

Homiletics Analysis: Galatians 4

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Galatians 4 advances Paul's argument from chapter 3 by moving from legal and scriptural demonstration to personal and covenantal demonstration. The chapter opens with the heir-under-guardians analogy (vv. 1–7): before the fullness of time, God's people were like minor heirs — owners in title but slaves in practice, held under the elemental principles of the world. But when the fullness of time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons. The Spirit of the Son is then sent into our hearts, confirming our status: no longer slave but son, and if son then heir. Paul then pivots to a pastoral rebuke (vv. 8–11): the Galatians are turning back to the weak and worthless elemental things, observing days and months and seasons and years — their law-keeping is a reversion to bondage, not an advance in godliness. Paul moves from doctrinal rebuke to personal appeal (vv. 12–20): he reminds them of their prior reception of him despite his infirmity, contrasting the false teachers' flattering pursuit of the Galatians' allegiance with his own travail-like labor for their formation in Christ. The chapter closes with the Sarah-Hagar allegory (vv. 21–31): the two women represent two covenants — Hagar the covenant of Sinai producing slavery, Sarah the covenant of promise producing freedom. The children of the freewoman, not the slave, are heirs; the Galatians are called to cast out the bondwoman and her son and stand in the freedom into which they were born.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to break the Galatians' confused attraction to law-keeping as a means of spiritual advancement by confronting them with the full weight of what they already possess in Christ. The passage is not primarily intellectual — it is an urgent pastoral summons. Paul is writing like a mother in labor, not like a theologian at a desk. God's intent through this chapter is to produce grief, recognition, and decisive turning — to make the Galatians feel the absurdity and tragedy of choosing slavery over sonship, to awaken them to their actual status in Christ, and to stiffen their resolve against a gospel that is no gospel. The three movements (doctrinal, personal, allegorical) work together to reach the reader at the level of understanding, affection, and identity simultaneously.

Subject Sentence: Full sonship through Christ has replaced every form of religious slavery.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every form of spiritual regression — every return to law-keeping, religious performance, or elemental obligation — by anchoring the believer’s identity unmovably in the adopted sonship secured by the Son of God Himself. To go back is not to advance; it is to choose a slave’s status over an heir’s inheritance.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of the “elemental principles” (*stoicheia*, vv. 3, 9)

The term *stoicheia tou kosmou* (“elemental principles of the world”) has generated significant interpretive discussion. Three main readings exist. First, the Reformers and much of the Reformed tradition read *stoicheia* as referring to the Mosaic law in its pre-Christ, elementary-schoolmaster function — the rudimentary religious arrangements (dietary laws, calendar observances, circumcision) that governed God’s people before the fullness of time. Second, many scholars, including some in the New Perspective tradition, read *stoicheia* as cosmic spirit-powers or angelic mediators, connecting the term to Colossians 2:8, 20 and Greco-Roman astrological or demonological usage. Third, a mediating position reads *stoicheia* as basic religious principles common to both Jewish Torah-observance and Gentile paganism — a deliberately broad term Paul uses to indict both Jewish law-keeping and Gentile religious observance under the same category of pre-Christ bondage.

The context of Galatians 4 is decisive. In verse 8, Paul addresses Gentiles who “did not know God” and were enslaved to “those that by nature are not gods.” In verse 9, he describes the Galatians’ turn to “weak and worthless elemental things” as a return to this former bondage. Crucially, the specific practices Paul cites in verse 10 — “days and months and seasons and years” — are Mosaic calendar observances. Paul is treating Jewish Torah-observance and Gentile idolatry as instances of the same category of pre-Christ, this-age religious bondage. The Reformed reading is substantially correct: the *stoicheia* are the rudimentary religious arrangements of the old age, epitomized by but not limited to the Mosaic law. The cosmic-powers reading requires importing assumptions from Colossians that the Galatian context does not support. The mediating position is the most textually defensible — Paul is deliberately indicting both Jewish and Gentile religion under the same category to make the point that the Galatians’ turn to Torah-keeping is no different in kind from their former paganism. Both are slavery; both are the wrong age; both are superseded by the fullness of time.

The Sarah-Hagar allegory and its hermeneutical implications (vv. 21–31)

Paul’s use of the word *allegoroumena* (“which things are being allegorized,” v. 24) has prompted two distinct interpretive debates. The first is hermeneutical: does Paul’s use of allegory here license allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament generally? The second is typological: what exactly is Paul claiming about the two women and two covenants?

On the hermeneutical question, both Lutheran and Reformed interpreters insist that Paul is not licensing freestanding allegory but engaging in typological-prophetic interpretation: the historical events of Genesis genuinely prefigure the two covenants. Paul himself insists on the historicity of both women and both sons — he is not treating the Genesis narrative as fictional. This is the correct reading. Paul uses *allegoroumena* to describe what he is doing with the text, but the substance of his reading is typological — the historical events carry a divinely-intended deeper meaning that Paul is authorized as an apostle to unfold. This passage does not license private allegorizing of Old Testament narratives.

On the typological substance: the identification of Sinai with Hagar and Hagar with “the Jerusalem that now is” is theologically jarring and deserves careful handling. Paul is not saying that Israel was never God’s people or that the Mosaic covenant was satanic in origin. He is making a temporal-covenantal argument: Sinai, functioning as a law-covenant, belongs to the old age and produces slavery; the Abrahamic promise belongs to the new age and produces freedom. The “Jerusalem above” is the eschatological community of the free — the church as heir of the Abrahamic promise. Dispensationalist readings that see a future Jerusalem as fulfillment of the “Jerusalem above” read against Paul’s argument: Paul’s “Jerusalem above” is a present reality (“is our mother,” v. 26), not a future Jerusalem. The Reformed reading — that the church is the true heir of Abraham, the child of the freewoman — is both textually grounded and consistent with Paul’s argument throughout Galatians.

The nature of Paul’s “infirmity” (v. 13)

Paul’s reference to “an infirmity of the flesh” as the occasion of his first preaching to the Galatians has generated considerable speculation: eye disease (connecting to v. 15’s “you would have gouged out your eyes”), malaria, epilepsy, and various other conditions have been proposed. For homiletical purposes, the specific condition is unknowable and irrelevant. What matters is Paul’s point: his physical condition might have been a reason for the Galatians to despise him, yet they received him as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. The contrast between their initial reception and their current drift is the rhetorical point. No significant divergence among orthodox traditions on this point.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 16–17, 21** — The historical events Paul allegorizes. Hagar and Ishmael represent birth after the flesh; Sarah and Isaac represent birth by promise and divine intervention. The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21:10 is directly quoted by Paul in v. 30 as scriptural warrant for the Galatians’ rejection of the Judaizers.
- **Romans 8:14–17** — The closest Pauline parallel to the heir/slave/adoption argument of vv. 1–7. “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” The Spirit of sonship groans in the believer; the inheritance is

certain; the status is irrevocable. Romans 8 supplies the same pneumatological grounding that Galatians 4 assumes.

- **Isaiah 54:1** — Quoted in v. 27. “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear.” Isaiah’s eschatological promise of the restoration and fruitfulness of Zion supplies Paul’s typological reading of Sarah: the free woman’s apparent barrenness becomes the mother of many nations. The Abrahamic-covenantal promise runs through Isaiah’s new-covenant hope.
- **John 8:31–36** — Jesus’ own “slave vs. son” distinction: “The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Jesus identifies the same categories Paul deploys. The Son’s freedom is permanent; the slave’s residence is conditional. This grounds Paul’s argument Christologically.
- **Hebrews 3:1–6** — Moses as faithful servant in God’s house; Christ as Son over God’s house. The servant/son distinction in Hebrews reinforces the temporal-covenantal argument of Galatians 4: Moses’ ministry, honored as it was, belonged to the preparatory age; Christ’s ministry inaugurates the fullness. Believers are the house over which Christ rules as Son.

Aim: To expose the tragedy of spiritual regression and anchor the believer immovably in the adopted sonship secured by Christ, so that no form of religious performance is mistaken for gospel advance.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4:1–2	The minor heir analogy: a child who is heir is no different from a slave until the date set by the father	Sets up the “before/after fullness of time” framework
4:3	“We also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elemental principles of the world”	Applies the analogy to pre-Christ humanity, Jew and Gentile alike
4:4–5	“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the	The densest Christological and soteriological statement in the chapter; incarnation, law-fulfillment, redemption, adoption — all in two verses

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	law, that we might receive adoption as sons”	
4:6	“Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”	Spirit as seal and confirmation of sonship; crying “Abba” is itself evidence of adopted status
4:7	“So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God”	Definitive statement of status; inheritance is through God’s act, not the believer’s performance
4:8–9	Rebuke: formerly enslaved to false gods; now turning back to weak and worthless elemental things — “how can you turn back again?”	“Again” is Paul’s pointed word — this is not progress, it is regression
4:10	“You observe days and months and seasons and years”	Specific Mosaic calendar observances; Paul treats these as symptoms of the deeper disease
4:11	“I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain”	Paul’s pastoral anguish; fear, not certainty, but deep concern
4:12	“Become as I am, for I also have become as you are”	Paul’s reciprocity appeal — he became a Gentile to them; now let them become free as he is
4:13–14	Reminder of Paul’s physical infirmity and the Galatians’ reception of him despite it	Establishes the personal bond and their prior spiritual discernment
4:15	“What then has become of your blessedness?”	Rhetorical question marking the collapse of their initial joy
4:16	“Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?”	Paul names the inversion: truth-telling now experienced as hostility
4:17	The false teachers’ flattering pursuit — they want to exclude the Galatians so the Galatians will pursue them	Diagnosis of the Judaizers’ motive: not love but leverage
4:18–19	Paul’s maternal imagery —	“Christ formed in you” is the

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	he is in anguish like a woman in labor until Christ is formed in them	goal of authentic pastoral ministry
4:20	Paul's wish to be present and change his tone — his perplexity	The letter is a substitute for presence; Paul is at a pastoral loss
4:21–23	The allegory introduced: two sons of Abraham — one by slave woman (born of flesh), one by free woman (born through promise)	Paul addresses those who “desire to be under the law” — this is directed at those who think they are choosing wisely
4:24–27	Allegorical interpretation: Hagar = Sinai covenant = present Jerusalem = slavery; Sarah = covenant of promise = Jerusalem above = freedom; Isaiah 54:1 quoted	Paul's typological reading of the Genesis narrative as covenantal argument
4:28	“Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise”	Direct application of the allegory to the Galatian believers
4:29	“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”	The persecution pattern is historically recapitulated; the Judaizers are Ishmael to the Galatians' Isaac
4:30–31	Genesis 21:10 quoted — “Cast out the slave woman and her son”; conclusion: “we are not children of the slave but of the free woman”	The chapter's decisive conclusion: act on your status; the allegory demands a response

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	4:1–7	From Slave to Son: The Fullness of Time and the Adoption of Heirs
2	4:8–11	The Tragedy of Regression: Choosing Slavery After Sonship

Division	Verses	Label
3	4:12–20	Paul’s Pastoral Anguish: The Contrast Between True and False Shepherds
4	4:21–31	The Allegory of the Two Covenants: Children of Promise, Not of the Slave

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Full sonship through Christ has replaced every form of religious slavery.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every form of spiritual regression — every return to law-keeping, religious performance, or elemental obligation — by anchoring the believer’s identity unmovably in the adopted sonship secured by the Son of God Himself. To go back is not to advance; it is to choose a slave’s status over an heir’s inheritance.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize what you already possess before you reach for anything more.

(*Mind/Belief*) The Galatians were not lacking something that the Judaizers could supply — they were failing to reckon with what they already had. The Spirit of the Son was already in their hearts, already crying “Abba, Father,” already marking them as heirs. The first movement of gospel application in this passage is cognitive: sit with what vv. 4–7 actually claim. God sent His Son. God sent His Spirit. You are a son, not a slave. You are an heir, not a probationer. Any spiritual discipline, practice, or religious structure that you are treating as the means by which you become more accepted, more secure, or more fully God’s — that structure is a lie about your status. The text calls you to know, with full confidence, what has already been accomplished and already given.

2. Grieve the ways you have reverted to religious performance as the currency of your standing before God. (*Affections/Worship*) Paul asks the Galatians, “What has become of your blessedness?” — meaning: where did the joy go? There was a moment when the gospel landed and they were undone by it. Then the teachers came, and the observances crept in, and the joy quietly drained away. Self-examination is warranted here. Not “am I doing enough?” but “have I, somewhere along the way, stopped resting in the Father’s love and started working to secure it?” The appropriate emotional register in response to this passage is grief — not guilt-spiral, but genuine grief at having treated an inheritance like a wage. Let Paul’s perplexity (v. 20) and maternal anguish (v. 19) register as the proper response to wasted sonship. The heirs of God should feel the weight of what they have nearly given away.

3. Identify the specific “elemental things” — the weak and worthless structures — to which you have reverted. (*Will/Behavior*) Paul’s rebuke in vv. 9–10 is concrete: days, months, seasons, years. He names practices, not abstractions. The application must be equally concrete. For the contemporary believer, the *stoicheia* may not be Mosaic calendar observances — but their functional equivalents are not hard to find: the belief that regular quiet times establish your standing with God; the anxiety that a week of spiritual failure puts you at a distance from Him; the sense that confession must be sufficiently emotional to be valid; the performance of visible Christian activity to secure your own sense of belonging. Name it. Paul asks for recognition, not vague acknowledgment. What specific practice or pattern are you treating as though it upgrades your status before God? That is where the casting out (v. 30) must happen.

4. Receive the pastoral care of those who labor for Christ to be formed in you, and be suspicious of those who labor for your allegiance. (*Mind/Belief*) Paul’s diagnosis of the false teachers in v. 17 is surgical: “They make much of you, but not for a good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.” The false shepherd’s labor terminates on himself — he needs you to need him. The true shepherd’s labor terminates on Christ in you (v. 19) — he needs you to not need him, because he needs Christ to be your sufficiency. The contemporary church is not lacking for teachers who will make much of their congregants in order to create dependence. The believer must learn to distinguish flattery that creates obligation from truth-telling that creates freedom. Ask of any teacher: does this person’s ministry increase my dependence on Christ or on them?

5. Act on your identity as a child of the free woman — stand in the freedom that is yours by birth, not by achievement. (*Will/Behavior*) The allegory of Sarah and Hagar does not end with a theological conclusion — it ends with a command: “Cast out the slave woman and her son” (v. 30). Paul is not offering a metaphysical observation about covenant structure. He is issuing a directive. The Galatians must act: they must remove the Judaizers from their community and from their theological imagination. For the contemporary believer, the application is the same in structure: freedom is not a feeling that descends; it is a standing that is claimed and acted upon. You do not earn your way into sonship incrementally — you were born into it at regeneration. Stop conducting yourself as a slave waiting to be promoted. Stand in the freedom of the child of the free woman — which means refusing, concretely and decisively, every religious system that offers to improve upon what Christ has already secured.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Galatians 4 contains one of the most compressed and powerful accounts of the incarnation’s purpose in all of Paul’s letters: “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (vv. 4–5). The Son entered every category that enslaved us — humanity, time, the law’s demands — precisely in order to exhaust those categories on

our behalf and replace them with a new status entirely. The doctrine of adoption (*huiiothesia*) is not peripheral but central here: sonship is the goal of redemption, not merely its byproduct. God's purpose in sending His Son was to create sons and daughters — heirs of His own estate, addressed by His own family name, confirmed by His own Spirit. The passage also teaches that the Spirit is not given as a reward for spiritual achievement but as a seal of legal status: because you are sons, God sent the Spirit (v. 6) — not so that you might become sons, but because you already are.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Galatians 4 is a masterclass in the Reformed distinction between law and gospel operating at the level of covenantal history. The *pedagogos* of chapter 3 and the *stoicheia* of chapter 4 together describe the preparatory function of the Mosaic economy: not evil, not salvific, but temporary — fitted to an age now definitively superseded. The fullness of time (v. 4) is an eschatological marker: something irreversible has occurred in history that changes the nature of the human relationship to God permanently. This grounds the Reformed insistence that justification is by grace through faith alone: the law's period of elementary guardianship is over, and any re-imposition of it as a condition of standing — whether in the form of circumcision in Galatia or works-righteousness in any form — is not rigor but regression. The Sarah-Hagar allegory further cements the Reformed understanding of the church as the true heir of the Abrahamic promise: the covenant of grace runs from Abraham through Isaac through Christ to the church, and the Sinai covenant, rightly understood, was always a subordinate administration of that one covenant of grace — not a rival covenant of works. The Judaizers were not offering an alternative path to the same destination; they were offering bondage dressed as advancement.

Main Takeaway

You are not a slave on probation — you are a son and heir, and the Spirit of the Son of God is already in your heart as the irrefutable proof. Every religious system that offers to improve upon that status is not helping you advance; it is persuading you to trade an inheritance for a wage. Cast it out. Stand where Christ has placed you.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the Sarah-Hagar allegory as an invitation to allegorize the Old Testament generally.** Paul's use of *allegoroumena* does not authorize readers or preachers to discover hidden spiritual meanings in Old Testament narratives at will. Paul is engaged in apostolically authorized typological interpretation — the

historical events genuinely prefigure the covenantal realities he describes. The preacher should make clear that Paul is reading typologically, not abandoning the literal-historical meaning, and should not use this passage to justify undisciplined allegorical preaching from the Old Testament.

- **Moralistic application of vv. 12–20 — “Be like Paul, not like the false teachers.”** The personal section of the chapter is deeply moving, and it is tempting to use it primarily as a character study in authentic versus manipulative ministry. But Clowney’s anti-moralism principle applies: the passage is not primarily teaching us to emulate Paul’s pastoral style. Paul invokes his own example because it is the living embodiment of the gospel he is defending — he became as a Gentile (v. 12), gave up his own comfort and status, in direct parallel to Christ’s entry into our condition. The application should move through Paul’s example to the gospel it enacts, not terminate on Paul’s example.
- **Softening the rebuke of vv. 8–11 into generic exhortation.** Paul does not say “I gently encourage you to reconsider your practices.” He says “I am afraid I have labored over you in vain” (v. 11). The pastoral tone of this chapter is urgent, anguished, and at points almost bewildered. A preacher who domesticates this into mild correction misses the stakes Paul is insisting upon. Gospel regression is not a minor adjustment issue — it is, in Paul’s view, a near-total collapse of the gospel itself. The preaching must carry something of Paul’s alarm.
- **Failing to connect vv. 4–5 to the rest of the chapter.** Galatians 4:4–5 is among the most cited texts in all of Scripture for the theology of the incarnation, and it is tempting to spend the entire exposition there. But the point of the incarnation statement is the adoption statement that follows — and the adoption statement is precisely what makes the Galatians’ regression so absurd and tragic. The fullness-of-time Christology is not the chapter’s resting point; it is the launch point for everything that follows. Do not let the congregation rest in the beauty of the incarnation without feeling the force of what it means for their status and their choices.
- **Dispensationalist misreading of “the Jerusalem above” (v. 26).** Some dispensational interpreters read the “Jerusalem above” as a reference to a future millennial or eternal Jerusalem, and connect it to promises about national Israel. Paul’s present tense is decisive: “the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” — present, not future; corporate, not national. The “Jerusalem above” is the eschatological community of the redeemed, the heavenly city in which believers already hold citizenship (cf. Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 12:22). To redirect this toward a future geopolitical Jerusalem is to import a framework Paul’s argument does not support and to miss his point about the church’s identity as heir of the Abrahamic promise.

- **Abstracting the application of v. 30 (“Cast out the slave woman and her son”) into purely internal categories.** It is natural to spiritualize the “casting out” as a private, internal rejection of legalistic tendencies. And that application is legitimate as far as it goes. But Paul’s immediate referent is ecclesial and concrete: the Judaizers must be removed from the Galatian churches. The passage warrants not only personal application (renounce legalism in your own heart) but ecclesial application (churches must guard their gospel boundaries and not give false teachers a platform under the banner of tolerance). The preacher should not shy away from the communal and structural dimension of Paul’s command.