

Freedom Persecuted
Galatians 4:21-31

As you're probably aware, an 89-year-old radio preacher named Harold Camping predicted that the world would come to an end yesterday around 6 p.m. He and his followers put up 1,200 billboards around the U.S. to publicize his prediction. The tragedy of it all is that the return of Christ is a very precious doctrine in Scripture that is supposed to fill us with anticipation and which is supposed to be a motivation for godly living. But this whole episode has turned the doctrine of the return of Christ into a joke.

I think we can all agree that going beyond Scripture and predicting the end of the world is spiritually malpractice. But do we see the danger in going beyond Scripture in other areas of doctrine and practice? Do we really believe that what we're told in Scripture is enough? Or do we feel the need to say more than God has said when it comes to seeking God, spiritual gifts, giving, politics, how you educate your children, or a dozen other issues? There is the temptation among well-meaning sincere, Bible-believing Christians to say more than Scripture says and to demand more of people than God does.

That exactly what Paul is warning against in the book of Galatians. Jewish Christians from Jerusalem were telling the Galatians that it wasn't enough to believe in Jesus; they also had to follow the Law. Since God had made it clear that the Law was now obsolete, they were actually demanding more than God.

In Galatians 4:21-31 Paul develops an allegory that explains why the Galatians shouldn't submit to anyone who tries to manipulate or control them by going beyond Scripture. He will call such pressure "persecution" and he will say that it leads to slavery. We'll look at Paul's allegory, then we'll talk about some implications for us.

An Allegory from the Law: Isaac and Ishmael (Galatians 4:21-31)

Paul asks a question in verse 21 that will set up his argument in the rest of the chapter:

21 Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?

If the Galatians really to be under law, they should listen to what the law actually says. He's referring to the Pentateuch (not the Mosaic Law) when he refers to the law. In the following verses Paul will give an allegorical reading of the account of Sarah and Hagar and then apply it to the Galatians and the Jews who wanted them to keep the Law. What Paul writes isn't really something that you or I would "get" from reading the account in Genesis. He's not really giving an explanation of what these passages meant in their original context. Rather he is making an allegory that would be especially relevant to the Galatians and their situation. In other words, Paul sees parallels between the situation then and the Galatians situation now.

Back in chapter 3 Paul had argued that he was being faithful to Abraham by saying that you only need faith (and not law) to be right with God. Here he returns to Abraham, pointing out that Abraham had two sons but that only one of them was free.

22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. 23 But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.

Genesis 16 describes how Abraham had a son with “the bondwoman” (Hagar). God had promised Abraham and Sarah (then Sarai) that He would give them a son, a descendant through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. After ten years in Canaan, Sarah still hadn’t conceived. And so *she* (not Abraham) came up with the idea that Abraham should have a child with her Egyptian servant Hagar. Abraham agreed and the resulting son was born; he was “son by the bondwoman” who was born “according to the flesh.” The NIV translates that last phrase “in the ordinary way.” There was nothing miraculous about Ishmael’s birth.

Isaac’s birth was very different. Thirteen years after Ishmael was born, God confirmed that *Sarah* would conceive and bear a child. That very year Abraham and Sarah had Isaac. He was “the son by the free woman through the promise.”

In verses 24 through 27 Paul develops an allegory. (Remember that Mount Sinai was the place where God gave the Law to Moses and the children of Israel.)

24 This is allegorically speaking: for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. 25 Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

This is about the most dramatic allegory Paul could have made. Hagar represents the old covenant, the Law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Just as Hagar bore a son into slavery, those who follow the Law are living in slavery. Even though the Jews were physically descendants of Isaac, Paul is saying that they were in slavery like Ishmael. This would have been extremely offensive to “present Jerusalem” – Paul’s fellow Jews.

In verses 26 and 27 Paul describes believers in Jesus as citizens of “the Jerusalem above,” as free, and as descendants of Sarah.

26 But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. 27 For it is written,
"Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear;
Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor;
For more are the children of the desolate
Than of the one who has a husband."

Paul is quoting from Isaiah 54:1 in verse 27. He sees Sarah as the (formerly) “barren woman” who has now been blessed beyond Hagar. Here’s a chart that shows the contrast Paul is making:

Hagar (the bondwoman)	Sarah (the free woman)
Ishmael (according to the flesh)	Isaac (according to the promise)
The old covenant	The new covenant
Present (earthly) Jerusalem	Heavenly Jerusalem
Slavery	Freedom
Judaism	Christianity

Beginning in verse 28 Paul applies all of this to the Galatians and the Judaizers (those from Jerusalem who were pressuring the Galatians to follow the old covenant/Law).

28 And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.

Paul is referring to an incident recorded in Genesis 21 when Isaac was about 2 years old. Abraham held a great feast when Isaac was weaned. At that feast Sarah noticed that Ishmael (who was probably 16 or 17 years old) was “mocking” Isaac. We can understand why Ishmael might mock Isaac. Before Isaac was born, there was the possibility that he would be heir to everything Abraham owned. Ishmael mocked/persecuted Isaac because he was the “child of promise” – the one who would be blessed by his father.

Paul tells the Galatians that just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, so too the Judaizers were persecuting them. We might not think of persecution in these terms, but Paul did. The Judaizers were persecuting the Galatians when they tried to impose standards upon them that God didn’t. They told the Galatians, “Believing in Jesus is fine, but if you really want to please God, you have to keep the Law.” Paul called that type of spiritual intimidation and control persecution.

What were the Galatians supposed to do? Paul tells them to do what Sarah did:

30 But what does the Scripture say?
"Cast out the bondwoman and her son,
For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman."

Genesis 21 records how Sarah had Ishmael and Hagar banished from their community. God promised to make Ishmael into “a great nation” simply because he was Abraham’s descendant. But the solution to Ishmael persecuting Isaac was to “cast out the bondwoman and her son.” That was appropriate because the inheritance would be given to the son of the free woman, not the son of the bondwoman. Through Isaac “all the families of the earth” would be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

In the same way, the Galatians should “cast out” the Judaizers. They should look them in the eye and tell them, “You are not longer welcome here. Even though you think you’re honoring God, we will not sacrifice our freedom in Christ in order to please you.”

The irony in Paul’s argument wouldn’t have been lost on the Judaizers. First-century Jews would have seen Ishmael as representing Gentiles; they would have used Genesis 21 as

justification for separating themselves from Gentiles. But Paul was saying that Ishmael represents Jewish Christians who try to impose the Law on Gentiles; he uses Genesis 21 as justification for Gentile believers separating themselves from **Jews**! The blessing of Abraham would come through those who trust and follow Christ alone, not through those who follow the Law.

Paul's conclusion in verse 31 sets the stage for our application:

31 So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.

Paul confirms that we – believers in Jesus Christ – are not children born into slavery. We are children who were born into freedom. Paul's application in chapter 5 will be, "Therefore, don't be subject again to a yoke of slavery; don't submit for a moment to those who want to take away your freedom."

I'd next like to give some *Thoughts on modern-day parallels*. . . to what the Galatians experienced. The **meaning** of our passage today is rather straightforward, but the **application** in our day isn't always quite so obvious. It will vary from situation to situation. Nevertheless, I'd like to share some thoughts on modern-day parallels that (hopefully) will point the way to application.

Following Christ often results in persecution. In the NT the term persecution includes everything from being attacked verbally (John 5:16, Matthew 5:11-12) to being killed (Matthew 23:34). By definition, persecution involves being mistreated "for the sake of righteousness" – because of your loyalty to Jesus and His kingdom. We're not talking about the trials that are common to this life (illness, conflicts at work, financial pressures).

It's important to understand that persecution can either draw a person closer to Christ or drive a person away from Christ. Paul understood that the type of persecution the Galatians were experiencing had the potential to shake their faith and cause them to lose heart. He wanted them to take courage in the knowledge that they were experiencing the same thing had happened to Isaac – the son born into freedom. Their persecution was analogous to the persecution others had experienced. Jesus made the same point to His followers in the SoM. In Matthew 5:10-12 we read this:

10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. 12 "Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

If you are persecuted, you're in good company; it doesn't mean that there's something wrong with your relationship with God or that you're doing something wrong. ***Following Christ often results in persecution.*** Paul actually wrote to Timothy, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:11).

This reality challenges a widely-held assumption about the Christian life. We probably wouldn't say it out loud, but we tend to think that if ***we're walking with Christ our lives will get easier, we'll have more comfort, and we'll have fewer conflicts.*** If you want more ease, more comfort, and fewer conflicts, by all means don't take any risks spiritually (always play it safe) and never mention the name of Jesus. Jesus said that if you follow Him (in His lifestyle and in His mission) people will treat you the way they treated Him.

I'm not suggesting that we go out and look for persecution. Jesus actually told His disciples (Matthew 10) to avoid persecution when possible (if they persecute you in one town, flee to the next). But if/when it does come, don't be disheartened; you will be in good company.

In our passage in Galatians 4, Paul gave very definite instructions concerning one specific type of persecution: ***Do not submit to those who "persecute" you by imposing cultural or extra-biblical requirements.*** This is Paul's most straightforward application for the Galatians. He told them, "Do not submit to those who are forcing you to follow the Law. Rather, do what Sarah did: Cast them out." For us, there may be times when people try to impose cultural or extra-biblical requirements upon us. They may be well-meaning, but they are basically demanding more of you than God does.

For example, every church has distinctions that go beyond Scripture: how you practice the Lord's Table, the type of music in your worship, how you structure your church, etc. The Scriptures give great latitude in how churches can function. And yet I've talked with numerous people who have gotten all sorts of grief because they aren't attending the church in which they grew up. They are made to feel like they are betraying God by going to a different church or raising their children in a different church. What church you attend is really, really important. But God can be trusted to lead people in their church commitments.

The spirit of this passage and the spirit of this principle isn't one of pride that says, "Nobody can tell me how to live my life. I'll live however I want." No, we should humbly receive the counsel and insights that others give. The spirit of this teaching is that you shouldn't submit to people who want say more than God says and who demand more than God does. Instead of submitting to man-made requirements, Paul will advocate submitting to the Spirit. The Spirit is able to do in our lives what man-made regulations never could.