

Galatians 4:21-31

Are You Really Free?

You've probably heard expressions like, "Everyone has his own interpretation of the Bible," or "There's two things people can never agree on: religion and politics."

These statements usually come in the context of a discussion on why the Bible can't be understood. The implication is that the Bible is written in such a way that it can be taken to mean anything and everything.

In Nehemiah chapter 8 there's an interesting passage dealing with the Scriptures. It says:

"Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded Israel.

So Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation. Then he read from it before the men and the women and those who could understand; "and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law."

Then the key is verse 8: *"So they read distinctly from the book in the law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading."*

The Bible is a book that was meant to be understood.

In I Timothy 4:13 an Apostle named Paul told a young pastor named Timothy how to preach. He said, *"Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation and to doctrine."*

In other words he told Timothy - read the Bible, explain the Bible, and then help people apply the Bible to their lives.

II Timothy 3:16 tells us that *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."*

The Bible is a God breathed book. It's God's message to the human race. Obviously, its a book that can be understood. If it couldn't then it would be a miserable failure.

As Paul said in I Corinthians 14 *For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle?*

If the Bible couldn't be understood, or could be made to say anything, who would listen to it?

Now, having said all of that, we still have to recognize something.

Anything that's written or spoken can be misunderstood. Think about how many times you've walked away from talking with someone thinking you knew exactly what they meant. Then you found out later you'd totally missed their point.

One writer put it this way: "Being written in a earthly language, the Bible of necessity partakes of a crucial linguistic weakness: that's the capacity for being misunderstood.

What we need to use is a legitimate method of interpretation to use in understanding the Bible correctly.

Paul Lee Tan, in his book "The Literal Method of Interpretation" writes: "The search for a methodical guide ended for Mormonism in those elusive plates of the angel Moroni, for Christian Science in its "Key to the Scriptures" and for 7th Day Adventism in the revelations of Mrs. Ellen G. White. In a larger sense, the search also ended for Roman Catholics, in the pronouncements of the general counsels, and for Orthodox Judaism in its rabbinical interpretations."

"It is hoped that the reader's search will end in the literal method of interpretation, the method which gets its interpretation direct from the writers of Scriptures."

Here at Faith Community Church, our method for interpreting the Bible is called the "historical-grammatical method." That means we take into account the historical setting of the writer and then find out word meanings, grammatical points, and context. Putting those factors together we're able to come up with a careful interpretation of the Scriptures.

The Bible can be understood. It is God speaking to man. And God meant for his message to be comprehended.

Now, when we talk about a literal interpretation of the Bible we don't mean that it doesn't contain figures of speech.

When Psalm 1:3 says, "*He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water,*" David used simile.

In Psalm 18:2 when he wrote, "*Jehovah is my rock and my fortress,*" he used metaphor.

When Luke wrote, "*a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed*" Luke used synecdoche.

In Isaiah 55:12 when the prophet says: "*the tree shall clap their hands*" He was using personification.

When Jesus said, "*behold a sower went out to sow*" in Matthew 13:3 He used a figure of speech known as parable.

We use figures of speech all the time. But because we use figures of speech doesn't mean that some hidden meaning has to be dug out from behind our words. We just use those things to illustrate and emphasize our point.

When we say something like, "It was raining cats and dogs," we mean it was coming down in buckets, which means it was really raining a lot. In that case we used figures of speech to emphasize the fact that it was actually raining very hard.

So the Bible is a book that can be taken literally. It's message can be discerned, it can be understood. Every passage of Scripture has only one correct interpretation. It can have many applications to different situations and circumstances.

That's what makes the Bible timeless, for all peoples of all cultures. But each passage has only one correct meaning.

We have to get to the meaning first and then we can get to the legitimate application.

Maybe you've heard this happen: people quote half a verse, out of context and then apply it to a situation when it didn't apply at all. That isn't a problem with the Bible. That's a problem with how somebody's handling the Bible.

The command is to *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."* II Tim. 2:15 *orthotomeo*: *ortho*= "straight" *temno*= "to cut"

All of that as a very important introduction to our passage for today.

Turn to Galatians 4 pg 1036

Galatians Chapter 4, verses 21- 31 has to be the most unique passage in all of the New Testament.

I love preaching through books of the Bible. I love seeing people grab onto the meaning of verses in their context.

But, there is a downside. I can't skip over the difficult parts. Galatians chapter 4 is one of those difficult parts.

In Galatians chapter 4 Paul uses a figure of speech called allegory. Paul is going to take an Old Testament event, and out of that, illustrate the truth that's the central theme of Galatians. That law and grace can't co-exist.

The thing that makes this so totally unique is that this is the only clear statement of the use of allegory in the Bible.

An allegory is usually a fictional story that teaches some hidden meaning, or a true story in which the apparent meaning doesn't make sense (and there is a hidden meaning behind it.)

In any case, in allegory the surface, or apparent, meaning isn't important. It's just a vehicle for the real hidden truth.

Some people want to try and interpret the Bible seeing every thing as an allegory.

I heard a very well known Bible teacher on the radio make the statement that there is no such thing as a simple narrative in the Scriptures. There is no such thing as an account of events taking place that doesn't have a spiritual meaning behind it.

For instance:

He says when Paul was shipwrecked in Acts 27 the front of the ship that remained intact was the believing church during the tribulation, and the other part that broke off in the storm represents professed believers who really weren't saved.

Or he quotes Ephesians 5:18 *"be not drunk with wine in which is excess, but be filled with the Spirit,"*

His explanation there is that to be drunk with wine is to believe a false gospel, while being filled with the spirit means believing the true gospel.

Now, see the danger in that type of Bible interpretation? There's absolutely no control and everything is left up to the imagination of the interpretator. And in the end the Bible can be made to say anything we want it to.

You know what Luke was telling us about Paul in Acts 27?

That Paul's ship was smashed up by the violence of the waves. And that God was faithful and preserved Paul through the calamity. To insert all kinds of hidden meanings in there is total speculation.

How about Eph. 5:18? It's telling us don't be controlled by alcohol, but be controlled by the Holy Spirit. No false gospels, no hidden meanings, just clear plain spiritual truth.

One of my favorites is how Lenski handles chapter 20 in his commentary on the book of Revelation.

Lenski is an amillennialist. He doesn't believe there will be a literal 1000 year kingdom on earth ruled by Jesus so he's got to explain away Revelation 20 where the 1000 year millennium is mentioned 6 times.

Listen to his allegorization of the text. He writes, “It would be strange, in deed, if “1000 years” were here where it occurs in so marked a way, all of 6 times, to be understood in a literal way. $10 \times 10 \times 10 = 1000$, namely 10 multiplied and raised to the 3rd degree, that of highest completeness.”

With otherwise due respect to Lenski who was usually a good Biblical commentator, that’s just bizarre.

What he’s saying is, the Bible doesn’t mean what it says. The plain sense isn’t good enough. So we have to come up with another meaning.

With that in mind we come back to Galatians Chapter 4 and ask the question, but what about Paul? Didn’t he call the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar an allegory? And, doesn’t that effect the way we look at the rest of the Bible?

Let me make 4 quick observations before we look at our passage.

#1. Paul specifically calls this Old Testament event an allegory. Since he spells it out, he’s showing us that its something out of the ordinary. He’s departing from his normal methods of interpretation.

#2. Paul doesn’t deny the literal aspect of the Old Testament account that he refers to. There was a Sarah and there was a Hagar. Their lives are fact, not fiction.

#3. Paul doesn’t come up with any new truth. He’s not like the Mormons who say that when God told Ezekiel to pick up two sticks (n Ezek. 37) one for Joseph and one for Judah and join them together that they represented the Bible and the book of Mormon (which is about as far from the context of Ezekiel 37 as you can get.)

Paul just reinforces truth that has already been revealed in a literal manner.

And then, most importantly of all

#4. Because Paul does it as a writer of Scripture, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit doesn’t mean that every body else can.

Galatians 4 isn’t the go ahead for us to come up with all kinds of “supposed deep

spiritual truths" that lie behind the words of Scripture. Coming up with things that aren't there.

In Galatians 4:21-31 the apostle wasn't saying, "Let's read this story of Sarah and Hagar and see what we can read between the lines." Instead, He was explaining what God revealed to him to be an allegory. Those are two entirely different things.

The Holy spirit directed Paul to explain an allegory to us in order to show that grace, not works, has always been God's way to life.

Part of the reason for using this passage was the Judaizers. The Judaizers were false teachers who came to Galatia and told the Galatians that to be forgiven by God they needed to keep the Law of Moses.

What Paul's doing here is trying to help the Galatian believers understand the difference between trusting what they could do for God for salvation and resting in the promise of God through the work of Christ.

Listen to how Paul introduces this allegory. He writes:

vs. 21

The problem in Galatia was that false teachers had convinced the Galatian Christians that the only way to come to God was through the law of Moses.

Now, you have to understand, they could give Scripture after Scripture in which it seemed evident that the law was the supreme test.

God had said things like, "The man who does these things shall live by them." and "Cursed is every one who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."

So they tried to convince these Galatian Christians that the way to gain God's favor was by keeping His law.

Just like the book that somebody sent that says that all Christians are obligated to keep the Sabbath day (which of course is Saturday) - because the Sabbath commandment is one of the 10.

Paul says, "You guys want to be under the law, then listen to what the God's law says."

First he gives the historical background. Then he gives the divine interpretation. Then finally he gives us a personal application.

I. First, the historical background.

verse 22 - 23

The term "law" is used in this passage in two different ways. The first time in verse 21 it refers to Moses' law, the law given at Mt. Sinai with all its rules and regulations.

The second time in verse 21 it refers to the books of the law. "Tell me, you that desire to be under Moses law, don't you hear the books of the law?"

Then he turns them back to the 1st book of the law, the first book of the Torah - Genesis.

Abraham's wife was Sarah and God had promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son. Through that son would eventually come Israel and finally through Israel would come Christ, the Savior of the world.

But Abraham and Sarah were very old.
And the years passed by and it seemed as though the promise would never fulfilled.

Finally, loosing hope, Sarah makes a suggestion that they should follow the custom of the nations around them and that Abraham should take another woman.

Not as a second wife, but as a concubine to bear him a child.

Abraham foolishly agrees and takes Sarah's slave girl Hagar as his concubine.

As a result of that union a son was born named Ishmael, and Abraham hoped that he would be the promised one through whom God could bless the world.

But God said, "This wasn't what I intended. This one isn't the promised seed."

Abraham pleaded with God, "O that Ishmael might live before You!"

But God said, "Ishmael can have an inheritance, but he isn't the son of the promise. The child of the promise is going to come through you and Sarah, just like I told you he would."

The son of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, in other words his birth was by purely human means.

14 years later Abraham and Sarah did have a son. Isaac. He was born of the free woman was through the promise. God purposely waited until Sarah was past the physical age of child bearing to demonstrate the point that the child was supernatural.

The Holy Spirit miraculously enabled Abraham and Sarah to produce a child after Sarah had been barren all of her life.

Ishmael was through the flesh, or works. Isaac was through the promise, or grace.

From Ishmael came the Arabs, from Isaac came the Israelies. From the beginning the boys were in conflict and that spirit has been carried on right down to our day.

That's the historical background.

II. Now listen as Paul unfolds for us the divine interpretation of this situation.

verse 24 - which things are symbolic

The word is *allegoreo*. It's the basis of our English word "allegorize" and this is the only place its used in the entire Greek New Testament.

What Paul is going to do is apply the facts of the account to illustrate spiritual principles.

And remember, as he explained in chapter 1, these were not things which he received from man, he wasn't taught them by man, but "by the revelation of Jesus Christ."

He tells us - **Rest of 24 - 27**

What's he trying to say? Hang on tight here we go! These women - Hagar and Sarah are illustrations of two covenants.

Hagar the slave woman who gave birth to the child of the flesh illustrates the Old Covenant of law given at Mt. Sinai.

God commanded his people, the Jews, to keep all of the commandments which He gave in conjunction with that covenant. As we've already seen, because the terms of the covenant were humanly impossible to keep it produced slaves.

Any Jewish person who attempted to satisfy God and gain freedom from the condemnation of his sins by trying to live up to that covenant in his own self-righteousness was spiritually like a child of Hagar - in bondage.

And God's purpose in all of that was to show His people that their only hope was through Christ the Savior, not what they could do.

Hagar therefore is Mt. Sinai where the law was given and corresponds to Jerusalem in Palestine who was in bondage with her children.

Not only was Jerusalem of Paul's day in bondage to the oppression of the Romans, but the people were in spiritual bondage because they had rejected the salvation provided by Jesus Christ.

So to put yourself under the law of Moses as a way to heaven is to put yourself under bondage.

But the Jerusalem above is free.

Sarah the free woman, with Isaac, the son of the promise, corresponds to the heavenly Jerusalem. The ideal Jerusalem that isn't under earthly control.

In other words, freedom in Christ.

One day the heavenly Jerusalem will descend to earth. You can read about that in Rev. 21 & 22; but it already exists, even more surely and eternally than the present city of Jerusalem in Israel.

Inhabitants of the heavenly Jerusalem are free from law, from works, from bondage, and from sin.

In fact, Eph. 2 tells us that every believer has been raised up together and made to sit together in heavenly places with Christ.

III. What is the personal application of this allegory?

vs. 28

When a person comes to that place in their spiritual life where they realize that they are a sinner and that they stand condemned before God and then put their trust in Jesus Christ, who was God's son and our Savior, that person is born into God's family and like Isaac, becomes a child of promise.

It took a miracle of God to produce the birth of Isaac and it takes a miracle of God to produce our new birth.

Jesus said, *"Except a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

In John 1:12, we are told *"But to as many as received him to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, even to as many as believed on His name."*

Flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God - it takes a new birth.

And when we believe that Christ died to pay the price for our sins then we are children of the free woman, children of promise.

but vs. 29

Ishmael caused problems for Isaac, just as our flesh causes problems for us. Ishmael didn't create any problems in the home until Isaac was born. Then he started. He hated Isaac. He mocked and persecuted him.

Our sinful nature doesn't cause any problems for us until we believe in Christ as our Savior. Then the opposition starts.

In Abraham's home you can see the very same conflicts that Christians face today.

vs. 30 Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? Here it is. Paul says, "listen folks. This ought to send you running from the law just as fast as your legs will carry you."

Hagar and Ishmael were cast out of Abraham's household. And that's exactly what is going to happen to their offspring.

The persecutors will be thrown out, and the persecuted will receive their rightful inheritance.

It is impossible for law and grace, flesh and spirit, to compromise and stay together. God didn't even ask Hagar and Ishmael to make occasional visits home; the break was absolutely permanent.

They were cast out and so will be everyone who tries to get to heaven by what they can do. By their works.

It is only children of the promise that have eternal life.

That's why Paul concludes this chapter with these words of challenge.

vs. 31

I have no doubt the judaizers were attractive people. They carried credentials from religious authorities. They had high moral standards and were meticulous in how they lived them out. They were effective in making converts.

They had rules to cover every area of life, making it easy for their followers to know who was "spiritual" and who wasn't. But these false teachers were leading the people into bondage and defeat, not liberty and victory.

So Paul has to remind them - we are not children of the slave woman - we are free in Jesus Christ.

The religion of Ishmael is a religion of what man can do by himself for God. But the religion of Isaac is a religion of grace. Grace is God's unearned and undeserved forgiveness. Grace is not about what we have done. It's all about what God has done. Isaac was born supernaturally through a divine promise.

The Ishmaels of this world trust in themselves and that they are righteous; the Isaacs trust only in God through Jesus Christ. The Ishmaels are in bondage because bondage is always the result of self-reliance. The Isaacs enjoy freedom and forgiveness because it is through faith in Christ that men are set free.

See, individual churches and Christians can make the same mistake the Galatians were making. They can fail to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. They can get all bound up in laws.

There's nothing wrong with biblical rules for living. Everyone of us needs to take the Bible seriously when it comes to living it out day to day. What becomes wrong is when we worship the rules instead of God. When we think we're spiritual because we keep the rules. When we judge other believers for not keeping the rules.

Remember the Pharisees had high moral standards. They lived by a strict code of ethics, but they ended up crucifying Jesus!

Who is your mother? Hagar or Sarah? Mt Sinai or the heavenly Jerusalem?

The free woman or the slave?