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The Letter to the Galatians—Fall 2013 Shared Ministry Study

Session 4 (Galatians 4:1-31)—October 1, 2013

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## Galatians 4:1-7—Children of the Living God

Paul ended the third chapter of Galatians saying that because of Christ, Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus alike are “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:29). He is going to flesh out the picture of Christians as *children* now, but not just as children of Abraham—Paul talks about those who belong to Christ as children of God. But he is still dealing with the question of “Why then the law?” In other words, *if I’ve been made a child of God as a gift of grace through faith in Christ, then why did God even bother to give the Law in the first place?* Paul returns to the image of a child in a family. Children, as long as they are minors, do not have possession of all that they will inherit. They are *trustees* until they come of age, until the *right time*. When that time comes, they will fully receive all that is promised to them, but in the mean time, their inheritance and their own care are overseen by a slave in the household who acts as a steward of it. Paul says the same thing about each of us. He has already said (in Gal. 3:24) that for those of Jewish background the Mosaic Law was like their “disciplinarian”/(Greek *paidagogue*), the slave in the household that oversaw the raising of the children. Now he says that the Gentiles, too, had lived under the rule of the non-existent gods of their pagan former lives—they had been “enslaved,” like minors in a household waiting to come of age. But then the *right time* came, Paul says. And “when the fullness of time had come,” God sent Jesus, as one born *under* the power of the law as well (that is, born an ordinary Jewish child), so that all of us who bear the weight of the law would be “redeemed” (redemption is a technical term for buying someone out of slavery). And because we have been redeemed, Paul says, we are no longer *slaves*, no matter what background we came from, Gentile or Jewish, but rather have been adopted as *children*. Paul gives as evidence of our adoption the fact that we can call on God as “Abba,” (Aramaic for “Father,” much as Jesus did in his own prayer life and in the Lord’s prayer), and if we are *children* then we are *heirs* of all God has given.

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## Galatians 4:8-11—Why Turn Back?

For Paul it’s a simple question: *once you have found—or been found—by love that is real, why would you keep going back to the old dead-ends and fakers?* That’s really how he sees the Galatian Christians as they are being led away from the message of grace to accept the Jesus-Plus-Law-Keeping message the new teachers have brought. They used to be enslaved to false gods in their old pagan lives, bringing offerings, sacrifices, and acts of devotion to try and appease angry gods like Zeus, Ares, Apollo, and the rest of the old pantheons. And now Paul says that if they accept the belief that they have to *do* something (circumcision, keeping kosher, following other ceremonial rules of the Mosaic Law), even if they are the rules of Judaism, they are falling for another dead-end. They would be making a false god out of the Law itself, so that it ends up being regarded like one more sales-pitch-offering-false-god (Paul calls them the “elemental spirits of the universe” here and back in 4:3). Rather than seeing the Law as something God had given *for a time* until the coming of Christ, the Galatians are in danger of submitting themselves to it like it really has the power to give them life. Paul says they are at risk of leaving behind the real thing.

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- Paul’s argument in 4:6-7 makes the case that you know you are someone’s child if you are able to call on that someone as your father (or mother). When it comes to belonging in God’s family, what does that look like? How do you know?
- Paul seems to be saying that whether it is the religious-requirements of other gods or believing you have to earn the love of the Biblical God through religious requirements, *both* are dead ends. What do you think of that conclusion?

## Galatians 4:12-20—Wounds from a Friend

There’s a line from the Proverbs that says, “faithful are the wounds from a friend.” In other words, when someone who really cares about you tells you something that is difficult to hear, it is really an act of love for them to bring the truth to you. Paul has had to say some pretty strong things to the Galatians, and they certainly can’t have been easy to hear (*like, “Who has bewitched you?” or “I am astonished that you are leaving the faith so quickly!”*), but he reminds them here in this next section that all of it comes from a place of deep and sincere love for the Galatian Christians. He recalls with them how they had been so gracious to him when he first came and brought them the Gospel. Apparently there had been some kind of physical ailment that was plaguing Paul, and he even seems to think (v. 14) that it was severe enough that it might have turned the Galatians off from welcoming Paul. But they didn’t—they had been kind and gracious, and shown genuine care for Paul, so much that he believe they “would have torn out your eyes and given them to me” if he had needed it. What Paul *can’t* understand now is that despite such close friendship in the past, the Galatians are now turning from what they had heard from Paul and are looking for someone else to give them a supposed “gospel.” He warns them about the ways these new teachers are flattering them: “They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them” (v. 17). In other words, these new teachers seem to be showering an awful lot of attention on the Galatians, but it is really so that they can teach them (wrongly Paul says) that the Gentile-Christian Galatians are not acceptable to God as they are, but have to become like the new teachers—namely, that they have to keep the Jewish laws first in order to be acceptable. Paul is upset about that, not only because it is a violation of the Gospel he brought them, but because he just plain *cares* about the Galatians, and doesn’t want to seem hurt and misled because someone new has blown into town and started flattering them. Paul finally then talks about his relationship to the Galatians like an expectant *mother*: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...” he says. In other words, Paul wants to see the Galatians come back to the Gospel and become reflections of Christ.

- Is there the danger of people falling away from the real Good News because someone else flatters them away? What responsibility does this put on us as fellow Christians to look out for each other?
- What could it look like for “Christ to be formed” in us?

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## + Galatians 4:21-31—It's Like The Wizard Of Oz

Preachers try (and Paul is a preacher, whatever else he is) to get their message across in whatever ways it will take to help people “get it.” Paul is no different. We have seen him make arguments from the Galatians’ lived experience, arguments from secular civil law, examples from the Law of Moses, and arguments appealing to friendship. And now he is going to try one more approach that requires some careful understanding. Paul is going to take a story from Genesis—the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, from Genesis 16—and he is going to ‘read’ it as an *allegory*. Allegories are sometimes difficult to interpret, because they present a story and then load other meanings into all the characters and events, and sometimes it is hard to follow who is who, or what details at the story-level are really there because they mean something at a symbolic-level. Take, for example, the C.S. Lewis *Chronicles of Narnia*, which at one level are fantasy stories about children in a magical kingdom filled with talking animals and their lion king named Aslan. Lewis didn’t mean them to be *just* stories of fantasy, but at least in part, an allegory about Christ. So when Aslan the lion gives up his life to rescue Edmund, it isn’t just a plot twist, it is the story of Christ’s death on the cross for a sinful humanity. And when Aslan rises to life again, well you can guess what that represents, too.

Our culture is full of other allegories, stories that can be read on a surface level as being about *one* thing, but can also be read with another layer of depth to them. *The Wizard of Oz* looks like it is just about a girl who gets lost in a magical land with only a pair of ruby slippers to show for it, but the original novel was also an allegory about The United States’ political and monetary policy, where the “yellow brick road” was a symbol for being on the gold standard for its currency. *Alice in Wonderland* was the same—many of the fantastical characters and creatures in Lewis Carroll’s famous story were meant to be caricatures of figures in British public life at the time he wrote it, and there are all sorts of other puzzles and mathematical riddles hidden in the story, too. The famous *Pilgrim’s Progress* is another example, one which is rather on-the-nose, with characters like “Christian” who represents (surprise, surprise) Christians. Or there is also the famous story by George Orwell called *Animal Farm*, in which all the animals take over a farm and start to run it themselves in hopes of creating a freer life for themselves, only to end up with an even worse tyranny under the pigs. It wasn’t just a silly talking-animal story, but was really an allegory of the Bolshevik (Communist) Revolution in Russia—and once you know that, the story takes on a whole new power. What all of these things have in common is the way that the story can be read at multiple levels. When you are doing this with a work of fiction and the author *intends* their story to be read as an allegory, they can make all the details “fit” their multiple layers of meaning. What Paul does here is to take an *existing* story and read it *as* an allegory, which is a bit trickier since this is story about real people to which Paul is adding new meaning.

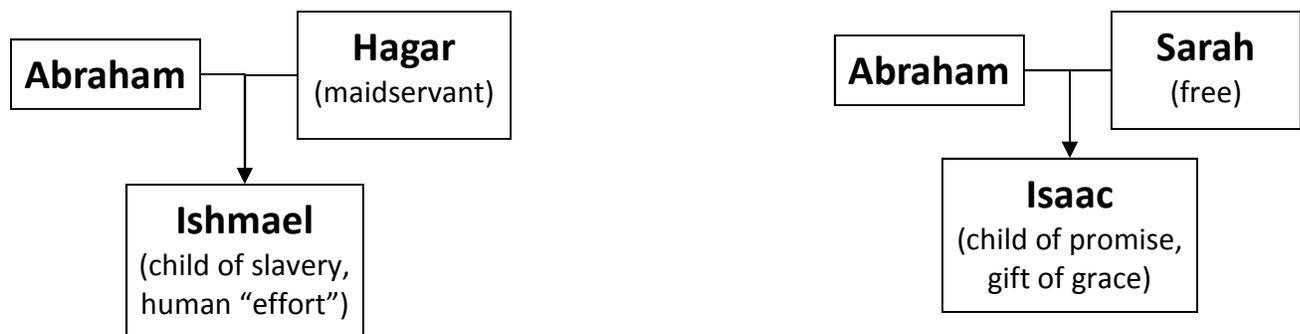
- Why would someone tell a story as an allegory? Why go to all that trouble?
- What are some things we should remember about how allegories “work” before we get into the details of Paul’s allegory in the rest of Galatians 4:21-31?

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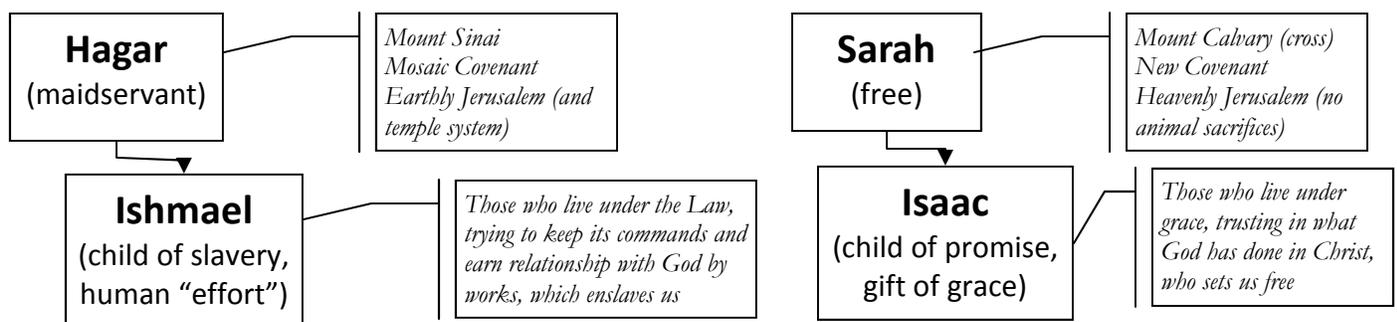
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## ✝ Galatians 4:21-31—Two Mothers, Two Sons

So here’s how the allegory works. First, Paul retraces the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Abraham was married to Sarah, but they had no children. And despite the promise that God would give them a child, Abraham and Sarah cook up an alternate plan for Abraham to have a child with Sarah’s maidservant Hagar, whom they could then claim as their own. The son born to Abraham and Hagar was Ishmael, and then eventually the son born to Abraham and Sarah was Isaac. Ishmael is the offspring of the “we-can’t-trust-God-let’s-do-this-ourselves” approach, and Isaac is the offspring of the “we-doubted-God-but-God-kept-his-promise-anyway-and-gave-us-a-son” approach. So the picture looks like this so far:



Now following in versus 24-31, Paul takes that story and that cast of characters and adds a layer of meaning to them. He is not necessarily saying that the Old Testament writers who first wrote down the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar would have understood this, but he is offering it as an object lesson, a way of making sense of how the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant in Christ could relate. Paul says that you can think of Hagar representing the covenant of Moses and the temple system in Jerusalem. Paul says that Sarah represents our heavenly home, what he calls “the Jerusalem above.” His point is again to say that the whole system of relating to God that arose out of the rules and commandments of Judaism were always meant to give way to the message of grace, the way of promise. And because we are children of the promise, Paul says, we are free from the demands of the Law.



- What does this allegory help us to see about how we relate to God?
- When would an image/story like this be *useful* in communicating the Gospel? When might it not?