, it wasn't being fulfilled, so they said, "We have to DO something to fulfill the promise." So in Genesis 15, Abraham marries an additional wife, Hagar the slave woman, and she has a child named Ishmael.

Notice what they're doing here - they're adding their works to the promise of God. They're relying on their own plan. They're doing something to make God's promise come true.

So more years pass, Abraham is now 99, she's 89, and the Lord comes and says, "This time next year, Sarah is going to have a child." Sarah is just inside the tent and she hears the whole thing and starts laughing.

**Genesis 18:13–15 [13] The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' [14] Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." [15] But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."**

And sure enough, without any scheming, without any planning, without them adding anything to the promise of God, Isaac is born the next year.

So Isaac is born without their adding any of their own schemes to the promises of God.

**Galatians 4:23 "But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise."**

Ishmael was born by works - by doing, by self-reliance. Isaac was born by God's grace. And Ishmael's descendants become the Arabs while Isaac's fathers Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel, and whose children become the promised children.

So Paul says, "Right, now think of how these two births compare to two covenants."

**Galatians 4:24 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.**

This is where it gets hard.

He talks about these two covenants. A covenant is the same word as Testament. In our Bibles we have an Old and New Testament, which are the descriptions of the Old and New Covenant.

And a covenant is (John Stott's definition) "is a solemn agreement between God and men by which He makes them his people and promises to be their God." God established the Old Covenant through Moses when he gave the law on mount Sinai, and the New Covenant through Jesus.

The Old Covenant was based on laws, while the new covenant was based on promises.

In the Old Covenant, under the law, God laid the responsibility on people and said "do this," under the New Covenant, God took on Himself all the responsibility and did all that needed to be done.

So Paul here is comparing Hagar, the slave woman, who bears Ishmael, a child through works, to the Old Covenant God made at Mt. Sinai.

What is he trying to say here?

This was the scene at Mt. Sinal when Moses went up on the mountain to get the commandments from God and bring them down to the people:

**Exodus 19:[1-8] On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. [2] They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, [3] while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: [4] 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. [5] Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; [6] and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." [7] So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. [8] All the**

**people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.**

Notice how this covenant works. God says, “Obey perfectly and you will be my kingdom, my people.” And the people say “We will do all of these things.” That was the deal - perfect God, perfect obedience, and they could stay in the land, stay in God’s favor.

But that’s not what you’re supposed to do when you hear God’s law - you’re not supposed to say “All these things we will do.” You’re supposed to say, “This is really good, really right, God is really holy. And yes, I will strive to obey, but this is Everest.”

If my obedience gets me there, I’m dead. I’m gonna need grace, a savior, some other way.

But these guys weren’t there yet. Their response to the law was self-reliance. We will do all these things.

Just like Abraham and Sarah responded with self-reliance by producing Ishmael through Hagar, the Jews responded to the law through self-reliance. And the rest of the OT is the story of them failing to do these things and having their lives fall apart as a result.

So Galatians 4:25 again:

**Galatians 4:25-26 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.**

The story of Hagar is just like the story of Mt. Sinai - stories of failed attempts at relying on yourself to get yourself a fulfillment of God’s promises.

And it’s fitting that Mt. Sinai is in Arabia - that’s the area that Ishmael’s descendants populated. They are people that God loves and promised to care for, but their origin story was self-reliance. And right in the middle of their territory is the Mountain of Self Reliance, Mt. Sinai.

And then, here is his shot at the Judaizers: he says Mt. Sinai, law from God, do all these things to get to God, worship at the temple, offer the sacrifices, follow the feast days, it’s all part of the Old Covenant reality that is represented by present day Jerusalem.

And Paul says, “That system is done - we belong to Jerusalem above, and Jerusalem above is free.”

We have a new covenant, we are the people of God through Jesus. We don't have a physical temple here or a physical capital city here, because that was all part of the Old Covenant that was replaced with the new.

**Hebrews 13:12-14 “[12] So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. [13] Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. [14] For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”**

Jesus kept that Old Covenant perfectly. He came and gave God perfect obedience. He says “All these things I will do,” he does them, and then takes on Himself our punishment on the cross, and gives us His record of perfect obedience. Because Jesus became that temple, we don't need to follow the old shadows of Jesus because the real one has come.

So Paul is saying, “Don't go back to the shadows and echoes and forms. You have the real thing in Jesus. The new covenant is not just an upgraded version of “all these things we will do.” It is GOOD NEWS - Jesus has done it. Jesus helps those who could never help themselves up the mountain of God's holiness. We don't contribute to that at all.

And then Paul brings in another Old Testament illustration, he quotes from Isaiah 54 and says:

**Galatians 4:27-28 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.”  
28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.**

The “Rejoice O barren one” was a verse originally aimed at the Jews in Captivity. They had been carried away by Babylon, and it was predicted that when they came back to their land they'd be more numerous than before.



And Paul says, “That’s going on now!” The New Covenant is the coming out of captivity of God’s people to a people more numerous, made up of Jews and Gentiles, more diverse, made of people from all nations, to a people whose capital city is not Jerusalem in Israel but Jerusalem above.

Why would you go back to making Christianity an Old Covenant religion?

Seeing this replacement of the Old Covenant with the new, seeing this story line of the Bible makes sense of some of the stranger things that happened in the ministry of Jesus.

Matthew 21:18–22

**Matthew 21:[18] In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. [19] And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once.**

This happened in early spring. And fig trees bear fruit in summer. So why did Jesus get so mad at the fig tree for not having fruit when fig trees don’t have fruit?

He wasn’t mad at the tree. He was mad at Old Covenant Israel. He is on the temple mount, about to be crucified because the Old Covenant system, that was supposed to bear fruit in leading people to Jesus, was about to have him killed. And the fig tree often represented the nation of Israel.<sup>1</sup> And the nation wasn’t bearing fruit, so Jesus said it wouldn’t bear fruit - out with the old, in with the new.

**Matthew 21:[20] When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” [21] And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. [22] And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”**

This passage doesn’t make sense outside of the whole scope of what God is doing in history.

Jesus says, “If you have faith and don’t doubt, you can cast this mountain into the sea.”

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<sup>1</sup> Hosea 9:10, Jeremiah 24, Jeremiah 8:13

But who has done that? Who, with their faith, has moved mountains?

And how often have we had some kind of metaphorical mountain in our lives and we read this verse and we think that if I just believe harder I can get rid of every problem. So every problem in our lives, whether its sickness or a relational struggle, the things we are praying about, we also now have to feel guilty about because if I just believed more I could throw mountains into the sea.

And this is often used as a prosperity Gospel proof text - if we just have enough faith we can remove any of our problems from our lives.

But Jesus doesn't say if you have enough faith you can move mountains in general, or anything that seems like a mountain in your life. He says "THIS mountain," and they were on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

If you have faith in Jesus, that whole mountain is thrown into the sea - you no longer need all the temple-related rules and regulations. A New Covenant has come, where by faith, you get the righteousness of Jesus to present before the Father. You don't need any more atoning for sin with sacrifice, you need faith in Jesus. Your faith throws that whole Old Covenant system, centered on the temple mount, into the sea.

We certainly pray asking God for big and miraculous things. He's generous and kind and does amazing things as we pray. But this passage is not saying "believe harder and you can do anything you want." It's better news- he is throwing the Temple Mount with all of its requirements, with all the "do this to live" into the sea.

And four days after cursing the fig tree, Jesus went to the cross. And while he hung there, the veil in the temple that separated God from people was ripped down the middle. The mountain quaked and the rocks split. And when he rose from the dead 3 days later, He came bringing a new and better covenant, where we become God's people by faith in the perfect and finished work of Jesus, not through "all these things we will do."

So maybe you're experiencing guilt because a problem won't go away no matter how hard you believe it will, and you wonder, "Is my faith real?" I've really been trying hard to believe that my parents would change, or my kid would walk with the Lord, or the cancer treatments would work this time - and no matter how sure I am that it will happen now,

the changes aren't coming. Don't add guilt for to your suffering - you're not guilty for that. Yes, keep praying and casting your cares on the Lord. But don't believe that every intractable problem in your life is just because you didn't believe enough.

Jesus here is saying that faith in Him gives us all the good works that the temple system required, because Jesus did them all. All the sacrifice it required was taken care of as He was sacrificed on that cross. The blood has been spilled.

All the guilt and shame we carry can be lifted - not through more religious observance, not through repeating the same prayer enough times, not through our sacrifices, not through our giving back and serving. It's lifted by faith in Jesus - if you have faith, you can say to that mountain - the mountain of works righteousness, the temple mountain - get out of here. For freedom Christ has set us free.

The insecurities, the wondering if I am good enough for God, the wondering, "Might I have sinned and not known it and need to atone," the treadmill of "do this and you shall live," the daily effort to save face and look the part and pretend to be without failings and maintain a Christian image like a whitewashed tombs full of dead mens bones on the inside. That all corresponds to present day Jerusalem - it all comes from law-based thinking.

Law says do this and live.

Gospel says believe and live.

And Paul keeps saying, "Don't go back." Don't miss the plot of the whole biblical story, the whole redemption story. Live like free people, children of the promise, like Isaac.

Hard work is good and can achieve a lot - we should be hard workers. Obedience is good and the Christian life is a life of obedience. Giving and serving is required of us and a source of tremendous joy in our lives. But none of those things get us to Him - and if we rely on those things to save us, we will miss Him.

So can I just invite you in? Judgmental and graceless Christians need to hear this warning not to go back. Pharisees scrutinizing one another need to run to Christ. IF you have renounced and repented of your sin and confessed it to Jesus, trusting in his cross with just a mustard seed of faith, you are going back to the Old Covenant if you forever feel guilty, forever ashamed, forever defiled, forever unworthy.

That old system had constant sacrifices to atone for sin, and it was never enough - another sheep was gonna get it next year to pay for sins. Day after day, animal after animal, priestly ritual after priestly ritual - all there as a reminder that we need atonement and forgiveness, but never sufficient to fully give it. That was the Old Covenant.

But Jesus came and from the cross cried, "It is finished." He atoned. He was finally, once for all who would believe sacrificed. It's enough. So Christian, you can boldly approach your father in prayer and not think these other people must have better access than you.

You can rest, knowing God is good and kind, and good and kind to you - not just those other people who are better at keeping up with the works.

You can risk having real joy, because life doesn't have to be a waiting for the other Divine shoe to drop, you can expect more of his kindness and blessing.

And for those who are not Christians. Christianity does uphold a moral code of right and wrong that we believe corresponds with the righteousness of God. God said don't lie, for example, because he is true.

And it says we have all broken that code and sinned. And God is a just judge - we will stand before him when we die and give an account, and a just punishment is doled out for our sin. There is wrath and hell for violating his infinite perfect holiness.

But what a lot of people believe is that Christians think that the way back in, the way to God, is by trying to keep the code now. By saying "All these things we will do" and then keeping that resolution.

But Jesus came to throw that kind of thinking into the sea. We can't scale everest. Jesus kept the code, went to the cross in our place, died, and rose. And we can receive that as a free gift if we will turn to Him (from self, from sin, from self-righteousness) and believe, or put our trust in Him.

Yes, the way out with God was through our sin, but the way in is not through our righteousness, but through Jesus.

Paul closes this section with this final encouragement:

**Galatians 4:29-31 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. 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.” 31 So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.**

He says there has always been and always be persecution, or opposition, from those who would justify themselves by works. Because of pride, because of jealousy, because of disbelief that anything is free.

Because Jesus is a threat. Same reason the Pharisees persecuted Jesus, religious Pharisees today who think they are good enough, superior, have earned their place with God, who sleep better thinking, “At least I didn’t do that...” want to persecute those who have grace for free.

But don’t be like them. Don’t be a Pharisee. Live free. And don’t go back to self-reliance to get you to God - it will always bring ruin. Don’t go back to relying on the things you add to Jesus to make you a real or elite Christian.

Trust in Christ and Christ alone.

So how do we break up that deadly self-reliance?

- 1) Allow the commands to do their real work and show us our need.
- 2) Read scripture and re-read scripture to remind ourselves of the plot: our need, His grace, and His mercy.
- 3) Meditate on the cross, where we see the trustworthiness of God, the love of God, and the sufficiency of God’s grace.
- 4) Participate in the covenant renewal ceremony - the Lord’s supper.

**1 Corinthians 11:17-32 [17] But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. [18] For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, [19] for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. [20] When you come**

together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. [21] For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. [22] What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

[23] For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, [24] and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." [25] In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." [26] For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

[27] Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. [28] Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29] For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. [30] That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [31] But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. [32] But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

### **Prayer of Confession**

### **Assurance of Pardon**

**Ephesians 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God"**

### **Sermon Discussion Questions:**

- 1) Discuss the differences between the Old and New Covenants.
- 2) What is the reason for the Lord's Supper for New Covenant believers?
- 3) Why is trying to contribute our works to our salvation so deadly?
- 4) How do you break religious self-reliance without giving in to sin and disobedience?
- 5) Does the message of free grace make us more sinful in our behavior?

