

Study 11
Galatians 4:21-31

1. In this section of the letter, Paul illustrates the difference between justification by faith and salvation by works by using the two sons of Abraham as examples. The term he uses in Gal 4:24 is that he is using the examples of these two sons allegorically. What is the allegorical method of interpretation?

The allegorical method of interpretation is a way of understanding texts, particularly religious or literary works, by seeking deeper, symbolic, or spiritual meanings beneath their literal words. This method assumes that the surface-level meaning of a passage serves as a "veil" for hidden, often moral, theological, or philosophical truths.

The authors and characters in the Bible can use allegorical interpretation but we cannot employ this method today because some weaknesses of it include:
-Risks subjective or arbitrary interpretations if not grounded in the text's original context.
-Can distort the author's intended meaning.

Allegorical interpretation can be valuable when the text itself supports such reading (e.g., when explicitly explained, as Paul does in Galatians). However, applying it without regard for the text's intent or context can lead to speculative and unfounded conclusions.

2. a) What are the dangers of unrestrained use of the allegorical method of interpretation in reading the bible?

The allegorical method of biblical interpretation can offer insights when used responsibly, but its unrestrained application poses significant dangers. These include:

1. Subjectivity and Lack of Control

- Allegorical interpretation often lacks an objective standard, as it heavily relies on the reader's imagination or presuppositions. This opens the door to personal biases rather than the intended meaning of the text.
- Without clear interpretative boundaries, different readers can assign conflicting meanings to the same text, making it impossible to establish doctrinal coherence.

2. Neglect of Authorial Intent

- Overuse of allegory can disregard the original author's intent, cultural context, and historical background. It risks distorting the text's purpose and message.

- The original, plain sense of Scripture may be overshadowed or ignored, leading to interpretations that were never intended by the writer or inspired by God.

3. Theological and Doctrinal Errors

- By imposing symbolic meanings not rooted in the text, allegory can create or justify heretical doctrines.
- Interpretations might conflict with the Bible's broader teaching, leading to theological confusion or inconsistencies.

4. Minimization of Historical and Literal Meaning

- Excessive allegorization can diminish the significance of the historical and literal aspects of Scripture, which are foundational to understanding its truth.
- For example, historical narratives such as those in Genesis or the Gospels may be interpreted as mere moral fables, reducing their theological and redemptive significance.

5. Discouragement of Proper Study

- Relying on allegory might discourage the disciplined study of the Bible, such as examining grammar, syntax, and cultural context.
- This can result in shallow or fanciful readings, undermining the richness of biblical teaching.

6. Undermines Clarity and Accessibility

- The allegorical method can make Scripture seem mysterious or cryptic, accessible only to those with "special insight." Scripture is perspicuous meaning clearly expressed and understandable hence of encouraging believers to interact with Scripture on their own it make them feel inadequate and become dependant on these specially qualified "teachers" hence this is the opposite of the example of the Berean Christians in Acts 17:10 who received the word eagerly but ... *were, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so*

7. Historical Examples of Misuse

- For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan has been interpreted allegorically to the point of making every detail symbolic (e.g., the donkey represents Christ's body, the inn represents the Church), distracting from the parable's original message of neighborly love.

Responsible Use

While allegory has a place when clearly marked (e.g., Paul's allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4), it must be grounded in Scripture's plain meaning and guided by principles such as:

- Consistency with the rest of Scripture.
- Explanation provided within the Bible itself.
- Careful attention to context and intent.

b) What are the most common sections of Scripture that are most often misused allegorically? Give examples.

Certain sections of Scripture are often misused allegorically, particularly when interpreters prioritize symbolic meanings over the literal and historical contexts. Below are examples of passages that are frequently misinterpreted:

1. Parables of Jesus

- **Example:** *The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)*
 - **Misuse:** Allegorists have claimed that every detail in the story has hidden meaning. For instance:
 - The wounded man represents humanity after the fall.
 - The inn symbolizes the Church.
 - The two denarii symbolize the sacraments or Christ's provision.
 - **Problem:** Jesus's intended message was about showing neighborly love, not constructing elaborate theological parallels.
 - **Example:** *The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)*
 - **Misuse:** Some interpret the older brother as a symbol of Israel and the younger son as the Gentiles, allegorizing beyond the main point of God's grace and forgiveness.
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2. Old Testament Narratives

- **Example:** *The Story of Noah's Ark (Genesis 6–9)*
 - **Misuse:** Some allegorize the ark as a symbol of the Church, the flood as baptism, and the animals as representing various nations.
 - **Problem:** While there are lessons about obedience and God's judgment, the historical account is primarily about God's covenant and salvation through Noah.
- **Example:** *The Story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17)*

- **Misuse:** Some allegorize David as representing Christ and Goliath as Satan, while others see the five stones as symbolic of the Pentateuch or virtues.
 - **Problem:** The story highlights faith and reliance on God in the face of overwhelming challenges, rather than hidden theological codes.
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3. The Song of Solomon

- **Example:** *Entire Book*
 - **Misuse:** Many interpret it allegorically as a representation of Christ's love for the Church or God's love for Israel.
 - **Problem:** While there are spiritual applications, the primary focus of the text is romantic love within marriage, celebrating human intimacy as God-designed.
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4. The Creation Account (Genesis 1–3)

- **Example:** *Adam and Eve's Fall (Genesis 3)*
 - **Misuse:** Allegorists have claimed the serpent represents human desire, the fruit represents sexual sin, and the tree of life is a mystical concept of eternal life.
 - **Problem:** The passage primarily explains humanity's fall into sin and God's provision of redemption.
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5. Revelation and Apocalyptic Literature

- **Example:** *The Book of Revelation (Revelation 1–22)*
 - **Misuse:** Every symbol (e.g., the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls) is allegorized to mean specific historical events or modern phenomena.
 - **Problem:** While Revelation uses symbolic language, it has a clear focus on God's ultimate victory, written for persecuted Christians in its immediate historical context.
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6. Galatians 4:21–31

- **Example:** *Hagar and Sarah Allegory*
 - **Misuse:** Some take Paul's explanation and expand it to suggest hidden meanings in all Old Testament characters or events.
 - **Problem:** Paul explicitly explained the allegory's intent, limiting its scope and preventing misuse.

7. The Psalms

- **Example: Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd")**
 - **Misuse:** Some allegorize every detail, such as the rod and staff representing specific doctrines or sacraments.
 - **Problem:** The Psalm is a poetic expression of God's care, not a coded theological treatise.

General Dangers

- **Theological distortion:** Overemphasis on allegory may lead to ignoring the historical and grammatical meanings of Scripture.
- **Loss of original meaning:** By seeking hidden meanings, interpreters risk overshadowing the plain truths of the text.

c) What are the conditions in which allegorical interpretation is legitimate?

Allegory should only be applied where the Bible explicitly uses it, as with Paul in Galatians 4. Proper interpretation involves balancing the literal, historical, and spiritual dimensions of Scripture.

3. a) What is the spiritual lesson that Paul is trying to convey by the use of the allegory of the two sons and two mothers in this section of the letter?
b) How is this relevant to us today?

a) The Spiritual Lesson in Galatians 4:21–31

In Galatians 4:21–31, Paul uses the allegory of the two sons (Ishmael and Isaac) and their mothers (Hagar and Sarah) to illustrate the contrast between two covenants: the covenant of law and the covenant of grace.

1. Hagar and Ishmael:

- Hagar, the slave woman, and her son Ishmael represent the old covenant established at Mount Sinai. This covenant is based on the law and human effort, leading to slavery and bondage because no one can perfectly fulfill the law (Galatians 4:24–25).

2. Sarah and Isaac:

- Sarah, the free woman, and her son Isaac represent the new covenant of grace, which is based on God's promise and divine intervention. Isaac's birth was miraculous and a result of God's power, symbolizing the freedom and inheritance of those who live by faith (Galatians 4:26–28).

Key Spiritual Lesson: Paul's allegory teaches that salvation is not achieved by human effort (law-keeping) but by faith in God's promise of grace. Believers are not children of the slave woman (bound by the law) but of the free woman (freed through Christ), and thus, they are heirs of God's promises.

b) Relevance to Us Today

1. Freedom in Christ:

- The allegory reminds believers today that salvation is not earned through religious works or strict adherence to rules but is a gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9). This truth calls Christians to rest in the freedom provided by the gospel.

2. Avoiding Legalism:

- Many believers are tempted to fall into legalistic practices, thinking they must "earn" God's favor through good works or rituals. Paul's message warns against this mindset, emphasizing that such efforts lead to spiritual bondage.

3. Identity as Children of Promise:

- Believers are encouraged to embrace their identity as "children of promise" (Galatians 4:28). This gives assurance of God's love and eternal inheritance, fostering joy, confidence, and gratitude.

4. Living by the Spirit:

- Just as Isaac's birth was a result of God's power, believers are called to rely on the Holy Spirit rather than their own strength. This reliance empowers them to live a life that reflects God's grace and glory.

In summary, Paul's allegory is a timeless reminder to trust in the sufficiency of God's grace, reject legalistic tendencies, and live in the freedom and joy that comes from being children of God through faith in Christ.

4. Why do you think that all over the world, Christians are often persecuted given the example of Ishmael and Isaac?

When other people have been "working" to attain their salvation, we are basically saying all the "good works" they are doing are useless and this is very offense to people who think they have worked very hard for it.

5. Paul uses the prophesy of Isaiah 54:1-3 which in its context is about Israel which is pictured as a woman, first forsaken but then restored and becomes more productive spreading to many nations. He now uses this metaphor to represent the Jerusalem from above which is free. What is he trying to tell us here when he writes that the Galatians are children of the mother Eternal Jerusalem?

Paul's use of Isaiah 54:1–3 in Galatians 4:26-27 connects the prophecy of restoration to his allegory about the two covenants. Here's how this unfolds

and what it means for the Galatians as children of the "Jerusalem from above":

1. Spiritual Identity and Freedom

Paul contrasts the earthly Jerusalem (representing the old covenant of law, slavery, and human effort) with the "Jerusalem from above" (representing the new covenant of grace, freedom, and divine promise). By declaring that the Galatians are children of the heavenly Jerusalem, Paul is emphasizing:

- **Freedom in Christ:** The Galatians, as believers, belong to the spiritual family of promise, rooted in grace and liberty rather than the bondage of the law.
 - **Spiritual Inheritance:** Just as Isaac was the child of promise, believers in Christ inherit the blessings of salvation and eternal life through faith, not through adherence to the law.
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2. Connection to Isaiah's Prophecy

In Isaiah 54, the barren woman is a metaphor for Israel's desolation and exile, followed by her restoration and fruitfulness. Paul reinterprets this to signify the church, the new people of God, born through the promise of God's grace.

- **Barrenness Transformed to Abundance:** Paul uses this prophecy to illustrate that the heavenly Jerusalem, though once seemingly barren (representing the suffering and rejection of Christ and His followers), is now producing a multitude of spiritual children through the spread of the gospel.
 - **Inclusivity of the Promise:** The reference to "spreading to many nations" aligns with the inclusion of Gentiles in God's covenant family. The Galatians, as Gentile Christians, are evidence of this fulfillment—they are spiritual descendants of the heavenly Jerusalem.
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3. Encouragement for the Galatians

Paul's message is deeply encouraging to the Galatians:

- **Assurance of Belonging:** By affirming their identity as children of the heavenly Jerusalem, Paul assures the Galatians that they are part of God's eternal plan, regardless of their lack of physical ties to Israel.
 - **Call to Embrace Freedom:** The Galatians are urged to reject the bondage of the law (symbolized by Hagar and the earthly Jerusalem) and fully embrace their freedom in Christ as children of promise.
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Relevance Today

For modern Christians, this passage emphasizes the universality of God's promise and the transformative power of grace. It reminds believers that their spiritual identity is not tied to earthly systems but to their relationship with God through Christ. It also calls the church to live in the freedom and fruitfulness of the gospel, reflecting the abundant life promised to the "Jerusalem from above."

6. What was Paul trying to tell the Galatians about what to do with the false Jewish teachers in their midst in Gal 4:30. Why such harsh treatment? How do we apply it to our church?

Paul's Directive in Galatians 4:30

In Galatians 4:30, Paul quotes Genesis 21:10:

"But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.'"

This is Paul's decisive instruction regarding the false teachers (the Judaizers) in Galatia, using the allegory of Hagar and Sarah to make his point.

1. Paul's Message to the Galatians

Paul uses the story of Sarah and Hagar to symbolize two covenants:

- **Hagar (slave woman):** Represents the old covenant of the law, associated with slavery and human effort.
- **Sarah (free woman):** Represents the new covenant of grace, associated with freedom and God's promise.

By quoting Genesis, Paul emphasizes:

- **Separation from False Teachers:** Just as Ishmael and Hagar were cast out to protect Isaac's inheritance, the Galatians must decisively separate from the Judaizers, who are promoting a false gospel of works-based righteousness.
- **Preservation of the True Gospel:** The inheritance (eternal life and freedom in Christ) belongs to those who live under the covenant of grace. False teachers who preach adherence to the law threaten this inheritance.

Paul's harsh directive reflects the seriousness of the threat posed by false teaching. Allowing the Judaizers to remain in their midst would dilute and corrupt the gospel, leading believers back into spiritual bondage.

2. Why Such Harsh Treatment?

Paul's strong words stem from several critical reasons:

- **Preservation of Doctrine:** The gospel of grace through faith in Christ is non-negotiable. Adding legalistic requirements compromises the core of the Christian faith.
 - **Protection of the Community:** False teaching leads to confusion, division, and spiritual harm within the church.
 - **Faithfulness to God's Plan:** The inheritance of God's promises is tied to the new covenant. To tolerate false teachers is to undermine God's redemptive plan.
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3. Application to the Church Today

Paul's instruction has significant relevance for the modern church:

- **Guard Against False Teaching:** Churches must remain vigilant in identifying and addressing teachings that distort the gospel. This involves clear teaching of biblical doctrine and holding leaders accountable.
 - **Practice Church Discipline:** When false teachers arise, the church must confront and, if necessary, remove them to protect the integrity of the congregation (cf. Matthew 18:15-17; Titus 3:10).
 - **Stand Firm in Grace:** Believers should be reminded that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Any attempt to add human works to the gospel must be rejected.
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A Balanced Approach

While Paul's directive is stern, it must be applied with discernment and love. False teachers should be confronted with clarity and firmness, but the goal is always restoration when possible (Galatians 6:1). However, persistent and unrepentant distortion of the gospel cannot be tolerated, as it endangers the spiritual health of the church.

7. Reflection question. In what aspects have you imposed certain works, behaviors, or practices (attending physically instead of online, fasting, baptism, serving in church, OT practices, etc) as requirements for salvation? (this doesn't mean we ignore people who are not producing the fruit of the Holy Spirit as we might be concerned for their growth but to reflect if we have verbally or mentally imposed certain things we need to do to guarantee our salvation)

Takeaway

Galatians 4:21-31 uses the allegorical interpretation of Abraham's two sons—Isaac and Ishmael where Ishmael (son of Hagar, the slave) represents human effort and reliance on the law, leading to slavery whereas Isaac (son of Sarah, the free woman) symbolizes faith in God's promise, leading to freedom.

Believers are urged to trust in God's grace and live as adopted children of the heavenly Jerusalem, embracing freedom in Christ rather than returning to the slavery of the law.