

Today we're going to be talking about how the Scriptures reveal Christ – and even the Old Testament reveals Christ. And we're going to talk about how to understand the Bible – and how different ways of interpreting the Bible have integrity, and other ways of interpreting the Bible, have very little integrity, and can be quite misleading....

So, throughout this letter, Paul has been upholding the Old Testament covenant of **Abraham** (Genesis).

And he's been helping us to understand that the covenant that God had made with **Abraham**, was a covenant of promise – a covenant of faith. It didn't depend on works/Law – it was a covenant of faith. The covenant of the Law came at a later date, when Moses was given the 10 commandments at Mt Sinai.

And this covenant with Abraham, was actually looking forward to the coming of Jesus Christ. It was through Jesus Christ (you see), that all the nations would be blessed (as was promised to Abraham).

And over the last (nearly) 4 chapters, Paul has (very clearly) made his case from Scripture.

But now, he does something rather strange. And I'm going to be really upfront, *“If the preacher of the church that I was attending, had a **regular** practice of interpreting Scripture in the way that Paul does in these few verses, I'm pretty sure I'd find another church to go to...”* ,, because this is **not** a normal way of interpreting Scripture, and it could be open to

terrible abuses. And I think Paul knows this, because he's already very clearly made his case from Scripture (that he's interpreted in the normal way {with a great deal of integrity}), **and he rarely uses** this second method to interpret Scripture.

And, I'll explain that more shortly, but it's probably going to be good for us to have a bit of a reminder of what happened with Abraham & Sarah & Hagar & the two boys.

God had promised Abraham, that he would be the father of many nations. The trouble was, he was getting really old, and he didn't have any kids yet... So, his wife Sarah came up with a cunning plan: That she would give her slave-girl (Hagar) to Abraham, so that he could sleep with her, and get her pregnant... A very understanding wife, Sarah, isn't she... What could possibly go wrong...

Well, sure enough, Abraham got Hagar pregnant, and she bore a son, and they called him "Ishmael"...

But as soon as Hagar "the slave-girl", realised that she was pregnant, she let her new sense of honour and importance, go to her head. She was able to give Abraham, what her mistress was **unable** to give him – a son... And she started rubbing it in to Sarah, and treated her with contempt... As I said before, "Two wives – What could possibly go wrong?"

But then Sarah took it out on Abraham – "This is your fault, you know..." And so Abraham said, "You're Hagar's boss – you deal with her.." And she did, quite harshly, and Hagar ran away...

In His mercy, the Lord found Hagar out in the wilderness, and said “It’s alright. You go back to your mistress and submit to her...”, “Your son (when he’s born) – he’ll have many descendants too...”

So Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born. And it wasn’t until Abraham was 100 years old, that Sarah (90) gave birth to Isaac – the child that God had promised all those years earlier.

Reading from *Genesis 21:8-13 (ESV)*

⁸ And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” ¹¹ And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. ¹³ And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.”

Alright, so that’s the story that Paul interpreted “allegorically”... What does that mean???

It means Paul's saying, we can find a deeper meaning in this.
– That when this saga played out, it was a lesson for the Galatian church (a couple of thousand years later), that they don't have to keep the Old Testament religious law...

I don't know if you followed the allegory as we read it – I'll just go through it really briefly...

- Two sons:
 - Ishmael, the son of the slave-woman (& the child of the flesh {when they tried to take things into their own hands, because God didn't seem to be providing a son like He'd promised...})
 - Isaac, the son of the free woman (& the child of promise); and

Now, I **suspect** (I don't know this, but I suspect) that the Judaisers who had come into town and were telling these new Christians in Galatia (Christians, who were Gentiles {weren't from Jewish stock}),,, I suspect they were telling them, that as Gentiles, they were on the outer – they were descended from Ishmael, whereas we Jews are descended from Isaac...

I suspect this for 2 reasons:

1. This was a common Jewish thought (that the Gentiles were descended from Ishmael, while the Jews were descended from Isaac)..
2. Through this allegory, Paul completely turns the tables on that view...

What Paul's saying, is that those who commit themselves to "The Law", are the children of slavery, while those who

depend on the promises of God (no matter what their nationality), are the children of promise and of freedom....

And to illustrate this, I've put up 2 columns (my apologies to those who are listening to the audio only)...

- The Slave woman (Hagar), represents Mt Sinai (which is where the Law of Moses is given), which corresponds to the physical, earthly city of Jerusalem;
- The Free woman (Sarah) represents the Jerusalem above (The eternal city – Eternal life in glory with Christ).
- So therefore, those who bind themselves to live by the Law are the children of slavery
- Whereas those who live by grace in Christ Jesus, are the children of promise...

Do you see what Paul's done there? – he's completely turned the tables.

- and his finale, is that it's all proved because in the early church, it's the Jews who were persecuting the Christians, just like Ishmael made fun of Isaac & Hagar treated Sarah with contempt...

Alright, so Paul was finding a deeper spiritual meaning in the Historical Biblical account of Abraham's family soap-opera... That's what we call "Allegory"...

Another well-known Allegory, is the Historical Biblical account of Jonah...

Do you know the story of Jonah?:

- God says “Go to Nineveh and tell them to repent”
- Nineveh, was the most godless, evil city – a vile place – the arch-enemy of God’s people Israel...
- And Jonah says, “I’m not going there”, and he heads off in the opposite direction.

- A big storm comes up;
- Jonah’s thrown overboard;
- Swallowed by a big fish;
- Spat up on the beach;
- Walks into the city;
- “Because of your evil, in 40 days, your city will be overthrown..”

- And the whole city (led by the King, who took off his royal robes, and repented in sackcloth and ashes) – the whole city repented
- Success... Or so you would think...

- And so Jonah then goes off and has a bit of a sook – “I want to die” ,, “I knew they’d repent” “And I knew that in your mercy, you wouldn’t destroy them...
- And God says, “Hey, it’s right for me to show mercy”...

An amazing Historical Biblical account...

But what we miss, (that Israel could **not** miss), is the deeper meaning – the allegory...

You see, God had been warning Israel for centuries (through his prophets) to repent of their sin, otherwise they would be overthrown... They heard prophet; after prophet; after prophet, but they wouldn't listen...

And here's Jonah, this reluctant, disobedient prophet, walks into the most despised city, and says "You're going to be destroyed" – He doesn't even tell them how to get out of their predicament – it's obvious. As soon as they heard the message (the first time), they repented... And so God showed them mercy...

The allegory – the deeper meaning for Israel – the most godless city on earth repented in a day, and you (my people) have been ignoring Me for years...

Alright, so that's a couple of examples of "allegory" – where there's a deeper spiritual meaning to be found...

But you can understand (can't you), that if we treated all of Scripture (or **much** of Scripture) as an "allegory", we could be opening it up to terrible abuse – you could make it say whatever you wanted...

So, why is it OK to see "allegory" in some scriptures, but **not** as a general rule???

Well, in both of those examples that I just gave, the allegory backs up what the Scriptures already very clearly say (in their own right).

Alright, so Paul has already very clearly made his case from Scripture, and then he adds in this allegory.

In the case of Jonah, the books of the Prophets have already very clearly called Israel to repent, and they are ignoring it. It's already very clear in Scripture, and then the allegory of Jonah, is put alongside it...

What we cannot and should not ever do, is to come up with an idea, that Scripture doesn't really clearly agree with, and then interpret it "allegorically" to prove our case...

So, how should we read the Bible???

Well, in **most** cases, the best way to understand the Scriptures, is what they clearly say, in a consistent message, throughout both the Old and New Testaments...

Let me share with you, a few rules I use, when I'm studying God's word:

1. Let what the Scriptures say, shape my understanding of God – instead of letting my understanding of God, shape what the Scriptures say...

The academic way of saying this, is to use "**exegesis**", not "**eisegesis**". Let me explain

The first thing we need to understand, is we **all** have pre-conceived ideas of what we believe about God... And whenever we read the Bible, (without even thinking about it), we tend to filter it through the lens of what we already believe...

It might be:

- what we've been taught
- the theology of the denomination we're in
- the prevailing popular belief; or
- something that I desperately want to be true...

And with these thoughts and these pre-conceived ideas, we tend to inject our own ideas/meaning into the passage... This is what's called "eisegesis" – we put our own meaning into the passage...

Now of course, that's not a good thing. The **best** way to read and understand the Scriptures, and the only way (with integrity) to do it, is with what's called "exegesis" – "ex" meaning out of – We get our understanding out from the Scriptures, instead of projecting **our** meaning into the Scriptures.

Are you with me?

e.g.

A Calvinist has 5 principles (they've been taught), that they have to believe to be a Christian. One of those principles is, "Once Saved Always Saved" – alright so, if I become a Christian, even if later on, I decide I don't want to be a Christian, and I hate Jesus, then that just can't happen. – once I'm saved, I'm always saved...

And so when a Calvinist reads a passage, where it seems pretty obvious that we're being urged to keep on in the faith, and if we don't keep on in the faith, then we're going to hell, they don't even consider that... *In fact, I've heard Bible teacher say, "Well, it sounds like it's saying this, but it can't possibly be saying this, because we know we can't lose our salvation, so it must mean something else,,* And then they proceed to explain away what the Scripture's actually clearly saying...

Here's a second example:
Some people believe in the prosperity theology – God wants you to be healthy and wealthy, and you will never be sick or poor... And they read the scriptures, and where God is speaking of **spiritual** blessings, they interpret this through the lens of what they believe, and they turn it into immediate physical blessings..

John 10:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

And if you believe the Prosperity Gospel, you filter that through the lens of current material blessings, and that's what you believe,,,, – and an “abundant life” is equated to physical worldly blessings...

Which is an extremely shallow understanding of the Gospel ... Surely the abundant life, is that we are made spiritually alive in Christ, and receive eternal life...

So, it's really important that we recognise this – the temptation to filter the Scriptures through the lens of what we believe...

Do you know what I've found? – It's the way that the Scriptures seem to continually challenge my underlying assumptions about God, and the joy of the way the Scriptures reveal God as God is (that is if I let it)...

2. Never study one verse on its own, or even one paragraph on its own.

Read (**at least**) a chapter or 2 before it and a chapter or 2 after it. There's an old saying that says, "*a text taken out of context, becomes a pretext*"...

A few weeks ago, Robyn and I attended church in another town and the preacher told us that to be good, spirit-filled Christians, we **all** had to speak in tongues... And he quoted **half** of 1 Corinthians 14:4... which says, **The one who speaks in a tongue edifies/(builds up) himself...**

And he said, this is a good thing – we should all be wanting to be developing ourselves in Christ – “Who doesn't want to be built-up in Christ?” he said, and therefore we should all learn to speak in tongues...

But what's the remainder of that verse say??? **1 Corinthians 14: (ESV) 4** **The one who speaks in a tongue builds up**

himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.

And in this section of 1 Corinthians, the actual message is:

- “We **don’t** all have the same spiritual gifts”.
- We all have different gifts, but together we make one body.
- The purpose of the Spiritual Gifts, is **not** to build ourselves up, but to build up the church.
- Therefore, the gift of tongues, is the **least** of the gifts – seek the gifts that **are** going to build up the church

You see, taking half a verse, completely out of its context, that preacher gave the exact opposite message to what the bible teaches.

But there’s other ways to take a text out of context. There’s the historical context...

3. We need to ask the question, “What did this passage mean to the original hearers, and how do I apply it today?” — Talking about ‘Understanding the historical context’

e.g.

In 1 Corinthians 11, there’s a passage about how, when women pray and prophesy, they should have their head covered... And that’s the reason some women wear a hat to church today. *I notice that none of you are wearing a hat to church... Why not???* Well, it’s because we understand (in the context of the whole passage), it’s not **about** headwear –

it's about how through traditions, we honour and submit to those authority

1 Corinthians 11:2-3 (ESV)

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

Now, in their culture, to honour their husband, and as a sign of their marriage to their husband, the married woman would wear a head covering....

That's not the sign of a married woman in our culture, is it....

What's the sign in our culture???

- A wedding ring??? Yeah, what else?;

A question we nearly always get asked at a wedding practice, is, "When I sign the marriage register, do I sign my maiden name? Or do I sign my married name???"

And at the signing of the marriage register, that's the last time a woman will sign her maiden name...

However, some women choose to keep their maiden name. Or choose to take on a hyphenated name...

And (I've never had to do this), but I've already decided, that if a bride chooses to **not** take on her husband's surname, I will refuse to marry them, because they're wanting to remain separate, and they're refusing to submit to one another...

Alright, it's not about head-wear – it's about how wives (in the traditions of their society) submit to their husbands, and about how men submit to Christ... And so (If I'm outside), I do remove my hat during prayer..., because that's how I submit to Christ...

Alright, are you with me – it's the cultural context – it's not about wearing a hat – it's about submitting to one another...

And the 4th Rule I apply

4. Scripture helps to interpret Scripture – we use 'clear' passages to interpret 'unclear' passages.

And we had an example of that today:

Paul had already made a clear case from Scripture that was easy to understand, and then he gives us this 'out-of-the-box' allegorical interpretation (but his interpretation was based on other clear Scripture).

Let me give you another example:

John 3 Jesus says to Nicodemus:

John 3:3(ESV) "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

What does it mean to be "born again"?

And then by way of explanation, Jesus goes on:

John 3:5 (ESV)

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Clear as mud... He said that, but if we take that on its own, we still don't know what it means.

But when we get into some of Paul's letters, we realise that baptism is dying with Christ, and then being raised again with Him. And in Peter's 1st letter, he talks about how we are born again, to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ...

Clear scriptures, help to interpret unclear Scriptures...

Alright, so that's 4 simple rules I stick to...

But I want to encourage you:

You don't have to be an academic to read and understand the Bible.

- If we love Jesus, we'll love reading His word;
- If we want God to transform us and make us more like His son, we won't be trying to twist the scriptures, or make them say what they're not saying
- we won't be focused on worldly stuff;

- We will let the Word of God challenge us and transform us.
- And in this, we will come to know Him better.

Let's Pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your word.

We thank You that You reveal Yourself in the written Word.

And Lord, we Pray,

That You would always help us to study Your word with integrity;

That we would submit ourselves to You,

To be shaped and formed, by You.

By Your Holy Spirit:

give us understanding;

Give us knowledge;

Help us to know You;

in the Name of Christ Jesus Our Lord,

Amen.