



Galatians 4:21-5:1  
 Finding Freedom: Galatians  
 Christ Formed In You

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For those of us who have been Christians for many years, and for those who are newer to the faith or don't even know a whole lot about it, many people oftentimes perceive a lack of connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Too many people just don't realize how they are connected...how Jesus even fulfills the Old Testament "Law" so that by faith we can live into and experience the promises of God – from both the Old Testament and the New. This is one reason we did "The Story" a few years ago, that walked through the Bible in 40 weeks or so, and helped us see how they connect together. Jesus himself says, **"Don't think that I have come to abolish the Law and Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them"** (Matthew 5:17) So there's a distinct connection between the Old Testament Law and Jesus and the rest of the New Testament all the way to today's Christians who continue to live by faith.

And today we see Paul reaching back into history, turning to Genesis once again to help the people in the region of Galatia to understand why they are completely off-base when they live by the law, rather than live by faith. As he does this, he reminds us how pertinent the Old Testament is to Jesus and the Christian faith. As we read this, we need to remember that: **Paul is making the point in this letter that those who live by the Law – doing Jewish religious "stuff" in order to achieve righteousness with God – that those people are not only negating the work of Jesus on the cross and negating their own faith** (which together make us righteous), **but they have become "slaves" to the law.** They became slaves to religious "gobbledygook" – that great theological term I introduced you to last week. So that's the underlying argument, and he appeals to the Old Testament here to help make the point. So, let's dive into today's reading, **Galatians 4:21-5:1. Followed by: Sermon Title Graphic Slide**

So...the events he recounts here come from Genesis 16, 17, 21. We may not all be familiar with this story and so Paul's recap of it might be confusing to us. If we know very little of the Old Testament and specifically to the events Paul refers to here, it might be particularly confusing. Interestingly, he

obviously felt that this recap is enough for his audience, even though they are not of Jewish background or decent, like he is. Apparently, he taught them about this enough that this little 1-2 verse synopsis is deemed sufficient (most of what he writes is not synopsis but explanation). But we're going to re-cap a little more.

**So: In Genesis 16 we see Sarah and Abraham rather desperate for children.** (Sarai and Abram at this point - their names change shortly after this, but since Paul calls him by his changed name we'll stay consistent with that)...so we've got Sarah and Abraham, and they're married to each other...and they are without children. And they were getting old – they're at least 50. Ok...now that I'm in my late 40's that doesn't seem that old...and actually, they were much older. Too old to bear children. So, she had Abraham do what most any wife would have her husband do in that social/cultural context: try and have a child through someone else. Understanding that this was not a crazy idea to them, even though it is to us, is a key thing to grasp. To us what she has him do just seems mind-boggling...it's inviting trouble into the household. And, by the way, some of those troubles – like jealousy – do come around for Sarah and Hagar, which Paul points out. Anyway, the point is: she had Abraham go to her slave girl, Hagar, in order for Hagar to bear a child for her.

Look, couples go to great lengths today to get pregnant if they're having troubles – in vitro fertilization, for example. Needless to say, those kinds of medical possibilities did not exist 4,000 years ago, which is roughly when they lived. So, she had him do what someone would do in their day, even if it's not what we would do. And Hagar conceives, gives birth to a son, and she names him Ishmael.

**Then the impossible happened: God says that a child will be born to Abraham through Sarah.** As the quote goes in Princess Bride, “Inconceivable!” But it is conceivable! Because, with God, all things are possible. And so Sarah, who was then *not* in her 50's, or 60's or 70's or 80's but over 90 years old, *does* conceive, and bore the promised son and he was named Isaac.

Paul makes the point that Ishmael was conceived much more ordinarily and “naturally” in the sense that Hagar was young enough to expect that sexual relations would likely lead to pregnancy. So, Paul writes in verse 23 that her pregnancy is “of the flesh.” **On the other hand, Sarah’s pregnancy with Isaac was a result of God’s intervention, because she was much too old to conceive.** And just to put all the cards out on the table here, not only was she 90, but Abraham was 100 or more. It’s not like he’s a prime age for getting her pregnant. It happens through the intervention of the Holy Spirit (not in the same way as Mary’s pregnancy with Joseph), as Paul writes in verse 29.

The point is: God’s hand is clearly at work here in the second birth. Isaac is a result of God’s “divine promise” as the end of verse 23 says. And that’s where we want to be, as well. We want to trust God and step out in faith, seeing amazing things happen that are only explained by the hand of God and then living into God’s promises.

Paul then says that these things are to be taken figuratively...like an allegory. It doesn’t mean that Paul didn’t consider this to be actual history. Sometimes we think an allegory as a fictional story that teaches some lesson to apply in real life. Paul certainly did not see this as *that* kind of allegory. He sees a spiritual lesson...a spiritual truth...that is embodied in these *historical* events.

**So: Paul is highlighting for the Galatians that these two women are representative of the two covenants.** Remember – we have the covenant of faith and the covenant of Law. The Covenant of faith came first and lasted longer than the covenant of law – it’s the covenant we are in through faith in Jesus; but the covenant of law was given as an intermediary to the Jewish people. It was never intended to replace the covenant of faith. The Galatians are falling into “law” and Paul is trying to get them back to living by faith...living out that covenant specifically through faith in Jesus. So these women are a picture of the two covenants.

A key part of this is that Sarah was a free woman and Hagar a slave. As we’ve seen, one of the main themes throughout this letter is that by succumbing to these religious law practices, the Galatians are becoming

slaves to these things, rather than living in the freedom that Christ brings. There's a strong contrast throughout the letter between "slave" and "free" and it's all about our spiritual condition.

So, dramatic contrasts shine through the allegory. Hagar is a slave, Sarah is free. Two covenants flow from them. **Hagar represents the covenant of law and corresponds to the "present city" (earthly) of Jerusalem" (verse 25).** Paul saw that present, earthly Jerusalem as the center of a religion of bondage where God was shut up in the Temple. Worship of God had ceased to be spiritual worship and had become all about observance of religious law. Those who participate in such a religion, whether they in fact trace their ancestry to Ishmael or not, are sons and daughters of Hagar. That is Paul's argument, and if he were here today, he would say it is still true.

**Sarah represents the covenant of promise and corresponds to the "Jerusalem that is above," our heavenly and eternal home.** Those who acknowledge Christ as Lord, who by faith receive His grace, claim the Jerusalem above. Like Isaac, the believing recipients of grace are the children of the promise, whether any trace of Isaac's blood flows through them or not. It is grace! It's *all* grace!

So, **Paul is saying that the true children of Abraham, the true inheritors of the promise, are *not* those whose are bound to the law, but those who have been set spiritually free by the grace of Jesus Christ.** That's the covenant you want to be in, he's saying...that's the covenant that comes by faith, that comes to fruition because of God's miraculous hand...not only as told through the lives of Abraham and Sarah, but particularly and finally in Jesus Christ. It all comes to fruition, completely and finally, in Jesus. *He's* done the work on the cross; *we* believe that and have faith. That faith brings us into the covenant of freedom...the covenant of grace that started way back in the Old Testament, in Genesis, 4,000 years ago. It's all connected.

He draws this to a close with these famous words in 5:1, **"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).** And while this is a word from God through Paul to the Galatian Christians, it is God's word to

us as well. This covenant of faith that began with Abraham stretches through Jesus and reaches into our lives today as well.

What does this mean for us? There are three things I want to highlight. **First, if you live by faith in Jesus, you're one of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. But we don't want that to end with us.** We want to pass the faith along and keep growing the family. How are you helping that to happen? Who are the spiritual descendants that you're helping to raise up? What decisions are you making now that will allow others to come after us and grow in faith here at Rose Hill and in other spheres of life? We talked about that quite a bit last week, so I'll leave it at that.

**Second, God calls us to step out in faith and trust Him.** And sometimes that means doing things that are out of the box, and look at things from a different angle than we might normally – like a pregnancy in old age. Let me utilize a story I came across to help with this. A guy named Steve Winger, from Lubbock, Texas, writes about his last college test—a final in a logic class known for its difficult exams (as far as I can tell this is a true story, but who knows for sure). He writes, “To help us on our test, the professor told us we could bring as much information to the exam as we could fit on a piece of notebook paper. Most students crammed as many facts as possible on their 8-1/2 x 11-inch sheet of paper. But one student walked into class, put a piece of notebook paper on the floor, and had a senior, advanced logic student stand on the paper.” The advanced logic student told him everything he needed to know. He was the only student to receive an “A.”<sup>1</sup>

First, just to be clear: If you're a student and you try that in class, don't blame me if the teacher fails you. But it's a genius idea – especially in a logic class. Second, and more to the point: so often we're locked in to a certain way of doing things – “Fit what you can on a sheet of paper” – and we all think of tiny font. Or, we're locked into “the way we've always done” things or the way we were told they had to be done (like the Galatian Christians who were told they had to do Jewish “stuff”) or a sin that has a firm grip on us...we're so centered on things like that, that it's like we're slaves to them. We can't conceive of anything else.

But God frees us from our old ways, habits, and sins; he frees us to step out in faith. He brings us into this covenant of faith that is built on His promise to do the work that's needed. We live by faith, even if that means trusting things that don't seem possible to us.

**Third, when we live by faith in Jesus, we live into freedom, because we're in relationship with the God who give us life and life eternal.** This flows out of the second point, where God calls us, and now we actually step out. It gets us away from the things that hold us back, and brings us into the freedom He offers. Where in your life do you need to experience a little more of God's freedom? In other words: Where is a little less of "you" and the things you're enslaved to needed, and instead more of Jesus? Perhaps it's in regards to judging others, or pride, lust, greed, selfishness. Maybe it's something at work or school...maybe it's at home with a spouse or a child or a parent...maybe it's in a relationship here at church, like in your small group or class or something else.

Maybe you've mistaken lethargy and slothfulness for "faith" and the idea that "God will take care of it." It's an easy trap to fall into, believing that "If God's "got this," and it's in His will to for something to happen, then I don't need to do anything." It's a dangerous mentality for us to fall into in our individual faith, just as it is for us collectively as a church. God "had" Abraham and Sarah and their future...and their legacy through their descendants. They had faith about that. But Abraham and Sarah still had to do their husband and wife thing. ☺ They weren't passive; they were participants in what God was doing.

**So: where is God calling you to live into your freedom and to step out in faith?** Paul says to "stand firm" here in 5:1, but that doesn't mean we don't step out and trust God. Quite the opposite: our firm foundation on Jesus gives us the freedom to freely live for him. Let's live out the freedom we have in Christ because of our faith in Him; Let's step out in faith even if it seems different or is out of the box; and let's live for Jesus in such a way that we too, like Abraham and Sarah, would have spiritual descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Let's pray...Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/29985/steve-winger-from-lubbock-texas-writes-about-by-shernichols>