

Galatians 4:21-31

Who does Paul appeal to (v. 21)? Those who want to return to the old system of legalism -- living under law-keeping as the basis for their relationship with God. They had not yet submitted to the bondage of the Law, but they were headed in that direction. Paul desperately wanted to stop them and turn them back to a life under grace.

There are many advantages to being under the law as your principle of relating to God. First, you always have the outward certainty of a list of rules to keep. Second, you can compliment yourself because you keep the rules better than others do. Finally, you can take the credit for your own salvation, because you earned it by keeping the list of rules.

Under the law the focus is on *my performance*. Under the grace of God, the focus is on *who Jesus is and what He has done* that makes us right before Him. Under the law we find fig leaves to cover our nakedness. Under the grace of God, we receive the covering won through the sacrifice that God provides.

"Some men hold God's law like a rod *in terrorem*, over Christians, and say, 'If you sin you will be punished with this.' It is not so. The law is *under* a Christian; it is for him to walk on, to be his guide, his rule, his pattern... Law is the road which guides us, not the rod which drives us, nor the spirit which actuates us." (Spurgeon)

It is important that Paul refer back to the Scriptures again and again. The legalists among the Galatians presented themselves as the "back to the Bible" bunch. Yet Paul will show that they were not handling the Old Testament Scriptures correctly, and he will show that a true understanding of the Law of Moses will support the true gospel he preaches.

How does Paul make his point about being under the Law (v. 22)? He returned to Abraham, the founder of Judaism, using the illustration of Abraham's two sons, to convince his readers that they were in danger of joining the wrong branch of Abraham's family.¹

How does Paul contrast the two sons of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael (vv. 22-23)? First, Ishmael's mother was a slave, but Isaac's mother was "free." These conditions affected the status of their sons in Abraham's household. Secondly, Ishmael was born naturally requiring no miracle and no promise of God, but Isaac was born supernaturally, in fulfillment of God's promise.²

The first contrast Paul draws between real Christianity and legalism is the contrast between *freedom* and *slavery*. One son of Abraham was born by a *freewoman*, and one was born by a *bondwoman*. The real Christian life is marked by *freedom*.

The second contrast Paul draws between Christianity and legalism is the contrast between a work done by God's *promised miracle* and a work done by the *flesh*. The real Christian life is connected to *God's promised miracle* and not the flesh.

The legalistic Judaizers who troubled the Galatians protested that they were children of Abraham, and therefore blessed. Paul will admit they are children of Abraham, but they forget that Abraham had two sons.

What further illustration does Paul use (vv. 24-25)? He shows the contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion representing the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

Hagar represents the Mosaic Covenant, made at Mount Sinai. Her descendants represent the Israelites who lived in bondage under the Mosaic Law. Just as Hagar brought forth a slave, so does the Law. To link unbelieving Israelites with Hagar rather than with Sarah, with Ishmael rather than Isaac, was a stinging portrayal. Sarah represents the Abrahamic Covenant, and her descendants are free, living under the promise, living under grace.

The covenant given at Mount Sinai produced slavery/bondage. Since it is all about what we must do for God to be accepted by Him, it doesn't set us free. It puts us on a perpetual treadmill of having to prove ourselves and earn our way before God. This covenant corresponds to earthly Jerusalem which was the capital of religious Judaism. This was the way most Jewish people in Paul's day tried to be right with God – by trusting in their ability to please God by keeping the law.

Besides the earthly Jerusalem, what is the other Jerusalem Paul describes (v. 26)? The capital city of those who are justified by faith is the heavenly Jerusalem. ("*Jerusalem that is above*"), the final destiny of departed believers, which is free. The heavenly Jerusalem is the mother of all believers, both Jew and Gentile.³

Every Christian through the centuries belongs to this new covenant, the covenant of the heavenly Jerusalem. And every birth under this covenant is a miracle, like the fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah 54:1. Everyone is born (again) because of a miracle by God.

The New Covenant brings freedom – it is free. It is free because it recognizes that Jesus paid the price, and we don't have to pay it ourselves.

What is the meaning of Isaiah's prediction (v. 27)? The original quotation from Isaiah 54:1 predicted that Israel, which was comparatively barren before the Babylonian exile, would enjoy numerous children in the future. Paul applied this prophecy to Sarah. She would have greater blessing and more children in the future than in the past, children of the promises, namely, all true believers including Christians.⁴ The abundance and glory of the New Covenant is shown by the fact that it would soon have *many more* followers than the Old Covenant.

In vv. 28-31, Paul applies the contrasts between the two covenants.

1. **What is the first practical application (v. 28)?** Christians are similar to Isaac, in that they experience a supernatural birth (by faith in Jesus Christ), and are part of the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation. Therefore they ("children of promise") should not live as enslaved sons. As Christians, we don't identify with Ishmael. We identify with Isaac, as children of a promise that was received by faith.
2. **What is the second practical application (v. 29)?** Legalists persecute those living in liberty. The legalists – represented by Ishmael – have always persecuted true Christianity, represented by Isaac; a condition which continues to this day as seen in Arab-Israel tensions. As we walk in the glory, in the freedom, in the miraculous power of this New Covenant, we should expect to be mistreated by those who don't. Those born of the flesh have always persecuted those born of the Spirit. With few exceptions, Paul's persecution came from the Jews, the people in bondage to the Law.
3. **What is the third practical application (v. 30)?** Christians should exclude ("get rid of") legalists from their midst, since legalists have no inheritance with the legitimate sons of God. Just as Abraham cast Ishmael out of his household, so the Galatians should cast the Judaizers out of the church. This does not mean church leaders should excommunicate all legalistic Christians. However, it would be wise (and Scriptural) to invite promoters of legalism to leave, especially if they do not change their teaching. Law and grace cannot coexist as principles for our Christian life. They represent different gospels which Paul warned about (1:8-9).

How does Paul summarize his argument (v. 31)? By reminding his readers of the very basic and drastic difference between himself and the Galatians, who were children of faith, and the Judaizers, who were children of the flesh. For Paul, one of the great issues in this conflict was *freedom*. He knew the bondage of trying to earn his own way before God, because he lived that way for decades. Now he knew the freedom of living as a son of God, free in Jesus Christ.

Paul's defense of salvation by faith alone (chapters 3—4) points out in the strongest terms the incompatibility of faith and works as methods of obtaining justification and sanctification. The Judaizers were trying to get the Galatians to submit to the Mosaic institutions to merit something from God. This approach is antithetic to grace, which acknowledges that people cannot merit God's favor and must simply trust in God to deliver what He has promised.⁵

¹ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Galatians, 2017 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), p. 62

² Ibid. p. 63

³ Believer's Bible Commentary, William MacDonald, 1995 Edition, (published by Thomas Nelson Publishers), p. 1889

⁴ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Galatians, 2017 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), p. 65

⁵ Ibid. p. 67