



Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Chapter 4, Verses 21-31

by Tim Kelley

Paul's letter to the Galatians contains a number of difficult passages that those who are unlearned twist to make them say what they want them to say and thus lead others away from the firm foundation of the Torah. Peter spoke of this in his second letter to the Galatians¹ -

^{ESV} **2 Peter 3:15** And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. ***There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction***, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. ***But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ***. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.

According to Peter, it's the unlearned who twist Paul's words around, but it's those who don't recognize the error that get led away by the deception. Peter's solution? Grow in grace and knowledge of Messiah Yeshua. We must come to understand who He died for, what He died for, and how He intends to bring His bride back into covenant with Him.

When we ended the last passage in Paul's letter, he seemed quite frustrated. It seemed that some of the non-Jews in the Galatian communities had either begun to turn back to the paganism they had recently come out of, or had decided to convert to Judaism. Why? Because of the pressure being put on them by the perpetrators of the "other gospel". But Paul hadn't given up on them. He went back to the beginning to help them understand how they had arrived at where they were.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:21** Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?

In spite of his efforts over the years, it seemed that some of the non-Jewish believers had decided, and in fact, were determined to follow the rabbinical Jewish practice of circumcision to officially become a part of the Jewish people. Apparently, they had determined it was better to convert to Judaism than to simply be confident in the fact that they too are sons of Abraham and are thus heirs to the promises.

We discussed a number of reasons why they might do this, but the primary reason would likely be that if they didn't convert, they would continue to be persecuted by the Jewish leaders in the congregations, and would eventually be kicked out of the synagogue. Like was shown in the last teaching in this series, being driven out of the synagogue would have required that they go back into the Roman cult religion or face death.

It's quite possible that this letter was not the first one Paul had sent to address this problem. In this verse, he used the word *thelo* (Strong's 2309) which can mean "desire", but also carries the emphatic meaning of "intend, resolved, determined". It would seem that the problem with the perpetrators had been going on for some time, but now the people were almost being forced to make a decision as to which way they would go, and Paul wasn't in favor of either of their choices.

"Under the law" is a term Paul had used three times so far (Gal. 3:23; 4:4; 4:5) where he showed that 1) those who were under guard by the law were actually being guarded by the law, that 2) Yeshua was born

¹ 1 Peter 1:1

“under the law”, and that He even redeemed those who were “under the law”. In each case the word “under” is the Greek word *hupo* (Strong's 5259). Being that Yeshua was born under the law would indicate that being “under the law” is not something to be frowned on - no more so than to be born “of the Holy Spirit”. And since we know that Paul continually supported the Torah, we can expect that when Paul used that phrase in this verse, he's not condemning the Torah, but is probably condemning the incorrect application of it.

Paul asked those who want to be under the law if they actually hear what the law is saying. The word for *hear* in this passage is *akouo* (Strong's 191) which implies hearing and considering what was said. It's the same word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *shema* as is “Hear O Israel . . .” (Deut. 6:4). Apparently, they did not truly understand the foundational truths of the Torah.

To help them understand, Paul presented an allegory – a midrash of the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Many who try to explain Paul's next few statements either mis-understand what an allegory is, or simply disregard the fact that those statements even were an allegory. So that we don't repeat that same mistake, it's important that we understand what an allegory truly is.

The Greek word for *allegory* is *allegoreo* (Strong's 238) and is used in only this one place in the scripture. Even though this is the only place the word is used in the Bible, it was a very commonly used literary device in the first century Greek, Roman, and even the Jewish cultures². According to Strong's, *allegory* simply means “to say something allegorically”. No real help there, but many online dictionaries provide a definition such as this -

“a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another.”³

Thus an allegory takes perceived facts and applies them to unrelated thoughts in order to make a concept more understandable. An example of allegory would be “the world must have come to an end; Johnny cleaned up his bedroom without being told!” This allegory leads the listener to believe that the likelihood that Johnny would clean his bedroom without being told is the same as the world coming to an end in the listener's lifetime.

It's important to understand that in an allegory there is no relationship between the things that are being compared. Thus Paul's clearly labeled allegory is not intended to imply that Torah = bondage and that the Torah must be cast away. Let's see what the allegory really teaches.

NKJ **Galatians 4:22-24** For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. ²³ But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴ which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar --

In the allegory we have five factual characters – Abraham, Sarah his wife, and Hagar - Sarah's bond maiden, and the sons – Ishmael and Isaac. Though there are five characters, the primary characters are Sarah and Hagar. Paul's allegory is built on these facts:

God made **promises** to Abraham that included **prophecies** for his **descendants**, yet Abraham had no children and he and Sarah were well advanced in years – she being well past the years of childbearing. As the years went by Abraham and Sarah lost hope in having a child and decided to obtain a descendant through Hagar. As the child grew, Abraham asked God that this son – Ishmael – could inherit the promises, but because he was not the child of promise, and was

² <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1256-allegorical-interpretation> under the heading “Philo”

³ Dictionary.com - <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/allegory>

instead born out of unbelief, God denied Abraham's request. By faith, Abraham and Sarah continued to try to have children and about a year later, Isaac, the son of promise, was born.

So let's organize these facts:

Facts:

| Sarah = freewoman

| Isaac = son of freewoman

| Isaac = born as a result of a promise

| Isaac = faith

| Hagar = bondwoman

| Ishmael = son of bondwoman

| Ishmael = born as a result of the Abraham's efforts

| Ishmael = works

Though we're not there yet, based on the scriptural text above we'll also see that allegorically:

| Sarah = Abrahamic Covenant

| Hagar = Sinaitic Covenant

The allegory begins by Paul saying "It is written that Abraham had two sons". That statement cannot be found in the Tnakh, yet it's clearly understood and it serves to indicate that Paul had begun the allegory – this being confirmed in verse 24. Paul laid out the facts that are outlined above, then began his comparison. He first made a connection between these two women and two covenants.

Vs. 24 – “. . . these are the two covenants:”

Most theologians interpret this to mean “New Covenant vs. Old Covenant”. There are a couple of reasons why they do this, one being that the King James Version interjects the word “the” into the passage even though most Bibles have marginal notes that indicate the word “the” is not found in the majority of Greek texts, and thus should not be there. The other reason is that many Christians fail to see the impact that the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15) and the Sinaitic Covenant (Exodus 19 - 23) have on Biblical prophecy. Paul is not talking about Old Covenant vs. New Covenant, but about the covenant made with Abraham vs. the one made with Israel at Mount Sinai. As we'll see, Paul was simply comparing these two covenants with the way by which the children of these two women, Sarah and Hagar, came to be born and how that impacted the inheritance.

It's important that we understand a couple of facts about these two covenants before proceeding. First, the covenant of the pieces (Abrahamic Covenant) was made between God and Abraham, but when it was made, Abraham was asleep, thus indicating that it was unconditional and God had the full responsibility for bringing it to pass. On the other hand, the covenant at Sinai was conditioned on both parties, God and Israel, living up to their part of the covenant. In that covenant God promised that Israel would be His special people and would be able to live in the “promised land” as long as they obeyed His Torah.

One more thought that's important to understand is that YHVH redeemed Israel as a result of the 200 year old covenant with Abraham, but before Israel entered into covenant at Mount Sinai. Thus – Torah obedience was not a requirement for Israel's redemption.

Paul then went on to say that in his allegory, the Mount Sinai covenant gave birth to bondage and is represented by Hagar.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:25-26** . . . for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children -- but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.

Continuing with the allegory . . . Hagar represented Mount Sinai, which in turn represented bondage, and bondage was, according to Paul, the state that 1st century Jerusalem was currently in. On the other hand,

the Jerusalem above – the “heavenly Jerusalem” was free, and we can assume it is represented by Sarah, who based on the facts, gave birth to Isaac as a result of faith.

Let's now compare the facts with the comparisons Paul has made -

Facts:

Sarah = freewoman
Isaac = son of freewoman
Isaac = born as a result of a promise
Isaac = the result of faith
Isaac = the heir

Hagar = bondwoman
Ishmael = son of bondwoman
Ishmael = born as a result of the Abraham's efforts
Ishmael = the result of a lack of faith
Ishmael = not the heir

Allegorical Comparisons:

Sarah = covenant with Abraham
Covenant with Abraham = freedom
Freedom = Heavenly Jerusalem

Hagar = covenant at Mt. Sinai (Torah)
Covenant at Sinai = bondage
Bondage = current day Jerusalem

At this point, it would be good to again consider the purpose of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul was dealing with the fact that there were those who had come to Galatia and had 'perverted' the gospel (Galatians 1:7) saying that a person had to be circumcised (i.e. – convert to Judaism) in order to be included in the inheritance promised to Abraham (i.e. – gain covenant status), something that is not stated in the Torah but is rather a perversion of a couple of Torah statutes, specifically Exodus 12:48. This perversion was a part of the oral traditions of first century Judaism.⁴

Though the allegory is not yet complete, if we consider the context of the book of Galatians, we'll see that what Paul is saying is that if a person tries to gain covenant status by his works (i.e. – the covenant at Mount Sinai) instead of the way Abraham did (i.e. – faith as shown in Gen. 15:6) then that person will remain in bondage because the Torah does not provide a way to gain covenant status but instead was given to people who already had covenant status. If a person understood that his redemption and covenant status was by faith, he would then understand that he was indeed an heir (Galatians 3:29). This is what Paul wanted the Galatian people to “shema” – to hear!

On the other hand, those who are willing to be circumcised (convert to Judaism) in order to claim covenant status are like Ishmael, who was born because of a lack of faith, and never did inherit the

Exodus 12:48 and the First Century Jewish People

In the first century, the Jewish people were the only 'visible' descendants of the Hebrew people. By that time, the northern tribes of Israel, Biblically known as “Israel” or “Ephraim” had been taken captive by the Assyrians and scattered throughout the known world. This was as a result of their proclivity to idolatry and the punishment defined in the Torah (Deut. 28:63-64) and spoken of by Daniel (Dan. 9:11). Along with the multitude of prophecies concerning the scattering, there were just as many that pertained to Israel's 'return' to God and His ways (Deut. 30:1-6).

Both Israel and Judah were eventually driven out of the land, but many of the Jewish people repented and many of them returned to the land just 70 years later, but Ephraim never returned in mass. Thus, by the first century the Jews considered themselves to be the sole representatives of the Hebrew people, and thus believed that Exodus 12:48 implied that the 'stranger' would have to adopt Judaism – even if that 'stranger' was a returning northern-tribe Israelite, who by definition was already a descendent of Abraham, thus having covenant status.

⁴ This author is not opposed to all oral traditions, but is opposed to any tradition that is raised to the level of Torah and thus circumvents, expands, or nullifies the Torah.

covenant. These people will simply be wrapped up in the bondage of oral Torah that at that time was imprisoning the inhabitants of 1st century Judaism.

Again – Israel was redeemed because of the covenant, not by her Torah observance –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 2:24-25** ²⁴ So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged *them*.

There were no works involved in Israel's redemption. God set His redemption in motion while they were still in Egypt - even before they took the lamb into their home and sacrificed it four days later. They were redeemed simply because of the covenant God made with Abraham, and went on to be free men and women because they had faith in the covenant. 'Works' did not come into the picture until they were well on their way to Mount Sinai. Israel was saved by grace, not by works. If their redemption had been dependant on Torah observance, they would have never left Egypt. But for those who may think I'm discounting the Torah, let me repeat what I've often said –

"Torah does not save or redeem you; it's what saved and redeemed people do".

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:27** For it is written: "Rejoice, O barren, *You* who do not bear! Break forth and shout, *You* who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband."

Paul continued his allegory by quoting out of the Septuagint a passage from Isaiah 54:1. This passage is clearly about the return of the northern ten tribes of Israel⁵, an event that was having a partial fulfillment within the Galatian communities. They were those Israelites, and Paul wanted them to know it. They, like Sarah, had been a barren people, unable to produce fruit, but now – because Messiah had come and had paid the penalty of their and their father's sins, they were able to return and to begin to bear fruit. On the other hand, Judah was like Hagar. She had born fruit, but was soon to be sent away and would thus cease to bear fruit.

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:28** Now we, brethren, as Isaac *was*, are children of promise.

This passage is somewhat confusing because of one word – "we". So far the allegory seems to imply that the non-Jewish Israelites are the ones who would allegorically be Isaac, but this passage says we, which in previous passages we've understood to mean "we Jews". There again, we have a conflict between the Greek texts, with the majority of texts using the pronoun "you". Thus the text should read like it does in the English Standard Version –

^{ESV} **Galatians 4:28** Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

This rendering is consistent with Paul's earlier statement that –

^{NKJ} **Galatians 3:29** And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise

Paul has again made it clear – the non-Jewish Galatians were being called because of the promise made to Abraham, and confirmed by the prophets. They were 'birthed' by faith⁶, and as such were just as much a part of the covenant as their Jewish brothers. Thus there was no need for them to convert to Judaism in order to be part of the covenant. But to explain what was currently happening to them by their Jewish brothers, Paul continued with the story of Isaac and Ishmael.

⁵ See Hosea 2:2; 9:11 as well as Hosea 14:4-6

⁶ Gal. 3:2

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:29-30** But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, even so *it is* now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman."

Did you notice what Paul said? The persecution of Isaac by his half-brother Ishmael was again going on in the Galatian community. The one born of flesh (which according to the allegory were the Jewish perpetrators of the "other gospel") was persecuting the one(s) born of the Spirit (i.e. – by promise).

The ancient story continued with Ishmael mocking Isaac.

^{NKJ} **Genesis 21:9-10** And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, *namely* with Isaac."

We don't know exactly what happened here, but it's apparent, Ishmael was causing enough problems for Isaac that Sarah and Abraham saw the need to send him and his mother away. In the same way, the perpetrators of the "other gospel" were causing a lot of problems for the 'sons of promise', the non-Jewish Israelites. As was mentioned last time, one of those problems was that their persecution of the non-Jews who had not followed their edict to convert to Judaism were being forced out of the congregation and back into the pagan Roman culture. This dabbling in paganism may have been the problem between Ishmael and Isaac.

The word translated *scoffing* in the Genesis passage is from the Hebrew word *tsachaq* (**צַחֵק** – Strong's 6711). It's used a couple of times in scripture to imply sexual relations. For example –

^{KJV} **Genesis 26:8** . . . behold, Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife.

^{NKJ} **Genesis 39:17** . . . "The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me".

It's also used to describe the activities surrounding the worship of the Golden Calf –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 32:6** Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

The Hebrew people could have very well been having sexual relations as part of their idolatrous worship of the golden calf. Thus whatever Ishmael was doing, it more than likely had something to do with idolatry.

Paul could have been making the same charge in regards to the perpetrators (see Gal. 4:17). Those 'born of the flesh' – the Jews – could have been hoping to drive 'those born of the spirit' – the non-Jewish Israelites - out of the synagogue back into paganism in order to claim the synagogue and the gospel message for themselves. Whatever was happening in Abraham's day, according to Paul, was happening in the first century as well.

I submit that it's also happening today. The Jews who control Messianic Judaism are not willing to accept non-Jewish Israel into the covenant. They want to claim the Jewish Messiah for themselves, as well as the Torah He represents. According to them, non-Jews may fellowship, but they have no part in, nor have they any need to observe the Torah and be a part of the covenant. And because the covenant is for "the Jews", the non Jews might as well continue in idolatry.

Paul declares what their end will be if they don't repent.

"Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman."

Those who attempt to secure redemption and covenant status by works, or who teach others to do so, will lose out on the inheritance.

Paul concludes his analogy, as well as his arguments, with this declaration -

^{NKJ} **Galatians 4:31** So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

Those who were (re)-turning to God and His ways were doing so because they had faith. Like Abraham, they had faith that God would be true to his word as found in the Torah and the prophets. The same Torah that prophesied of Israel's exile, also prophesied of their return, and the vehicle by which that return would be begin was Messiah Yeshua.

^{NKJ} **Luke 24:25-27** Then He said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ "Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" ²⁷ And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

To review what we've seen is this part of Galatians –

- Paul's allegory was not intended to equate Torah to bondage
 - It was to equate those who promote association by works (flesh) with Hagar, the bondwoman
- Torah – as pictured by Mount Sinai – becomes bondage if you use it to obtain covenant status
- If you believe covenant status is a byproduct of works (flesh), then you are a son of Hagar
- If you believe covenant status is by faith in the promise, then you are a son of Sarah
- The fate of those who promote covenant status by works (flesh) will suffer the fate of Ishmael.

Shalom Alecheim