When I was in Seminary my homiletics professor waxed eloquent on more than one occasion on the advantages of expository preaching, as opposed to topical preaching or textual preaching. Among the advantages he reiterated were that it keeps the preacher from riding hobby horses, it gives the people a balanced diet, and it allows the Bible to speak for itself.

There is another important factor which I don’t recall my prof mentioning, namely that expository preaching forces the preacher to deal with texts he otherwise might well choose to ignore. I’ll almost guarantee you that no one would choose the passage before us today if he weren’t going through the book of Galatians verse by verse. He wouldn’t choose it for a Sunday sermon or a revival meeting or a baccalaureate service or, frankly, for any other occasion I can imagine.

I have committed, however, to preach through the whole Bible, and to leave nothing out. So I will tackle this passage, too. Please turn in your Bibles to Galatians 4:21-31, and follow along while I read from the NIV:

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written:

"Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband."

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."

On the surface this Scripture is surely one of the strangest in the NT. What in the world is this exotic account of a covenant bearing children and a woman named Hagar who is Mt. Sinai in Arabia? And what about the present Jerusalem which is in slavery and the Jerusalem above that is free? What does all this mean? Well, I have discovered that the text is not nearly as confusing as it appears on first reading.

We need to be reminded before we examine this text that to the Jewish people of that day the fact that they were descendants of Abraham was of paramount importance. They believed their very membership in the family of God was traceable to the Abrahamic blood in their veins.
But Scripture makes it clear that it is not the kind of blood in one's veins that provides a right standing with God; rather it's one's heart relationship with God. In fact, the God has no grandchildren or great-grandchildren at all, only children, and actually only adopted children. Every individual, regardless of physical parentage, has to personally accept God's gift of salvation by faith, and on that basis be received into His family.

Now in the churches of Galatia, to whom the Apostle Paul was writing this letter, there were some who rejected this truth. They were teaching that in order to become a real Christian one had to become a Jew, by means of circumcision and obedience to the Mosaic Law. In other words, if you weren't racially an actual descendant of Abraham, you had to at least adopt the characteristics of a descendant of Abraham.

Paul dealt a blow to this argument back in chapter 3. There he told us that it is those who exercise faith in God who are the real descendants of Abraham, regardless of their ethnic background. But now in Ch. 4 the Apostle takes the issue one step further. He demands to know, not whom they claim as their father (Abraham, of course), but rather whom they claim as their mother, for Abraham had sons by two different women. In the Genesis account of Abraham and his family situation Paul finds a fascinating spiritual lesson concerning the distinction between law and grace.

Our simple outline moves from
- A Challenging Question to
- An Historical Narration to
- An Allegorical Interpretation, and finally to
- Practical Application.

A Challenging Question (21)

“Tell me,” he begins in verse 21, “you who want to be under the Law, are you not aware of what the Law says?” The gauntlet the Apostle throws down is this: if you want to live under the OT way of life, you'd better first read the OT (and not just read it on the surface). Do you really know what you're getting into?

I have found a similar challenge to be useful at times in my own ministry. I have known people who have taught that the Sabbath of Moses is still in effect today, and have accused others of sinful behavior because they mow their lawn, go shopping, go hunting, or attend a baseball game on Sunday. I have challenged them, “If you want to be under the Law of the Sabbath, you’d better read what Moses actually says about the Sabbath.” For one thing, the Sabbath was clearly Saturday, not Sunday. For another, it was comprehensive, forbidding all kinds of activity, not just the kind legalists want to stop. In addition, it was rigidly enforced. Break it, even occasionally, and you paid heavily, sometimes with your life. I don't know many Sabbath advocates in the Church today who want to go that far.
Now I take a brief aside here to say, “I am talking about the Sabbath commandment in the Law of Moses.” I am well aware that there was a Sabbath principle that long preceded Moses. In fact, it goes way back to creation. Man is healthiest and happiest when he observes one day for rest and worship out of seven, just as God did. There is a rhythm to life that works best when we rest one day out of seven. That Sabbath principle is still in effect and we break it to our own detriment. However, the regulations (concerning what day that must be and what was forbidden on the Sabbath and what sanctions were attached) were from Moses, and the NT removes those regulations from us.

Let’s take another issue–tithing. Some people treat tithing as an absolute requirement on the believer today, but do they really know what they’re asking for? The tithe in the Mosaic Law amounted to approximately 23% of everything! The NT, in my understanding, abrogates the tithing law and replaces it with the principle of proportionate giving–certainly not a lower standard than the OT tithe, but a different one.

Paul’s concern here in Galatians 4 isn’t particularly the Sabbath or tithing, but he cautions us about legalism in general: “Before taking on the Law, make sure you understand what you’re taking on.” Like so many others, the Galatian heretics were reading the Bible to find what they wanted rather than what was really there. When read more carefully and honestly it often says something very different.

An Historical Narration (22-23)

Here in verse 22 and 23 the Apostle takes us back into the Book of Genesis and tells us that Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. And he had them by two different women, Hagar and Sarah. Let’s review the facts in a bit more detail. Abraham was an idolater from Ur of the Chaldees, the heart of the Fertile Crescent. When he was still a young man, his father decided to move the whole family to Canaan, but they only got as far as Haran (northern Iraq or southern Turkey), where they settled until his father died. Then God spoke to Abraham, told him to go to a place He would show him, and promised to bless him. He trusted God and went.

Abraham’s name, which was then “Abram,” meant “father of many.” He was promised that because of his willingness to trust God, his descendants would be as numerous as the sands of the sea. There was only one problem: Abraham didn't have any kids. And he was 75 and his wife was 65! Abram and Sarah waited and waited for God to fulfill His promise, and they weren't getting any younger. So, when they reached 85 and 75, they decided to help God out. After all, no one wants to see God embarrassed by not being able to fulfill His promises.

The idea originated with Sarah. She was so humiliated by her childlessness that she pushed her husband into the arms of another woman so he could have a child by her. You thought surrogate motherhood was a modern notion, but it’s a least 4,000 years old. It's easy to ridicule Sarah for this decision, but the fact of the matter is that it was a very sacrificial act on her part. Imagine
being so desperate to experience God’s promise that you would be willing to give your husband to another woman to achieve it!

But isn’t that like millions today who are so desperate for the promise of salvation that they are willing to do great acts of penance, or walk on their knees up the stone steps of a cathedral, or join a monastery, or give large sums of money to the church, or do door-to-door witnessing for hours every week? Sincere? You bet! Sacrificial? They put many of us to shame. But friends, even a sincere and sacrificial act will lead to tragedy if we are trying to accomplish God’s will in our way.

The other woman was Hagar, Sarah’s servant, and she did indeed bare Abraham a son. He was named Ishmael and became the father of the Arab people. In the twisted way of thinking so prevalent in those days, Abraham had proved his manhood by finally fathering a child. But what was good for his self-esteem became very bad for Sarah’s. What had seemed like a good solution turned very sour when Hagar began to show contempt for Sarah. By the way, helping God out of the tight spots almost always leads to sorry consequences for those who try it. He's really perfectly able to take care of His own promises.

But God decided to wait 13 more years before fulfilling His promise to Abraham, probably in order to eliminate any conceivable natural explanation for what He was about to do. Not too many years ago there was a woman who gave birth to a healthy baby at age 57 (an event which probably makes a lot of women I know just a tad bit nervous). But Abraham is way beyond that! He is now 99 and his body is, by his own evaluation, “as good as dead.” What is more remarkable is that Sarah is 89 years of age, infertile her entire life, and completely beyond the child-bearing age.

Nevertheless, God comes to Abraham and says He wants to change His name. It had been “Abram,” meaning “father of many,” but now God wants to change it to “Abraham,” meaning “father of a multitude.” You know, it’s embarrassing enough to be called “father of many” when you’ve only got one kid; but then to have your name changed to “father of a multitude” at age 99 must have been hard to swallow indeed.

But God followed up the name change with a miraculous conception for Sarah—not a virgin birth, but a supernatural one nevertheless. As Hebrews 11:11 puts it, “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive.” Abraham is 100 and Sarah 90 when Isaac is born.

I think we can summarize the historical narration with a contrast between Hagar and Sarah.  
Hagar was a slave woman, Sarah a free woman and Abraham’s wife.  
Hagar had a son, Ishmael, by natural birth; Sarah had a son, Isaac, by supernatural birth.  
Ishmael was the result of “works” i.e. Abraham and Sarah trying to solve a problem by their own efforts;  
Isaac’s birth was the result of faith; i.e. Abraham and Sarah believing God’s promises.
Now those are the historical facts. What is the Apostle going to do now with the facts?

**An Allegorical Interpretation (24-27)**

Verse 24 begins: “These things may be taken figuratively,” or as the NASB translates more literally, “This contains an allegory.” Many Bible students have been bothered by this unique use of allegory in the Bible, but I do not think we need to be embarrassed by it. It is true that most of the allegorical interpretations of the Bible down through the centuries have been purely fanciful and totally unrelated to the historical facts. Paul, on the other hand, first asserts the validity of the historical facts and then probes those facts for deeper spiritual meaning. In no way does he deny or downplay the history.

What he comes up with is that these two women, Hagar and Sarah, represent two covenants, the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The Greek actually says, “the women are two covenants,” and later that “Hagar is Mt. Sinai.” But the verb “to be” doesn’t always imply identity between two things; sometimes it means “represents,” and clearly that is the case here. (By the way, I believe this is true also in the account of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. 11, where Jesus is quoted as saying, “This is my body.” An overly literal interpretation leads some to believe that the bread of communion is identical to the Body of Christ, actually changing into the Body of Christ. But what is undoubtedly meant is that “this bread represents my Body.”)

Here in Gal. 4:24 Paul is saying that these two women represent two covenants, and in the next verse that Hagar represents Mt. Sinai, where Moses gave the Law, the Old Covenant, to the children of Israel. Hagar stands for the Law in that just as Hagar was able to bear only a slave-child, so also the Law can produce only spiritual slaves.

Sarah, on the other hand, stands for the New Covenant which God made with all true believers, a Covenant of Promise and of Grace, not works. The children of this covenant are not slaves to the Law, but free sons and heirs, as was Sarah’s son, Isaac. This New Covenant, of course, is brought to fruition in the death of Messiah. Do you remember the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper, “This is the New Covenant in my blood,” or “This cup represents the New Covenant in my blood?”

Not only do Hagar and Sarah represent two covenants; they also correspond to two Jerusalems. Hagar corresponds to the present Jerusalem, i.e., the Jerusalem in Palestine, which was the headquarters of Judaism when Paul was writing, and the headquarters of legalistic Christianity in the first century. Do you remember back in chapter two when Peter played the hypocrite and had to be rebuked by Paul? What had happened is that certain leaders came down from Jerusalem to Antioch to demand separation from the Gentiles, and Peter fell for their legalism.

But there is another Jerusalem, called in verse 26, “the Jerusalem above.” This may ultimately be a reference to the New Jerusalem we read about in the Book of Revelation (21:2), but in our present context I believe it refers primarily to the kind of Christianity that trusts in the grace of
God rather than in human works.

In this connection the Apostle cites in verse 27 a prophetic text from Isaiah (54:1), which looks forward to the glory of Jerusalem following the Babylonian Captivity. Paul uses the contrast between the glory of Jerusalem before the Captivity and the eventual greater glory of Jerusalem after the Captivity as illustrative of the contrast between the glory of Judaism before Christ and the greater glory of the church after Christ came. The number of people enjoying the freedom of God's grace will eventually outnumber those in bondage to the Law, even though the legalists may seem to enjoy the edge at the time.

This, then, is the allegory. Abraham had two sons, born of two mothers, representing two covenants and two Jerusalems. These ultimately represent two religions, a religion of bondage and a religion of freedom. Hagar, Ishmael, the Old Covenant, and the Jerusalem in Palestine all stand for those who try to help God out, who try to earn their salvation by works, circumcision, law-keeping, baptism, church membership, tithing, or anything else. Sarah, Isaac, the New Covenant, and the New Jerusalem, on the other hand, all stand for those willing to take God at His word and receive His free gift without “helping Him out.”

Practical Application

1. **We are children of promise, not works.** Verse 28 reads, “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.” He is speaking to all those who are born-again Christians and tells us we are like Isaac, not Ishmael. Our descent from Abraham is spiritual. We are his sons supernaturally, not naturally.

Of course,

2. **We can expect persecution from those who practice a religion of works.** If we are like Isaac, we must expect to be treated as Isaac was treated. Verse 29 says, “At that time the son born in the ordinary way (Ishmael) persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit (Isaac). It is the same now.” We can only guess at the nature of the persecution which Ishmael directed toward Isaac, his younger brother by 14 years. Perhaps he called him names because the little guy was getting so much attention from Abraham. In Gen. 21:9-10 we read the following: “But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, ‘Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.’” Whatever the nature of the persecution, Paul uses it as an analogy of what often happens between those who follow man-made religion and those who follow Christ.

Real Christians will be persecuted, and the remarkable thing is that, as with Isaac and Ishmael, the persecution more often comes from our half-brothers than from the pagan world. And what do I mean by “half-brothers?” I'm referring to the religious people who share our monotheism but reject salvation by grace through faith. You know, it was the Jews who killed God's prophets, not
the pagan Gentiles. It was the Pharisees who were the principal opponents of Jesus, not the Romans. And the Apostle Paul's fiercest enemies were not the agnostic philosophers of Athens but rather the fanatically religious Judaizers.

Today I'm inclined to think the greater enemies of the true church are not atheists and communists, but rather Muslims, who incidentally also claim Abraham as their father. In fact, the Quran rewrote history and claims that Ishmael was the Son of Promise and it was Ishmael whom Abraham agreed to offer as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. Islam sees the potency of Paul's argument here.

But perhaps our greatest enemies of the true church are members of the nominal church, with the fiercest opposition often emanating from pulpits and church hierarchies. Think for a moment about the tragic abortion problem in our country today. The abortion industry could hardly stand for a single day if it weren't for the support they receive from the mainline Protestant denominations whose basic theology is that people must work their way to heaven.

The same opposition from our half-brothers is seen in the battle over gay rights and evolution and the teaching of traditional values in the schools. Again it is often the mainline churches that are the greatest enemies of the Christian faith. Several years ago there was an Associated Press article in the paper. This was the headline: “Group of liberal clergy urges recognition of same-sex marriages.” Here's how it started off:

About 850 mostly liberal members of the clergy and other religious figures issued a declaration Tuesday urging all faiths to bless same-sex couples and allow openly gay ministers.

Among endorsers of the statement were the retired leader of the Episcopal Church, the presidents of the UCC and the Unitarian Universalist Association, presidents or deans at 15 Protestant seminaries and numerous theology teachers.

But opposition not only comes from the religious left, with its social Gospel of salvation by works, if indeed they believe in any salvation at all (the fact is, many no longer think there is anything they need to be saved from). Opposition also comes from the legalistic religious right, who are also our half-brothers. I personally have received in my 40 years of ministry as much criticism and graceless judgment from legalists afraid of the grace doctrines I have taught, as from liberals who deny the fundamentals of the faith I proclaim. But that shouldn't surprise us, for there is an absolute incompatibility between the philosophy of salvation by works and the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

By the way, is it possible that verse 30 is advocating that those who propound legalism in the church be disciplined and removed? It quotes the OT as saying, “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.” From the human point of view it seems cruel that God should command Abraham to send away his own son Ishmael, whom he loved very much. Why not allow visitation rights? Why not compromise and give Ishmael and his mother separate rooms in the same house?
It would never work, and God knew that. Just as it will never work for us to compromise and try to reconcile legalism with the Gospel. We would readily remove a member who denied the deity of Christ. Should we not also remove those who advocate salvation by works?

Isaac, and those who are his counterparts today, namely believers in God’s grace, can expect persecution from those who practice a religion of works. But that’s not the end of the story. The news isn’t all bad.

3. The pain of persecution is accompanied by the privilege of inheritance. Verse 31: “We are not children of the slave woman, but of the freewoman.” We may be despised and rejected by men; yet we are the children of God, and “if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17).

Now our final application is found in 5:1, which perhaps should have been the final verse of chapter 4. As you know, the verse divisions and chapter divisions of the Bible are man-made and sometimes are best ignored.

4. We must keep standing firm in our freedom. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Once again I suggest to you that this is the key verse of the entire book of Galatians. No matter how godly legalists appear, no matter how persuasive their arguments, no matter how severe their threats or harsh their persecution, we are to stand firm on the grace of God and on the freedom for which Christ set us free. We are commanded by God to dig our heels into the freedom Christ won for us so that no one can drag us off into bondage again.

Conclusion: In conclusion I’d like to ask this question, “Who is your mother?” You claim God as your Father or you probably wouldn’t be here today, but who is your spiritual mother? If your only birth was a natural one and somehow you think that you can help God out by earning your salvation through good works or moral behavior, then your claim to be God’s child is really a bogus claim, no matter how sincere you may be. You are actually an illegitimate child because the one you call your Father refuses to recognize all the personal efforts and works, which you are trusting as your spiritual mother. He calls all such efforts “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

On the other hand, if you have been born, not only naturally, but also from above, born again, if you will, by faith in Jesus Christ, and are trusting His grace and His grace alone for your salvation, then God is your Father and His grace is, so to speak, your spiritual mother.

The Ishmaels of this world trust in themselves that they are righteous; the Isaacs trust only in God through Jesus Christ. Friends, it’s easy to claim a spiritual heritage. But there’s only one way to actually have a spiritual relationship with God. That's through simple faith in the fact that God sent His Son as the sacrifice for your sin. He offers you complete forgiveness, but you must receive it.
i. This play on words with Abraham’s name is beautifully described by Donald Grey Barnhouse, in volume II of his commentary on Romans, chapter 31.