

MESSAGE FOR SEPTEMBER 6, 2026, FROM GALATIANS 4:21-5:1

This morning, we continue in our study of Paul's letter to the believers in Galatia. In our text for this morning, Paul continues in his attempts to persuade the Galatian believers that **the bible teaching they had received from the Jewish false teachers or Judaizers was not only wrong, it was also, spiritually toxic.** The false teachers seem to have *almost* persuaded these new believers that the way to be right with God—the way to be acceptable to God was by believing in Jesus but **they also added the requirement** of living in obedience to Jewish law. As he has done so many times in this letter, **Paul again works to dissuade these believers of that lie.** In our text for today, he uses a particularly interesting but also a challenging argument to make this point. He sets the table for his treatment in verse 21 that Scott read earlier.

There, he writes, “²¹ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?” The false teachers had wrongly been claiming that a believer had to live “under the law” to be pleasing, acceptable or right with God. To live under the law simply means that **you are relying on your obedience to the law to make you acceptable to God.** This is what much of the Judaism of Paul's day taught. This is what Paul, as a Pharisee, had himself believed until Jesus revealed to him that **being right with God was NOT dependent on obeying the law, but only on placing your faith in Jesus.** In this section of the letter, Paul tells these believers in Galatia that **the false teachers were wrong in teaching that the Old Testament requires that a person can be made right with God by living “under the law.”**

Paul implies in verse 21 that **their desire to live under the law was misguided because they had not “listened to the law.”** They were just plain wrong about what the Old Testament taught. Paul uses the word “law” here in verse 21 to mean that they had not listened to **the entire Old Testament.** We know he's using “law” for the entire Old Testament because when he implies they had not listened to the law, he supports that by referring NOT to a specific law they were misinterpreting. Instead, **Paul cites as “the law” they were not listening to,** first, a story in Genesis and later, a citation from the prophet Isaiah.

So, contrary to the Judaizers, Paul implies that **if they were truly listening to the law, the Galatians would never reasonably conclude that they must live under the law.** Paul cites as proof of that, some important spiritual truths from this story in Genesis. Here, **Paul reveals what the Old Testament genuinely teaches about the law.** That is—that living under the law enslaves people and to support that, he cites a very familiar story from Genesis chapters 16-20. This is the story of Abraham and Sarah and the ordeal surrounding the miraculous birth of their son Isaac.

Genesis reveals that Abraham actually had two sons. You'll recall that **God had promised Abraham a son, an heir in his old age.** But before God gave Abraham that son (who we know would be Isaac), his elderly wife Sarah became impatient waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled. So, rather than trust in *God and his timing* to fulfill his promise, in her unbelief, Sarah suggested that Abraham take her own slave woman, Hagar, as a second wife and produce an heir through her.

Hagar was a Gentile who was not part of this first Jewish family. Abraham foolishly agreed to this faithless plan and a son named Ishmael was born to him and Hagar. **In spite of Abraham and Sarah's unbelief in relying in purely human means rather than God's power to miraculously fulfill his promise and conceive a son through Sarah, God remained faithful to them.** In the end, by God's power, Sarah—long after her childbearing years are over, miraculously conceives the

son that God had promised to Abraham. They named this “child of promise,” Isaac. Isaac was brought into God’s covenant people while the Gentile, Hagar and her son Ishmael, were cast out; though God blessed them as they lived apart from God’s people.

That is the story that provides the content for Paul’s argument here in chapter four. With that to give us some context, Paul begins his summary of this story in verse 22. He says, “²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman.” “The slave woman” is obviously Hagar and “the free woman” is Sarah. Here, Paul uses this then 2000-year-old story to **illustrate spiritual truths about the law and its inadequacy to save anyone**.

He begins his argument from the story in verse 23, saying, “²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the *flesh*, while the son of the free woman was born through *promise*.” When Paul says, “the son of the slave was born according to the *flesh*,” the phrase “according to the *flesh*” here simply means—**by ordinary human means apart from faith or God’s divine intervention**. Abraham fathered Ishmael by Sarah’s slave Hagar in the same way we all got here—through a normal biological reproductive process. But that’s not ALL this phrase “according to the *flesh*” means here.

Hagar and her son, Ishmael, who was conceived “according to the *flesh*” represents **Abraham and Sarah’s foolish and unbelieving attempt to provide an heir for Abraham *outside of God’s plan***. The stress here is on the fact that there was **no faith in God required for Ishmael to be conceived**. Abraham and Sarah were relying ONLY on natural, human reproductive means.

By contrast, when Paul says later in verse 23 that the son of “the free woman was born through *promise*” he’s referring to God’s plan to miraculously give Abraham an heir through Sarah. That is, **through the promise God made to Abraham years earlier that he and Sarah would have a son**. This son, Isaac, would require the power of God to be conceived supernaturally.

In verse 24, Paul begins *his interpretation* of this story by saying, “Now this may be interpreted allegorically...” This is where this text begins to get interesting and challenging and this will require your full attention and focus. This reference to allegory is Paul’s way of saying that **he is about to treat or interpret this biblical story differently than the well-established norm**. This is the *only time* in his 13 letters that Paul does this. That is, that **he qualifies how he is going to handle a story by announcing that he is interpreting it through the lens of allegory**.

By what Paul means by allegory, one commentator is helpful when he says, “*Paul’s claim to be giving an “allegorical” interpretation means simply that he is using one set of realities (the narrative of Sarah and Hagar) to speak of another set of realities to speak of ... other things.*”¹ Specifically, he’s using the story of Sarah and Hagar to illustrate **the difference between trusting God and his promise (Sarah and Isaac), which points to salvation by faith, and trying to do God’s will in your own efforts (Hagar and Ishmael) which points to living under the law.**

Nowhere else does Paul indicate that he is taking an Old Testament historical narrative and will **use something other than the plain sense of the story** to arrive at its interpretation. **Here’s an illustration of what I mean by that from Paul’s treatment of this story**. No one **reading the Exodus story where God gives the law to Moses on Mount Sinai** would naturally come to the conclusion *“this is just like the story of Hagar the slave woman.”*

¹ Moo, D. J. (2013). *Galatians* (pp. 292-315). Baker Academic, digital version.

No one would think of that because **that is not the plain meaning of the story and we should always be looking for the plain meaning of the text.** In order to make that unexpected connection, you have to bring something from outside the text to bear on this story. Yet, with this “allegorical” way of interpreting the bible that Paul employs here, he actually makes that connection here. Another illustration of this is when most people read the account of the Exodus and Mount Sinai, they tend to see it as **a story of liberation from slavery in Egypt.** But Paul here, as he interprets this story through this allegorical lens, claims that **the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai was actually enslaving to Israel.**

Now, it’s important for us to remember that **Paul’s interpretation here, though outside the normal way we read the bible, is NOT at ALL irrational or arbitrary.** This is not the apostle Paul acting like the person in a group bible study reading a passage and saying, “*I feel this means this*” when there is NO CONNECTION between what they feel and what is on the sacred page. **Paul is drawing a very real connection between the events he cites here from Genesis and the truth he’s been establishing in this letter about the law and its toxic influence on a believer when we try to be right with God through the law.**

Paul is choosing to make his point in a way that is not a direct, straight-line argument and **we’ll have to work a bit harder to see what he is saying.** The question is—**WHY does Paul choose to use this *less than direct* kind of argument to make his point here** when nowhere else does he do that in the New Testament? I hope we’ll see the answer to that question as we move on.

His allegory begins when he says in verse 24, “these women are [represent] 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.” The question here is **how is it that Paul sees Hagar representing the law that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai AND the Jerusalem of Paul’s day? What’s the connection Paul is making here between Hagar, Mount Sinai and Jerusalem?**

The connection is **slavery or enslavement.** Paul is saying that Hagar and her status as a slave point forward 500 years to **Israel under the law covenant Moses made with God on Mt. Sinai.** The slave woman Hagar also points forward 2000 years to **Jerusalem in Paul’s day.** That’s what Paul means when he says about Hagar that, “she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.” The phrase “present Jerusalem” represents those Jews (like the Judaizers and many others) who wrongly believed that **the law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai** provides a way for a person to be right or righteous before God.

As we’ve seen before, Paul argues that **this is NOT the reason God gave the law**—to make people righteous through obedience to it. HE says elsewhere that NO ONE can keep the requirement of the law which is PERFECT OBEDIENCE. Therefore, as we saw back in 3:10, “all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse”—God’s curse.

THAT’S the reality we see repeatedly played out in the Old Testament as it regards Israel. No one can objectively read the Old Testament and come away thinking that **because the Jews lived under the Law of Moses, that liberated them to follow God and be a great blessing to him.** The historical events tell a very different tale. That is, that **the Jews who believed they were pleasing or acceptable to God through their law-keeping lived in constant rebellion against God and his**

law. Their rebellion against God ultimately led to God exiling them from the land of Israel, under the curse of the Mosaic law covenant.

Paul is using this allegory to try to shock these Galatians by showing them **that Old Testament Jews and the Jews of his present day (represented by Jerusalem and the Judaizers) were living like Hagar the slave woman because of the law.** Even though the Jews identified themselves as the children of Abraham through the patriarch Isaac, the truth is, because they lived “under the law,” **their spiritual “mother” is NOT Sarah, it’s Hagar, the slave woman. Because they were living under the law, they were living NOT like descendants of Isaac, but of Ishmael who was cast out from God’s people.**

As we’ve said before, this understanding of **the enslaving nature of the law** is directly at odds with the teaching of Judaism at this time which understood that **the law brought liberation and freedom.**² The Judaizers couldn’t have been more mistaken about the nature and function of the law. Paul writes in Second Corinthians 3:6, “6 ...For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” **The law kills you because its purpose is not to make you righteous but to show you your sin and your devastating need for a Savior.** It never liberated anyone.

Living under the law—trying to *please God or be acceptable to God or be righteous before God by obeying the law or by some way trusting in your performance* is spiritually toxic because it enslaves you and ultimately kills you. It never liberates. Now that Paul has drawn the connection between Hagar, the law on Mt. Sinai and the Jews of Paul’s day, he turns to reveal to the Galatians **who he still considers as believers and he reveals where believers are seen in this Genesis story.**

He says in verse 26, “26 But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is *our* mother. 27 For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” 28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.”

We saw in verse 25 that Paul refers to “the present Jerusalem” but here in verse 26, he speaks of “the Jerusalem above” that is free and is the “mother” of all believers. What is “the Jerusalem above?” In the Revelation, the apostle John calls this “the new Jerusalem” and in Hebrews 12, the author calls this “the heavenly Jerusalem.” There we read, “22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.”

This is **the eternal dwelling place—the heavenly city** that awaits believers. The New Testament teaches that **this future heavenly kingdom has certain elements within it that, *for the church*, are also part of this present world.** That is, *some* of the blessings that will be perfected in this future age in the heavenly Jerusalem, are ALREADY present in this church age. For instance, We have **the gift of the Holy Spirit** now. We have **forgiveness of sins** now. We have **authority over Satan** now. We’re **adopted children of God** now ...and many others. But we are NOT YET perfected in this present age. We still get sick. We sin and battle against the dark forces of the world, the flesh and the devil, and we frequently fail.

² Schreiner, ECNT, commentary on Galatians 4:25.

Revelation 21 reveals that after Jesus returns, **this heavenly Jerusalem will be brought to earth as the permanent dwelling place of believers**. Another of the blessings we in the church already have now in this life that is actually part of “the Jerusalem above” is the one Paul intends here. That is, **our freedom from the enslavement from the law in Christ**. That is, **by virtue of Christ’s death on the cross, we can live in liberty over the spiritual enslavement that comes from living under law**. Believers don’t live under law but **under grace** through the gospel. Because of Jesus, we don’t have to live under **the tyranny of the law with its power to increase and intensify sin and temptation**. We don’t have to live under the condemnation that the law brings.

In Christ, **believers are part of the new age of the Spirit**. Paul is using this allegory to reveal **that the Jews who believe they can be righteous by the law—who live under the law—they are living in the old age under the law before Jesus when the law held people captive to sin**. They are living like the slave Hagar rather than the spiritually free Sarah who was blessed with a son through God’s promise. But what does he mean in verse 25 when Paul says, ²⁶ But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is *our* mother?”

Having the new Jerusalem as our mother means at least two things. First, the heavenly Jerusalem is our mother in the sense that ***it is the place of our spiritual origin***. We know that our **biological** origin is found in our biological mothers. On a human level, we originated from our mother’s womb. But spiritually speaking, our home is NOT in this world—**our citizenship is in heaven and it’s in that sense that this “Jerusalem above” is our mother**. But it’s also our mother **in a second sense based on the parallel Paul draws between the church, Sarah, and Isaac**. Isaac’s mother was Sarah and that came about through supernatural means. God had to do a series of miracles for the elderly Sarah to conceive, carry a child and give birth.

The “Jerusalem above” is the mother of the church in the sense that ***our existence is supernatural and otherworldly***. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT? **The church is NOT fundamentally a religious organization. It’s a living, vital organism pulsating with the very life of God**. Because our home is in heaven, we are NOT of this world or the natural things here. **When we were born again, we were spiritually birthed into the heavenly realms through the miracle of regeneration by the Holy Spirit**.

Paul is saying that Jews (like the Judaizers) trying to be righteous through the law **are of this world—this present Jerusalem**. **No miracle is required or even possible when you are seeking to be justified before God through your own efforts to keep the law**. But for believers from the heavenly Jerusalem, **their faith in Christ enables them to live on earth like new, heavenly creations**. Paul supports that claim by citing a verse from Isaiah 54. He says, ²⁷ For it is written, “*Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.*”

Ok, think this through. Paul is drawing parallels between the story in Genesis he’s cited and this prophecy from Isaiah. When Isaiah speaks of the “barren one” who “is not in labor” but who is told to rejoice, he’s talking about **Sarah**. She was barren, unable to conceive, but with God’s intervention, did ultimately and joyously have a child, Isaac. The women “who has a husband” here in Isaiah is **Hagar** because Abraham was her husband. **He’s telling Sarah and by extension, the church, REJOICE. REJOICE that you are barren! That is, that you can do nothing to make yourself acceptable to God! REJOICE that your righteousness is in Christ by faith and not works! Are you rejoicing in that?!**

In verse 28, Paul turns very personally to the Galatians and says to them, “²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.” His point here is to affirm that **believers like the Galatians have been supernaturally born as children of Abraham like Isaac was—and that happened by faith in a promise**. Believers have come into being NOT by the enslavement of living under the enslaving curse of the law but are children **by faith in the promises of the gospel**.

In verse 29, we see another reason Paul applies this Genesis story to the Galatians' situation. **He uses it to reveal what the Judaizers were really doing to them.** He continues in verse 29 “²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.” He's saying that, just as Hagar's son, Ishmael, persecuted and bullied Isaac the child of promise (as the Genesis story reveals), these false teachers are behaving just like their spiritual father Ishmael and persecuting the children of Isaac, the church.

Paul desperately wants these Galatian believers to see that **when you are wooing someone to be circumcised in order to be acceptable to God, you are spiritually abusing them. You are persecuting them.** Paul is NOT being melodramatic here. When you are trying to influence someone to believe a lie that will keep you him of heaven like, *“You must follow the law in order to be saved”* **you are potentially doing eternally profound harm to that person**, and their blood will be on your hands.

Similarly, if, in our silence to others about the gospel, we're allowing some unbeliever in our sphere of influence to wrongly assume that they're just fine with God because they're a nice person, we're allowing potentially grave spiritual harm to come to that person because **we're not doing anything to remove that person from a path that leads only to hell.** We're not loving that person when we fail to confront him/her about the lies they're believing. **We are, in effect, holding their hand as they stroll into hell.** Paul is saying that **these false teachers in Galatia were in the place of persecutors and are the spiritual descendants of Ishmael who persecuted Isaac.**

Paul reminds the churches in Galatia, these descendants of Isaac, what the Scripture calls them to do with spiritual persecutors in verse 30, “³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman” He's telling these Galatians who were being persecuted by the lying false teachers to **remember what was done with the persecutor, Ishmael.** He was cast out. This is a powerful call for these Galatians to cast out of their lives, out of their church, **the lies of these false teachers. They must violently expel the lies of the false teachers.**

Likewise, when we drift, as believers inevitably do at times, into living like we accept the lie that our status with God is dependent on our performance, **we must, with violence, cast out those enslaving lies and quickly return to the freedom of the gospel of grace through faith.**

Paul's conclusion of his treatment of the Genesis story is simply “³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.” Paul wants the Galatians to identify with **Sarah and Isaac** who was born supernaturally through God's miraculous work and NOT **Hagar the slave and her son Ishmael**, who was cast out. To go back under the law once you have trusted in Christ is living like a slave, Hagar when you could be living like a free person, Sarah.

Paul gives one final application in 5:1 where he says, “¹For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and **do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**” As believers, we must know and appreciate that **one of the reasons Jesus went to the cross was to liberate a race of slaves to**

sin from its controlling and condemning power. Jesus says in John 8:34, “...Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” Sin causes us to do things that are opposed to our new nature.

Sin robs us of our joy—it ruptures our fellowship with God and other believers. Sin causes us to live under the wretched shadow of guilt and shame, and it makes us feel dirty before God. It causes us to doubt God’s love and blunts our assurance of salvation. Sin enslaves. And **here’s the point.** When a liberated believer begins to seek their acceptance with God through their performance, Paul compares that to placing a heavy wooden yoke across your shoulders —**a weighty burden that will control the way you live because the law enslaves people to sin.**

Again, one reason Jesus went to the cross and the gospel of Christ crucified is preached is to set people free from the enslaving nature of sin. If you’re here today and you’ve not trusted in Christ, please do that **so that you will be set free from the guilt you have before a holy God and the enslaving power of your sin.** Christ died to set us free, and Paul concludes with the command, “stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” He’s saying, “*because you have been set free, stand firm in that freedom and do not submit to the yoke of the law that enslaves people to sin.*”

This is our application from this passage as well. That is, ***believers must stand firm and not allow ourselves to suffer under the enslaving power of sin that comes from living under the law.*** And the enslaving influence the Galatians were allowing into their lives were **the lies of these false teachers that they must live under the law in order to be acceptable to Christ.**

My experience as a pastor correlates precisely with what Paul is saying here. That is, there is a strong correlation between **believers who seem helplessly trapped in some sin(s) and believers who are living under the law as if God’s acceptance of them is dependent on their spiritual performance.** In my counseling ministry, I have given two books away about 150 times. The two books are Jerry Bridges’ “*Transforming Grace*” which is on order for our library, and J.D. Greear’s book in our library simply called “*Gospel.*”

The reason I’ve given away so many copies of those books is because of **this strong relationship between living under the law and being enslaved to sin.** That is, **living under the law instead of grace always brings this enslavement to sin and those books do a great job of reminding us of what it is to live under God’s grace.** Now, without a doubt, that is only ONE cause of someone being enslaved to sin, but in my experience, it is the most frequent cause. When we base God’s love and acceptance of us on our performance and that may result in finding ourselves enslaved in many and various ways.

It may be enslavement to sexual lust or pornography. It may be enslavement to **bitterness and/or unrighteous anger.** It may be to **self-pity** or any number of sins, but so often, **when they repent of trying to please God by their works and return to trusting in the gospel, the joy floods back into their lives.** And those people often find that the enslavement to sin is gone and the sin is much easier to resist **when they are resisting from the position of being accepted by God through gospel and not trying to earn it through the law.** May God give us the grace to live by grace and not law for his glory and our joy.