

Galatians 4:21-31

Two Covenants

Many years ago Bob Dylan sang these words, "you're gonna have to serve somebody... it may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you're gonna have to serve somebody." And so the only way to be truly free is to be biblically free. Whenever we do not believe and obey the Word of God we become enslaved to something else. Our Lord Jesus declared,

If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.
(John 8:31, 32)

Sadly, however, sometimes we forget the truth. Or we say that we love the Bible, but we fall short of believing what it says. Or we say we will obey it, but then fail to obey. Sometimes we are ignorant of what Scripture really teaches, because we have taken someone's word on the topic without checking it out ourselves.¹

The Pharisees were in error like this. They were meticulous in observing the Old Testament law even to the point of tithing their herbs. But they failed in showing mercy, justice and faith.² The Galatians were caught up in a similar dilemma. They had been deceived by false teachers to reject new covenant truths and to follow old covenant law in order to be righteous before God.

But neither the Galatians nor their false teachers really understood the Old Testament law. So as we begin our final section of Galatians 4, the apostle launches a missile of truth in the form of a question.

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?
(Galatians 4:21)

It is ironic that these believers are embracing the Old Testament law in order to be righteous before God, when the Old Testament law itself states that you cannot do that. Here is what Paul had said earlier in Galatians 3.

¹ Acts 17:11

² Matthew 23:23

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them."
(Galatians 3:10)

This quotation is from Deuteronomy 27:26. And it tells us that failure in any one aspect of the law brings about divine judgment and condemnation. You could obey two hundred and ninety-nine laws, but if you broke the three hundredth law, well, you're cooked! This is why under the Old Testament system there were various sacrifices for sins.

Now, in verse 21 Paul is using the word "law" (the Hebrew word is "Torah") in two ways. One is the law itself with the commandments and rituals. The other way is to mean the first five books of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy. Paul is going to recount a true story from Genesis. And so in his question he is saying in effect, "OK, you want to be under the Torah? Then listen to what Torah teaches."

Paul will tell the story of Abraham and Sarah and Sarah's servant Hagar and their sons, Ishmael and Isaac. There are three stages in his argument. The first he retells the historical account. Then secondly, he interprets it symbolically or allegorically. Then finally he makes it personal.

In the historical section Paul reminds us that Abraham had two sons. Ishmael was the son of a woman who was a slave. Isaac was the son of Sarah, Abraham's wife and a free woman. In the symbolic section these two sons and their mothers represent two covenants; a covenant of bondage, which is the Old Covenant. And the covenant of freedom, which is the New Covenant.

Then in the final section all of this is made personal. If we are saved by God's grace through faith in Christ we are free and sons of the promise and of God's Spirit. If we place ourselves under the Old Testament law we are slaves and sons of the flesh, like Ishmael. And the flesh will always persecute those of the Spirit. Let's begin.

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?
²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. ²³ But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the

freewoman through promise,
(Galatians 4:21-23)

After centuries of human wandering after Adam's sin, God revealed His plan to bless the world through Abraham. God promise to make Abraham the father of many nations and that through his seed, or descendant, the whole world would be blessed. But years went by and Abraham had no children.

So Abraham's wife Sarah devised a plan for Abraham to have a son by her slave Hagar. This was a form of surrogacy practiced by the pagan people of the land. Abraham went into Hagar and she gave birth to Abraham's son Ishmael. Many years later, by a miracle of God, Sarah gave birth to Abraham's son Isaac.

A point of supreme boasting for Jews was that they were descendants of Abraham and thus a blessed people. But Abraham had two sons. And one was God promised and given and blessed and that was Isaac. And the other was the work of the flesh and of sin, and that was Ishmael. Just being a descendant of Abraham did not make you special before God. John the Baptist tried to make this truth clear in his day and time. In Matthew 3, he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees,

and do not think to say to yourselves,
'We have Abraham as *our* father.'
For I say to you that God is able to
raise up children to Abraham from
these stones.
(Matthew 3:9)

The apostle now explains what John really meant. The true children of Abraham are not those simply with a Jewish pedigree, but those who are spiritual; those who are of the faith of Abraham. Paul stated this before in Galatians 3:26-29 saying,

For you are all sons of God through
faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For as many of
you as were baptized into Christ have
put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew
nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female; for you
are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you
are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed,
and heirs according to the promise.

Being united to Christ we are sons of Abraham by faith. It is not enough just to be a physical descendant of Abraham to be blessed. You must believe in God's promise of salvation by grace through the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. There are physical descendants of Abraham and there are true spiritual children of Abraham.³ Paul sees this illustrated in Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Both sons had Abraham as their father, but there were two very important differences. The first difference was that they had different mothers.

Tell me, you who desire to be under
the law, do you not hear the law?
22 For it is written that Abraham had
two sons: the one by a bondwoman,
the other by a freewoman. **23** But he
who was of the bondwoman was born
according to the flesh, and he of the
freewoman through promise,
(Galatians 4:21-23)

Ishmael's mother was a slave—Sarah's servant. Isaac's mother was a free woman—Abraham's wife. Each son received the consequence of those facts. Ishmael was born into slavery, Isaac was free. The second difference was the different events that brought about their births. Again, verse 23,

But he *who was of the bondwoman*
was born according to the flesh, and
he of the freewoman through promise,

Ishmael was born according to the flesh. Some Bibles translate that phrase as "born in the course of nature." But the more literal "flesh" brings out two meanings. First, Ishmael came into being by natural, physical processes. Secondly, he was born by the human reasoning (actually scheming!) and unbelief of Abraham and Sarah. And all that this scheme did was give birth to a slave. Isaac's birth was different.

But he *who was of the bondwoman*
was born according to the flesh, and
he of the freewoman through promise,

Isaac was not born according to the flesh, but through God's promise. The promise of God and His faithfulness to His Word was the means by which Isaac was born. And as we will read in verse 28, by the power of God's Spirit. We read in Romans 4 that Abraham was about 100 years old and his body dead in terms

³ Romans 4:13-17

of reproduction. Sarah was about 90 years old and her womb was barren. So Ishmael was born according to the flesh. Isaac was born supernaturally.

In much the same way those two births mirror our salvation. When we are born the first time we are born of the flesh and we are slaves to sin. But when we are saved and born again we are born through God's promise and of His Spirit. This was not just history for Paul. It was symbolic of a deeper truth and an example for all of us. When writing about Old Testament events in Corinthians Paul wrote,

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

(1 Corinthians 10:11)

The apostle Paul understood that the story of Hagar and Sarah and Isaac and Ishmael teaches us that we are a slave to sin by our fleshly nature, or we become free, children of God being born again by believing God's promise to us in Christ and by the power of His Spirit in us. Paul's comparison continues.

But he *who* was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴ which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— ²⁵ for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—

(Galatians 4:23-25)

Hagar was the perfect woman to represent the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant meant slavery to the law and she herself was a slave. And her son was born into slavery. So anyone who is still in bondage to legalism is one of Hagar's spiritual children. Anyone who reduces Christianity to a set of rules is a slave like Hagar. Mount Sinai is where the Old Covenant was given to Moses.

When Paul mentions Jerusalem, he was speaking both geographically and allegorically. Jerusalem stands for people bound by the law to fleshly ordinances. This must have been a huge shock to the false teachers, because what Paul is doing is calling them Ishmaelites! This was like calling a Jew an Arab.

The false teachers prided themselves on the fact that they were the true sons of Abraham. But Paul said that they were spiritually bankrupt, illegitimate.

but the Jerusalem above is free,
which is the mother of us all.

27 For it is written:

“Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband.”
(Galatians 4:26, 27)

The Jerusalem which is above is the New Jerusalem mentioned in Revelation 21, which will come down out of heaven to a new earth. It will be the ultimate home of all of the redeemed. Do you remember in John 14:2 Jesus said, “In My Father’s house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you.” The New Jerusalem is what he was talking about. In the quote Paul applies a passage from Isaiah 54:1 to the New Jerusalem. Once it had no children except in the purposes of God, now it has millions upon millions! Paul continues.

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was,
are children of promise.
(Galatians 4:28)

God promised Abraham and Sarah a son and He performed the miracle that gave birth to Isaac. In the Old Covenant God made people responsible for keeping the covenant. There were commandments: “You shall do this and shall not do that.” But the New Covenant rests on God’s promises. In Jeremiah and Ezekiel, God said, “Behold, the day are coming...when I will make a new covenant...I will give you a new heart...I will put My Spirit in you.”⁴ In the New Covenant, all we have to do is believe God’s Word to us.

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was,
are children of promise. **29** But,
as he who was born according
to the flesh then persecuted him
who was born according to the Spirit,
even so *it is now.*
(Galatians 4:28, 29)

⁴ Jeremiah 31:31, Ezekiel 36:26

Ishmael mocked and scorned Isaac. And we must expect the same thing. The flesh always persecutes the spiritual. Unbelievers always persecute believers. Legalists always persecute those blessed by grace.

Nevertheless what does the Scripture say?

“Cast out the bondwoman and her son,
for the son of the bondwoman shall not
be heir with the son of the freewoman.

³¹ So then, brethren, we are not children
of the bondwoman but of the free.

(Galatians 4:30, 31)

When Paul quoted the words of Sarah from Genesis about Hagar, it was a not so subtle way of telling the Galatians to kick out the false teachers. Like Isaac we are children of God's promise; children of the free woman, the New Jerusalem. We are, all believers in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, black, white or brown, the true Israel of God.⁵ We are the true circumcision, having our hearts circumcised.⁶

The religion of the false teachers was the religion of the flesh, of Ishmael, of nature, of what man can do. But the religion of Paul is a supernatural religion—it is the work of God in Christ. As Peter wrote, when we believe God's good news to us in Christ, we become partakers of the divine nature.⁷ We are children of promise and of the Spirit—we are free in Christ!

Now, a question comes up—free from what and free for what? That's what we will begin to learn as we begin Galatians 5.

⁵ Galatians 6:16

⁶ Philippians 3:3

⁷ 2 Peter 1:4