

## A Perfect Portrait of Saving Faith, Part 1

Scripture: Galatians 4:21–5:1

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We are, as you know, in the book of Galatians, and we're going to go back there this morning, so you can open your Bible to Galatians chapter 4. We come to a passage this morning that is very remarkable. Unless you have in the past been in a church where someone has taught the book of Galatians you have probably never heard a sermon on this portion of Scripture. No one would voluntarily preach on this, you have to be basically forced into it; and that is a shame in some ways. The reason I say that is because there seems to be a lot of confusion about this passage. It is, on its surface, complex. But it also yields incredibly powerful blessing.

It is Galatians 4, verse 21, down through chapter 5, verse 1, which is where this section actually ends. They should have moved the chapter heading one verse further. And I'm going to read it to you, because I want you to have it in your mind. And this Sunday and next we're going to be looking at it.

Galatians chapter 4, verse 21: "Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. This is figuratively speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar.

"Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. For it is written, Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; for more numerous are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband. And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. 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.

"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.' So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman. It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

I know you are confused, trying to figure out how all of that makes any sense: Abraham, the bondwoman, the free woman, Hagar, Sarah, Mount Sinai in Arabia, the Jerusalem that is present, the Jerusalem that is above, children of the flesh, children of the promise. And were you to pull out a number of commentaries on this passage you might find an equal level of confusion, even among

those who have done their best to look at this portion of Scripture. And while it is not a passage that typically someone would voluntarily preach, as I said, when forced to do so it yields some amazing, amazing riches. And they're going to be to your benefit today and next Lord's Day.

Now let me just remind you of where we are in the book of Galatians. Galatia is a region in Asia Minor where the apostle Paul went to preach the gospel. He went through the region of Galatia – these are Gentile people; these are people who grew up in paganism, not Judaism – and he went through the region of Galatia and he preached the gospel; and people heard the gospel, believed the gospel, were converted to Christ. They were wonderfully regenerated, justified, being sanctified and on the way to glory.

Churches were established in a number of cities in Galatia. The churches were flourishing. The people had been forgiven of their transgressions. They had received eternal life. They were possessors of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had done His transforming work, or begun to do it in their hearts. They were enjoying the fruit of the Spirit. They were enjoying life in the Spirit.

They were flourishing as believers, until some Jews came from Jerusalem, and they said they believed also in Jesus. They also believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They trusted in Him as their Savior. However, they said to these Gentiles, "It is not enough for you that you have been saved by faith. That is not valid. In order to be truly saved, you must keep the law of Moses." And by that, they were not talking about moral law, they were talking about ceremonial, civil, social kinds of ordinances, namely circumcision and the festivals and the feasts. Chapter 4, verse 10: days, and months, and seasons, and years.

They were telling these Gentiles, "You need to go back and you need to get your lives in line with all the orders that are in the Mosaic restrictions." God had given Moses the law for Israel, and it was to identify them as His special people. And as His special people there were certain ways they had to live and act and eat, and even certain things that were forbidden like going into a Gentile home. There were many prescriptions; you know them from back in the book of Exodus.

It wasn't the moral law. The moral law is simply a reflection of God's character, and that is everlasting and eternal. They're talking about the laws that were prescribing unique life for Israel in the world. So they were saying to these converted Gentiles, "You've got to go back and do all those things that are in the Mosaic law."

The truth of the matter was they did not need to do that, they lacked nothing. When Christ came the law was done, the law was done, its role was over. Now there was neither Jew nor Gentile, but all are one in Christ. So God is not identifying a certain nation or nationality of people by external behaviors and ordinances and events. That was the shadow. That was the ABCs. That was elementary school. Now Christ has come, and we go from shadow to substance. From elementary school we graduate into the school of discipleship with Christ. They lacked nothing. They did not need to go back into the bondage of those old Mosaic prescriptions.

Now they said they believed in Christ, which gave them access. They also said that they had come from the Jerusalem church, which would be the mother church, and that they had authority from the apostles, perhaps from James who was the leader of that church. They said, "We represent the truth. We represent the true gospel that you need to hear. You have not received salvation until you follow

Mosaic law.”

Paul writes this letter really in anger. It is the only letter that he wrote out of the thirteen he wrote in the New Testament in which there are no kind greetings. He doesn't say anything that could be construed as a warm welcoming beginning, he launches into this horrendous distortion of the gospel. And in chapter 1, verse 6, as you remember, he says, “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed, damned, anathematized!” Says it again, “As we said before, I say now again, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you have received, he is to be accursed!” Paul has fury launched in the direction of any adulteration, alteration of the gospel.

Gospel is salvation comes by the grace of God through faith alone in Christ apart from works. But the Galatians had bought this, this was new to them; and they were listening, and they were somewhat accepting. That's why in chapter 3, verse 1, Paul says, “You foolish Galatians, you have become bewitched.” So he writes this letter to defend the true gospel. In it, as you heard, he denounces the twisted and perverted gospel, and then he goes on to defend the true gospel. In the first two chapters he defends the true gospel by his own personal experience, his own personal and apostolic experience. That is the theme of chapter 1 and chapter 2.

For example, back in chapter 1, verse 11, “I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” He says, “The true gospel I received from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.” And then he goes on all the way through chapter 1 and 2 to speak of his experience with the true gospel, even including an encounter with Peter and some of those who were in danger of perverting that true gospel. So chapters 1 and 2 has to do with his experience as a defense of the true gospel.

And then chapters 3 and 4 have to do with Scripture, and this is where he makes the heart of his argument. He goes to the Old Testament Scripture to show that salvation is by faith alone. Chapter 3, for example, verse 6, he goes back to Abraham and says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” It wasn't that he did something, it was that he believed. Faith is enough. Faith is how you receive the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Down in verse 11: “The righteous man shall live by faith.” That is his message, and he quotes a number of Old Testament passages and uses the illustration of Abraham through chapter 3, and into chapter 4.

Now we are in chapter 4, and we run again into Abraham. From verses 21 down to the first verse of chapter 5 is his final use of Scripture to make his case. So chapters 1 and 2, his experience to make the case; here are the Scriptures, chapters 3 and 4; and then in chapters 5 and 6, he talks about the implications and the application of the true gospel. Now this is his final scriptural presentation, what I read you, starting in verse 21. This is the final element in his scriptural defense, his scriptural explanation of salvation by faith.

Now up to this point – just to remind you – no one reading Galatians could be confused, no one. No

one could miss Paul's point. No one could miss Paul's intention. Everything is straightforward, crystal clear, nothing confusing: salvation is by faith without works. Christian believers then are free from all those external Mosaic ordinances and ceremonies and rituals and restraints and restrictions.

The Judaizers are wrong, they are wrong. Circumcision and following all the ceremonies of Moses are not necessary; they make no contribution to one's salvation. That's his message. But when he comes here, what I just said, that no one could mistake his point up to this juncture, may not be true by just reading this. This does seem unclear. Very, very unique portion of Scripture.

Now let me tell you why it is difficult. Go down to verse 24, and in verse 24 we read, "This is allegorically speaking." I don't know what version you're reading, but many, including the NAS and many others – King James, I think the ESV – say, "allegorically speaking."

And allegory in the Bible is a terrifying thing. An allegory in the Bible would send a Bible interpreter into panic. An allegory would be the most dangerous of all possible things in Scripture. Why would God put an allegory here?

Now I'm saying that, and you're saying to yourself, "Well, explain what an allegory is." Simple explanation of an allegory would run like this: an allegory is a story, fictional or true, the meaning of which is not found in the story. Did you get that? That's the simplest way to explain an allegory. It is a story, fictional or true, the meaning of which is not found in the story.

Another way to say it would be on the negative: on its face, the story by itself is meaningless, unless somebody tells you the secret meaning. Allegories always hide a secret meaning. And for an allegory to communicate anything intentionally we have to know the secret meaning.

There is no allegory anywhere in the Bible. That is to say, there is no story, fictional or true, that on its surface is meaningless and there is some hidden midden that is the real meaning. There are none in the Bible. This is the only place in the Bible where the verb *allgore* is used. And instead of translating *allgore*, they transliterated it into "allegory." They just took the Greek word and gave it an English sound. They should have translated it.

What does *allgore* mean? *Agoreu* means "to speak in public." *Allos* means "another." "To speak in public," and "another." Putting those two together, this is what *allgore* means "to speak of one thing by referring to another," to speak of one thing by referring to another."

That is not on its face an allegory, that is an illustration. You could say, "He runs like the wind." That's not an allegory. You're talking about somebody's speed and you're using a figure of speech to communicate it. In other words, you're explaining his running by something else – figures of speech, analogies, illustrations, even parables that our Lord gave. He's the only one who gave parables. And parables could be viewed as allegorical, except for the fact that He always explained them and their illustrations.

There is nothing in the Bible with secret meaning, nothing that's hidden so that no one can really know the meaning. This is not true among the ancient rabbis. They're typically – the ancient rabbis in Judaism – were literally up to their eyeballs in allegories. If you read ancient Jewish literature you run into it all the time.

For example, when you read in the Bible about the Euphrates River, the rabbis said that's not a river. The Euphrates River that goes from Ur of the Chaldees in the north down to the land of Canaan in the south is not a river; that's an allegory of the journey of a stoic philosopher from sensual understanding to spiritual enlightenment. It's crazy, no one would know that. First of all, it's not true. The Euphrates is a river, and water goes from Ur to Canaan. This is not the journey of a stoic philosopher from sensual to spiritual understanding.

There were interpreters, rabbinical interpreters in the city of Alexandria, Egypt, so that allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament is associated with Alexandrian interpretation. Caught on in the Roman Catholic system, as you probably know, to the point that Roman Catholic scholars said the two coins that the good Samaritan gave to the innkeeper, those aren't really coins. That's an allegory for baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Here's another one. Job's seven sons weren't actually his seven sons, they were the twelve apostles. That's ridiculous, and bad math. And Job's friends were the heretics, and his seven thousand sheep were God's people, and the three thousand camels were the depraved Gentiles. That's what an allegory looks like.

And this is why we say so very often: if you're going to be faithful to the Scripture, you understand there are no hidden meanings, there are no allegories. You take the Scripture on its face value. You interpret historically, grammatically, literally – all of it. Nothing is secretive, nothing is hidden. Allegories have been used through history to twist and pervert, and also to elevate people into some kind of gnostic-life ascendancy where nobody could understand what they understand.

So Paul is not giving an allegory, he's giving an illustration, an illustration. The account is not fictional, it's not fanciful; it is historical. And on its face it had meaning. It's about Abraham, and it's about Sarah, and it's about Hagar, and it's about Ishmael, and it's about Isaac, and it's about Mount Sinai in Arabia, and the present Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem that is above, and it's about two covenants. It's about all of that. But all of that is history, and in that history is its own truth revealed, as you will see very clearly. This is just a powerful, vivid illustration.

Now, Paul has already made his argument on Scripture, you don't need another argument. Scripture settles the issue. Scripture says, "The just shall live by faith." Quoting the Old Testament back in chapter 3, verse 6, "Abraham believed, and it was counted to him for righteousness." Down in verses 10 and 11, "The just shall live by faith." That's all settled because that's what Scripture said. So this is not a further argument, this is an illustration, and it is absolute genius as an illustration.

So with that, let's look at verse 21. Paul says, "Tell me," – and remember, he's perplexed, the end of verse 20 he's so perplexed about why these people have gotten sucked up into this legalism – "tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" Who's he talking to? "You who want to be under the law." Well, the Judaizers, of course. But more than that, the Galatian believers who had been misled and bewitched, and they're now going back under the Mosaic law. They're going to go back to circumcision, back to all the ordinances, and the months and the days, and all of those things.

"You're going to go back to all of that? You who want to be under the law, do you listen to the law?"

Do you actually know what the law says? Are you sure you want to go back under it?"

Go back to chapter 3 and verse 10: "As many as are of the works of the law are under a curse;" – if you're trying to live by the law to earn your salvation you're under a curse – "for it is written," – back in Deuteronomy 27:26 – 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.'" And then down in verse 12: "He who practices them" – that is the law – "shall live by them." In other words, "If you want to go back under law, you're putting yourself in an impossible situation, because you cannot keep the law perfectly. It can't be done."

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount to the scribes and Pharisees that they could not come to God by their law-keeping. He said this in Matthew 5:48, "Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect."

"Is that what you want? You want to go back under that law that demands perfection or pronounces a curse on you? This is very perplexing. Why would you even imagine there would be some benefit in that?"

And by the way, just historically speaking, the Judaizers, these who were going around claiming to believe in Christ but demanding that Gentiles who never had anything to do with the law their entire lives would now have to keep the Mosaic law, they followed Paul all the time everywhere. Legalism is always around, it never goes away and hides, always forcing itself into the picture – and we're going to see that very powerfully when we keep going next week.

Now the moral law of God is never going to go away. The law of God, that is a reflection of His nature. That is so sure and so true and so lasting, that not one jot or one tittle shall ever pass from that law till it's all brought to fulfillment, Matthew 5:17 to 20.

But the external law, that law which externally identified Israel as the unique people of God, is gone, gone. Peter's told, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat," no more dietary laws. Paul said, "Don't let anybody hold you to a Sabbath or a new moon or a feast day or anything else; that's all shadows. Substance has come. You don't need to go back." These are Gentiles, again, who weren't raised on the law.

Now I want to say something here that I think is important; and I haven't read any commentator that actually brought this up. The fact that Paul, writing to these Gentile churches, throws all of these Abrahamic elements at them – including Sarah, and Hagar, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Arabia, and Mount Sinai, and Jerusalem – the fact that he's talking in this language with virtually no explanation, he doesn't rehearse the story, is indication to me that they were taught by Paul the Old Testament. These are Gentiles. There would be some Jews there, but these are primarily Gentile believers. And the fact that he just starts talking in these terms that are familiar to us would indicate that they were familiar to them.

And keep this in mind: the only Bible Paul ever preached from was the Old Testament. The New Testament was in the process of being written. So he would preach the gospel from the Old Testament. That's why in chapter 3, as we saw, he talked about justification by faith, and he drew the proof of it from the Old Testament. That was the only Bible there was. So they are Gentile people who have been made literate about the Old Testament; and he can then go back to this story and tell the story again, a familiar story to them, and use it as an illustration.

They don't need to go back under the law. They don't need to go back under what cursed and condemned them. "There is no condemnation in Christ," – right? – Romans 8:1. Verse 1 of chapter 5, we read it at the end: "It is for freedom Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm, do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Don't go back to the bondage of the law."

Now that you're a believer, we've been saying this the last few weeks, right? We don't describe our Christian life by our relation to the law, we describe our Christian life by our relation to Christ, right? We are Christ's, in Christ, Christ is in us.

Do we obey the moral law? Of course, because the moral law is a reflection and extension of the nature of the One we love. We obey out of love, not out of fear. But there's no sense in going back to living the way Old Testament Jews lived; that's all in the past.

Now, Paul's going to illustrate this in a very powerful way, very powerful illustration from the life of Abraham. There are three parts to it: historical illustration, divine interpretation, and personal implication. So at least for this morning, the historical illustration, okay? So let me give you a feel for this, verses 22 and 23.

"Are you listening to the law?" he says. "The law will just put you under bondage again. Not necessary." And here's an illustration. "For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise."

The Judaizers boasted that they were of Abraham's line. They were the children of Abraham, they were the sons of Abraham. They flaunted their Abrahamic descent, and that made them the unique people of God. And if you were going to be a part of the people of God, then you had to fall in line with what the descendants of Abraham did dutifully, and that was adhere to the Mosaic ordinances.

Paul has already basically attacked that. Just because you're Jewish and Abraham is your ancestor doesn't save you. Back in chapter 3, verse 7, "Be sure it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham." Verse 14: "In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham comes to the Gentiles, and we receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Verse 29 of chapter 3: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise." So just being a Jew isn't enough. Romans 2: "Not all Israel is Israel. Not every Jew is a true Jew inwardly."

So Paul goes back to make this illustration. They would say, "Abraham is our father." You remember John the Baptist said to them, Matthew 3, "God is able to make these stones into children of Abraham." And Jesus said, "No, your father's not Abraham," – John 8 – "your father's the devil." That's not good enough.

Here, Jesus illustrates the two covenants that separate works from faith. Powerful illustration. Abraham had two sons; we know that. Abraham had two sons: Ishmael first, and Isaac second. One was by the bondwoman, her name was Hagar; and one by the free woman, his wife Sarah. The son by the bondwoman Hagar, whose name was Ishmael, was born according to the flesh; but the son Isaac by the free woman Sarah through the promise.

Now to help you maybe understand this, just think of it this way. Two different mothers: a bondswoman – which means a female slave, a female slave – named Hagar gives birth by Abraham to Ishmael who is a slave, and all his family are slaves. The other free woman Sarah gives birth by Abraham to Isaac who is free. They are born in different ways, not biologically different ways, but they are circumstantially born in different ways. I don't know if you need to be reminded of the story, but I'm going to remind you anyway.

In the fifteenth chapter – this is just brief: “The word of the Lord comes to Abram in a dream, ‘Don't be afraid, I'm a shield to you; your reward will be very great.’ And he says, Abram says to the Lord, ‘O Lord God, what are You going to give me? I'm childless. You keep telling me I'm going to have a people, I'm going to be the father of a great nation, and I don't even have one child at this point in time. I'm 86, Sarah's ten years behind at 76. We have no capacity for that. Her womb is dead, we're barren. The only heir in my house is Eliezer of Damascus, a servant.’ And Abram said, ‘Since You've given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir, I'm going to make my servant my heir since You haven't given me a son. You promised You would, but You haven't.’

“Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘This man will not be your heir, it's not going to be your servant Eliezer; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.’ He took him outside” – God did – “and said, ‘Look to the heavens; count the stars, if you're able to count them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’” What a promise. “And then Abram believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” That's his salvation. Righteousness was imputed to Abram because he believed God. So he now has a promise: God is going to give him a son, even though there is no human way that can happen.

Time passes. Chapter 16, Sarah, “Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, ‘Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid.’ This is how desperate this woman is. She's pushing her husband, her old husband into adultery, because it was such a scandal not only to be a woman without a child, a woman without a son, but to be the object of a divine promise that wasn't being fulfilled. The stigma was getting to her. “Go to my maid; perhaps I'll obtain children through her.”

“Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. And Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan. Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife.” That goes against God's restriction: one man, one woman. So they made some kind of official notation about this. “He went to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress Sarai was despised in her sight. Sarah said to Abram, ‘May the wrong done me be on you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the Lord judge between you and me.’” Hagar, when she was with child, mocked Sarah, and that made Sarah very angry.

Now listen to this; here's the illustration. Ishmael was born to Hagar. Ishmael is an illustration of the flesh. Ishmael is an illustration of the flesh. The promise was clear: God is going to give a son. It's going to have to be supernatural. They don't want to wait on God, they'll do it their way; so the flesh rejects the promise and tries to take by its own power what God gives.

One child is the child of the flesh, the other child is the child of the promise: that's Isaac to Sarah. By the time he's born Abraham's 100, she's 90. But God supernaturally creates that child in her womb.



Ishmael was born according to the flesh; they did it on their terms their way. Isaac is born through the promise of God; Ishmael is born naturally, you might say. Isaac is born supernaturally. That's why when he was born they named him "laughter," which is what Isaac means, or "rejoicing," or "gladness."

Two sons then become the patterns for spiritual truth. Ishmael is a son born in the usual, natural way. But beyond that, not just the usual, natural way, but in the flesh in a sinful way, as if they could fulfill the will of God on their own sinful terms. Ishmael is a representative of all those who try to do it on their own. Ishmael is an illustration of those who want salvation by works. And Ishmael was born to a slave, was a slave, and produced a whole lineage of slaves. Ishmael symbolizes accomplishing what God wants by your own flesh and ending up in bondage.

Isaac, on the other side, was born as a result of Abraham's faith in God. As a blessing on His faith, God miraculously enabled Abraham, though he was, Hebrews says, as good as dead in terms of childbearing capacity. He allowed Abraham to deposit his seed in his wife Sarah, and for that to lead to the birth of Isaac. Isaac then was the child of promise. Isaac was the result of the power of God. He was, you might say, Spirit-born. The Holy Spirit caused Isaac to come forth when it would have been impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have a child. Isaac represents then salvation by faith alone. Abraham believed God and God supernaturally fulfilled His will in Abraham.

Ishmael pictures all those who try to please God and accomplish God's will by the flesh. It's sinful, it's useless, it creates bondage. Isaac symbolizes all those who do the will of God by faith in His promise. He does the work; He brings it to pass; He receives the glory.

"Why would you," – Paul is saying – "why would you who are the children of promise, why would you think to accomplish the purposes of God through the flesh?" Now that's just the start. We'll do the rest next time.

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