

The Book of Galatians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: The Two Covenants: Hagar and Sarah

Galatians 4:21–31

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

In this passage Paul makes a final, climactic argument against the Judaizers by reading the story of Hagar and Sarah as a picture of two covenants. The doctrinal point is the absolute contrast between the covenant of law, represented by Hagar and Sinai, which produces slavery, and the covenant of promise, represented by Sarah and the heavenly Jerusalem, which produces freedom. Believers in Christ are children of promise, like Isaac, born by the power of God rather than by human effort, and as such they are heirs of the inheritance. The command to cast out the slave woman drives home that law-righteousness and grace cannot coexist as the ground of our standing with God.

Two points deserve careful handling. First, Paul's allegorical reading is an inspired apostolic interpretation, not a model for inventing fanciful meanings in every text; teach students to read Scripture according to its plain sense while receiving Paul's Spirit-given insight here. Second, the heavenly Jerusalem that is our mother is a present spiritual reality, not a future earthly city. Believers have already come to the heavenly Jerusalem and belong to Christ's kingdom now, since the kingdom arrived with Christ and his reign is present, not awaiting an earthly millennial restoration. This is a good opportunity to affirm the present reality of the kingdom and the church against premillennial expectations.

Pastorally, the lesson is about identity and freedom. Paul wants the Galatians to know who they are, free children of promise, and to live accordingly, decisively refusing the slave mindset of self-justification. Aim to help students embrace their identity as children of the free woman, to trust God's promise rather than manufacture results by the flesh, and to expect, without fear, the opposition that the way of grace inevitably provokes.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul interprets Hagar and Sarah as representing "two covenants" (4:24). What two covenants do these women stand for, and what is the fundamental contrast Paul draws between the way of law and the way of promise?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul turns the Judaizers' own Scriptures against their argument. He takes the familiar account of Abraham's two sons and explains that the two mothers represent "two covenants." Hagar, the slave woman, corresponds to the covenant given at Mount Sinai, the law, which "bears children

for slavery.” Sarah, the free woman, corresponds to the covenant of promise, which bears free children.

Draw out the fundamental contrast. The way of law operates on the principle of human performance: do this and live, and it leaves people enslaved to the impossible task of earning. The way of promise operates on the principle of God’s grace: believe and receive, and it produces free children who rest in what God has done. These are two different families, two different cities, two different ways of relating to God entirely.

Note the boldness of Paul’s claim. The Judaizers were certain that law-keeping made them Abraham’s true heirs. Paul says that those who seek justification by law are spiritually descended from Hagar the slave, not Sarah the free woman. The true children of the promise are those who trust Christ, whether Jew or Gentile.

A word about method will help students. Paul calls this an allegory, an inspired reading of the older story that reveals its deeper pattern. This is the apostle’s Spirit-given insight, not a license for us to invent hidden meanings in every passage. We read Scripture according to its plain sense, while gratefully receiving the interpretation Paul gives here.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hagar and Sinai representing the covenant of law that enslaves
- Sarah and the promise representing the covenant of grace that frees
- Law as the principle of performance, promise as the principle of grace
- Paul’s allegory as inspired apostolic interpretation, not a model for fanciful readings

Discussion Prompts

- What two covenants do Hagar and Sarah represent?
- How do the way of law and the way of promise fundamentally differ?
- Why was Paul’s claim so startling to the Judaizers?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul presents two kinds of children, those of the slave woman and those of the free. As you examine your own walk, are you living more like a child of the slave woman, anxiously earning, or a child of the free woman, resting in grace, and what reveals which one to you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to discern which family they are living in. Both kinds of children can sit in the same pew. One rests in grace as a free child; the other strains under an invisible law as a slave, even while professing the gospel. The difference is not always visible from outside, but it shows up in the texture of a person’s walk with God.

Help students read the signs in themselves. The slave child relates to God through anxious performance, rides the roller coaster of recent behavior, fears rejection, and finds little rest. The free child relates to God through trust, lives from acceptance already given, and rests even on bad days, knowing the inheritance does not depend on a flawless record.

Be honest that most believers carry traces of both. We can be free in our theology and enslaved in our daily experience, professing grace while functioning as if everything depended on us. Naming the slave patterns is not condemnation; it is the first step toward walking in the freedom that is already ours.

Point to the gospel as the way home. We do not become free children by trying harder to feel free, but by believing more deeply that in Christ we already are free. Invite students to identify the slave patterns in their lives and to bring them into the light of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two ways of relating to God, slave and free, even among professing believers
- Marks of the slave: anxious performance, fear, and restlessness
- Marks of the free: trust, rest, and security in grace
- Walking in the freedom that is already ours in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Are you living more as a slave child or a free child of God?
- What patterns in your walk reveal which one you are?
- How does the gospel move you from slave-living to free-living?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul notes that Ishmael was born “according to the flesh,” while Isaac was born “through promise” (4:23). What is the difference between what human effort, the flesh, can produce and what God’s promise produces, and why does that difference matter for our salvation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul highlights a crucial contrast: Ishmael was born “according to the flesh,” the natural result of Abraham and Hagar’s own scheme, while Isaac was born “through promise,” a miracle that only God could accomplish in a couple long past the age of childbearing. The two births picture two utterly different sources, human effort and divine promise.

Explain what the flesh can and cannot produce. Human effort can manufacture many things, including an Ishmael, but it cannot produce the children of God or the righteousness God requires. What the flesh produces is, at best, a substitute, and often a source of lasting trouble. Only God’s promise, received by faith, produces the true heir.

Apply this to salvation. We cannot generate our own acceptance with God by our striving any more than aged Abraham and Sarah could generate a child by their own power. Salvation is a birth from above, a work of God's promise and Spirit, received not achieved. This is why Paul insists so fiercely that justification is by faith and not by works of the law.

Let it humble and free students. The pressure is off, in the best sense. We are not asked to manufacture by the flesh what only God can give by promise. Our task is to trust the One who keeps his word, and to receive the gift he alone can produce.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The flesh and the promise as two different sources (Galatians 4:23)
- Human effort unable to produce the children or the righteousness of God
- Salvation as a birth from above, a work of God's promise and Spirit
- Receiving the gift rather than manufacturing it by striving

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between what the flesh produces and what promise produces?
- Why can human effort never generate our acceptance with God?
- How does this truth both humble and free you?

Question 4

Student Question:

Like Abraham with Hagar, we often try to manufacture by our own effort what only God can give. Where in your life are you attempting to produce, by the flesh, something that can only come as a gift of God's promise?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the Hagar pattern into our own lives. Abraham's attempt to help God along by producing an heir through Hagar sprang from impatience and unbelief, and it brought heartache for generations. We repeat his mistake whenever we try to manufacture by our own effort what God has promised to give in his own way and time.

Help students recognize their Hagar solutions. When God seems slow, we are tempted to force outcomes, to scheme, manipulate, or compromise in order to secure what we want. We may try to engineer a relationship, a result, a sense of worth, or even spiritual growth by sheer effort, rather than waiting in trust. These fleshly shortcuts often create lasting complications.

Distinguish trusting from passivity. Waiting on God's promise is not idleness; Abraham was still called to act in faith. The issue is whether our action flows from trust in God or from unbelief that takes control. The flesh grasps and forces; faith works and waits, leaving the outcome to God.

Invite a specific surrender. Ask students to name an area where they are tempted toward a Hagar solution, and to consider what it would look like to trust God's promise there instead, releasing their grip and waiting on him to provide what only he can give.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fleshly shortcuts as attempts to secure God's promise by our own effort
- Impatience and unbelief as the root of Hagar solutions
- Trust expressed in faithful action without grasping control
- Surrendering outcomes to the God who keeps his promises

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to force what only God can give?
- How is trusting God different from passively doing nothing?
- What would it look like to wait on his promise in that area?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says, "the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother" (4:26). What is this heavenly Jerusalem, and in what sense do believers belong to it and to God's kingdom now, rather than only waiting for some future earthly kingdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul lifts the Galatians' eyes to their true home: "the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother." Over against the earthly Jerusalem, which in its bondage to the law represents the old covenant, stands the heavenly Jerusalem, the free city of God's grace, to which all who are in Christ belong. This is the mother of the free children.

Explain what this heavenly Jerusalem is, and especially what it is not. It is the present spiritual reality of God's people, the kingdom and city of God into which believers have already come. The writer of Hebrews says plainly that we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the assembly of the firstborn (Hebrews 12:22-23), and Paul says our citizenship is already in heaven (Philippians 3:20). This is a present possession, not merely a future hope.

Address the kingdom directly, since this guards an important truth. God's kingdom is not a political, earthly reign still waiting to be set up in a future age. The kingdom came with Christ, who announced that it was at hand, and it was established as he began to reign, with his church as its visible expression (Mark 1:14-15; Colossians 1:13). Christ reigns now from the right hand of the Father. Believers do not wait for an earthly Jerusalem to be restored; they already belong to the free city above and to the kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Bring it home as comfort and dignity. To belong to the heavenly Jerusalem is to have a home that no earthly loss can take, a citizenship more secure than any nation, and a King who reigns even now. The free children live as those who already belong to the city of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The heavenly Jerusalem as the present spiritual home of God's free people (Hebrews 12:22–23)
- Believers' citizenship already in heaven (Philippians 3:20)
- The kingdom established with Christ and present now, against premillennialism (Mark 1:14–15; Colossians 1:13)
- Christ reigning now, with the church as the kingdom's visible expression

Discussion Prompts

- What is the heavenly Jerusalem, and how do we belong to it now?
- Why is it important that the kingdom is present rather than only future?
- How does belonging to the city above give you security?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul reminds the Galatians that their true citizenship is in the free city above. How should belonging to the heavenly Jerusalem, and to Christ's kingdom even now, shape the way you live, spend, and set your hopes day to day?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns heavenly citizenship into daily practice. If our true home and kingdom are above, and we belong to them even now, then that reality should reshape how we live in the present world. Citizens of the free city carry themselves differently from those who have no home but here.

Help students see the practical implications. Heavenly citizenship reorders our priorities, loosening our grip on earthly status, possessions, and security, and fixing our hopes on what cannot be shaken. It frees us to be generous, to hold this world lightly, and to invest in what lasts. People who know their home is secure can afford to live openhandedly here.

Connect it to the present reign of Christ. Because our King reigns now, we live under his rule today, not merely awaiting a future kingdom. That means ordering our daily lives, our work, our relationships, and our resources, under his lordship now, as citizens already serving the King who is already on the throne.

Invite a concrete shift. Ask students to name one way their heavenly citizenship should change how they spend their time, money, or hopes this week, one place where living as a citizen of the free city above would look different from living as if this world were all there is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Heavenly citizenship reordering earthly priorities
- Holding this world lightly and investing in what lasts
- Living under the present reign of Christ the King
- Daily life ordered by our identity as citizens of the city above

Discussion Prompts

- How should belonging to the heavenly Jerusalem shape your daily choices?
- Where do you hold earthly things too tightly?
- What is one way to live this week as a citizen of the free city?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul observes that the child “born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, and so also it is now” (4:29). Why does the way of grace so often provoke opposition from the way of the flesh and the law, both in Paul’s day and in ours?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul notes a painful pattern: Ishmael, the child of the flesh, mocked and persecuted Isaac, the child of promise, “and so also it is now.” The way of grace has always provoked opposition from the way of the flesh and the law. This is not an accident but a recurring feature of the spiritual landscape.

Explain why grace provokes such opposition. The message of free grace offends human pride, because it gives us nothing to boast in and levels every person at the foot of the cross. Those committed to earning, to religious performance and self-justification, often resent the gospel of grace precisely because it declares their efforts unable to save. The free child, by simply existing, exposes the futility of the slave’s striving.

Help students expect this rather than be surprised by it. Paul prepares believers to face misunderstanding and hostility, sometimes from the religious, for resting in grace and freedom. If even Jesus and Paul faced opposition for the gospel of grace, we should not assume that faithfulness will always be met with applause.

Point to the right response. The free children do not retaliate or abandon grace under pressure; they hold firm, return love for hostility, and remember that the outcome is already secure. The child of promise inherits, whatever the child of the flesh may do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The persistent opposition of the flesh to the way of grace (Galatians 4:29)
- Grace offending human pride by leaving nothing to boast in
- Expecting misunderstanding and hostility, sometimes from the religious
- Holding firm in grace and returning love rather than retaliating

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the message of grace provoke opposition?
- Why should believers expect this rather than be surprised by it?
- How should the free children respond to hostility?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul prepares believers to expect misunderstanding and opposition for living by grace. When have you faced pushback, misunderstanding, or pressure for resting in grace and freedom rather than in rules and performance, and how did you respond?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to recall their own experience of opposition for living by grace. It may be subtle, a relative who thinks their faith is too easy, a religious acquaintance who insists they must do more, an inner voice that accuses them of being presumptuous for resting in grace. Such pressure can be unsettling.

Help students name the pushback honestly. Sometimes the opposition comes from others; often it comes from within, from a conscience so trained in earning that grace feels almost irresponsible. Both forms can tempt us to abandon freedom and crawl back under the law to appease the critics, outer or inner.

Encourage a grace-rooted response. We do not answer such pressure by proving ourselves through performance, but by standing on the finished work of Christ. When accused of resting too much in grace, the free child does not retreat into earning; they rest more deeply, while continuing to walk in obedient love.

Move toward steadfastness. Invite students to recall a time they faced such pushback and to consider how they might stand more firmly in their identity as a free child next time, neither defensive nor doubting, but secure in the grace that holds them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Opposition to grace coming from others and from a law-trained conscience
- The temptation to abandon freedom to appease critics

- Standing on Christ's finished work rather than proving ourselves
- Steadfast security in our identity as free children

Discussion Prompts

- When have you faced pushback for resting in grace?
- Does the opposition come more from others or from within?
- How can you stand more firmly as a free child next time?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul quotes Scripture's command, "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" (4:30), concluding that "we are not children of the slave but of the free woman" (4:31). What does this teach about the radical incompatibility of law and grace as ways of being justified, and how do we decisively reject self-justification and live wholly as free children under grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question reaches the doctrinal climax of the passage and of Paul's whole argument from the Hagar story. He quotes the command of Scripture: "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." The point is uncompromising. Law-righteousness and grace cannot live together in the same house as the ground of our standing with God. One must be cast out.

Explain the radical incompatibility. Paul is not saying we can blend a little law-keeping with a little grace and arrive at acceptance. He is saying the two principles are mutually exclusive at the level of justification. To add law as a ground of righteousness is to nullify grace (Galatians 5:2-4; Romans 11:6). The slave woman and the free woman cannot both be our mother. We belong to one family or the other.

Help students apply the command to their own hearts. Casting out the slave woman means decisively renouncing self-justification, refusing to base our standing with God even partly on our performance, our religious record, or our merit. It is not enough to add grace alongside our earning; the earning itself, as a ground of acceptance, must be expelled. We rest wholly and only on Christ.

Guard the truth, as in earlier lessons, against two distortions. Casting out law as a ground of justification does not mean casting out obedience; the free children love and obey their Father, and saving faith is a living, obedient faith that believes, repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into him. What is cast out is not obedience but the attempt to be justified by our works. We obey as free children from acceptance, never as slaves trying to earn it.

End where Paul ends, in identity and assurance: “we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.” The believer’s settled status is freedom. Help students hear this as a declaration over their lives. They are not slaves trying to earn an inheritance; they are free children who already possess it in Christ, and nothing about that needs to be earned, only received and lived.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The radical incompatibility of law and grace as grounds of justification (Galatians 4:30)
- Adding law as a ground of righteousness nullifies grace (Galatians 5:2–4; Romans 11:6)
- Casting out the slave woman as decisively renouncing self-justification
- Obedience and a living, obedient faith retained, while earning for acceptance is expelled
- The believer’s settled identity as a free child who already holds the inheritance

Discussion Prompts

- Why can law and grace not coexist as grounds of our standing with God?
- What does it mean, practically, to cast out the slave woman from your heart?
- How do we expel self-justification while keeping obedient faith?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. Paul calls believers to live out their true identity as free children of promise. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to cast out the slave mindset of earning and to live decisively as a free child of God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone calls students to live out the identity Paul has labored to establish: free children of promise. The whole passage drives toward this declaration, and the lesson should end by inviting students to act on it concretely, casting out the slave mindset of earning and embracing their freedom.

Help them name one decisive step. For one person it may mean renouncing a specific way they have based their worth on performance; for another, finally receiving their acceptance as a settled gift; for another, trusting God’s promise in an area where they have been scheming like Abraham with Hagar. The aim is a clear movement from slavery toward freedom.

Remind them that identity precedes action. We do not earn our way into freedom by trying hard; we live out a freedom already given. The slave mindset is cast out not by striving but by believing the truth of who we are in Christ and letting that truth reshape how we live.

Close in joyful assurance. Paul ends the chapter on a triumphant note, and so should the lesson. The believer is not a slave but a free child, an heir of the promise, a citizen of the city above.

Send students home standing in that freedom and ready to live as the free children they truly are.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living out the settled identity of free children of promise
- Identity in Christ as the basis for casting out the slave mindset
- Freedom received and lived rather than earned by striving
- Joyful assurance as the proper note of the free children

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way you will live as a free child of God this week?
- How does believing who you are help you cast out the slave mindset?
- How does this passage leave you more assured of your freedom?