

“Two Covenants”

March 16, 2025

Galatians 4:21-31

I. Introduction

In today’s Scripture Paul brought to a close his extended argument proving that, as he wrote in [Galatians 2:16](#), “**Man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.**” In his sixth and final argument, Paul used a method that was often used by skilled debaters in the ancient world—allegory. In an allegory or analogy, persons and actions represent hidden or symbolic meanings, so that a story, whether true or made up, can be read on two levels: the factual and the symbolic; think of Aesop’s Fables. Although allegory was a popular style of teaching among Jewish rabbis, Paul used it sparingly. It’s as if Paul had almost a sacred regard for the actual history of his people. But here, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul used an Old Testament story as an analogy or a figure of the two covenants in question, the Covenant of Law and the Covenant of Grace.

The Judaizers were teaching that if a person wanted to be saved, he must obey the Law, i.e., the first 5 books of the Old Testament, as well as believing on Jesus Christ. Using the same Scriptures—the Law, also called the Torah, Paul closed his argument using the familiar story of Ishmael and Isaac to prove that Christians are not under the Law. The events described actually happened, they are found in [Gen. 16-21](#); Paul used them as an allegory or spiritual symbols as well.

[2 Timothy 3:16](#) says that “**All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.**” Here in Galatians, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to see a hidden meaning of the Genesis’ story of Abraham, Sarah & Hagar, Isaac & Ishmael. But a note of caution, we are not free to find “*hidden meanings*” in all the events in the Old Testament. We must always interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, and where the New Testament gives us permission, we may search for hidden meanings. Otherwise, we must accept the statements of Scripture at face value and not try to “*spiritualize*” everything.

II. The Two Covenants

A. The Question Paul began his allegorical argument of the Two Covenants with the rhetorical question, “Are you not aware of what the law says?” Paul began his analogy by reminding his readers of the historical facts of the true story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.

B. The Historical Facts Since there isn’t time to read [Genesis 12 through 21](#) this morning, let me give a quick summary of Abraham’s life—you can, like the Bereans of [Acts 17:11](#), “Examine the Scriptures...to see if what [Paul I said was true](#)” later today. In [Genesis 12:1-9](#), at the age of 75, Abram—soon to be called Abraham—was called by God to leave his country and go to Canaan. [Turn to Genesis 12:1-5](#). Both Abraham and his wife, Sarai—soon to be called Sarah—wanted to have children and to be “[a great nation](#).” But there was one problem, [Genesis 11:30](#) explains, “[Now Sarai was barren; she had no children](#).” [Rom. 4:16-25](#) records that God was waiting until both of them were “[as good as dead](#)” before He would perform the miracle of sending them a son.

Ten years have passed, Abraham is now 85 and Sarah is 75. [Genesis 16:1-3](#) records that Sarah had become impatient and suggested that Abraham try to have a son by Hagar, her maid. This was permissible in society at that point in time, but it was not the will of God. Hagar got pregnant and Sarah got jealous. Things became so contentious that Sarah drove Hagar out. But God intervened and sent Hagar back. He promised to take care of her and her son.

And when Abraham was 86 years old, a son was born. Abraham named him Ishmael. Paul described this birth back in [Gal. 4:23](#), “[His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way](#).” A better translation would be: “[The son by the bondwoman \(or slave woman\) was born according to the flesh](#).” The birth of this son was “[according to the flesh](#),” not because it was physical, but because the scheme was devised by Sarah and carried out by Abraham. *Flesh means not according to God’s will.* Ishmaels’ birth was motivated by purely selfish desires and fulfilled by purely human means—this was the “*flesh*” in action; not God’s will.

When Abraham was 99, [Genesis 17 & 18](#) record that God “[appeared to](#)” Abraham and said in

Gen. 17:19, “Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac.” A short time later, God appeared again, turn to Genesis 18:10-15. When Abraham was 100, Isaac was born (Genesis 21:1-7). His birth created a new problem in the extended family—Ishmael now had a rival. For 14 years Ishmael had been Abraham’s one and only son—he had been spoiled by all those around but now things were different.

When Isaac was 3 and Abraham was 103, the troubles came to a head. At the feast celebrating Isaac’s weaning, Ishmael started to mock him and that was just the beginning of trouble in the home. There was only one solution: Hagar and her son had to go. Genesis 21:9-14 says that with a broken heart, Abraham sent them both away, because the Lord told him to. On the surface, this story seems to be nothing more than a tale of a family with problems. But through the leading of the Holy Spirit, Paul saw spiritual truths that are illustrated by the true story. He saw a Spiritual interpretation.

C. The Spiritual Interpretation Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul explained that “**the women**,” the slave woman Hagar and the free woman Sarah, “represent two covenants.” Hagar and Ishmael represented the covenant of law and works and corresponded to an earthly Jerusalem with the Pharisees and their laws. Sarah and Isaac represented the covenant of grace and faith and corresponded to a heavenly Jerusalem; Hagar & Sarah were flesh versus Spirit. Using basic facts about Hagar and Sarah, Paul demonstrated that the Law no longer has power over the Christian.

1. Grace came first; the Law came second. God didn’t begin with Hagar; He began with Sarah. Hagar came second. In His relationship with Abraham and with Israel, God first operated on the basis of grace, not Law. Like Sarah, grace came first. Abraham was redeemed—saved—through grace not works. Genesis 15:6 says, “**Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.**” When God delivered Israel from Egypt , it was on the basis of grace and not Law, the Law wasn’t given until after the Exodus from Egypt. Like Hagar, the Law came second. Galatians 3:19 says, “**What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.**”

2. The Law was a servant pointing out sin. Five times in these verses in Galatians, Hagar was called a “**slave**” or “**bondwoman**” depending on your translation. Hagar was a slave. Sarah was a free

woman, and therefore Sarah's place was one of liberty. Although she had a son with Abraham, Hagar was still a slave and was in bondage. She wasn't meant to be the mother of the children of promise. Similarly, the Law wasn't meant to be the "*spiritual mother of children of promise*" but as [Romans 3:20](#) says, "**Through the law we become conscious of sin.**" The Law was a servant—a servant of God—pointing out sin.

3. The Law cannot make anyone a child of God. Hagar wasn't meant to bear a child to Abraham. The birth of Ishmael to Hagar and Abraham wasn't God's will. It was the result of Sarah's and Abraham's impatience and unbelief; the birth was a work of the flesh, of sin. Hagar was trying to do what only Sarah could do, and Hagar failed. Similarly, the Law cannot give life or, for that matter, righteousness or the gift of the Holy Spirit or any spiritual inheritance—[turn to Galatians 3:21; 2:21; 3:2; 3:18](#). Like Hagar, the Law failed. The Law can't make anyone a child of God. Isaac was born Abraham's heir but not Ishmael. The Judaizers were trying to make Hagar a mother again by making the Law the way of salvation—the way of eternal life. But no amount of religion or legislation can create eternal life. Only Christ can do that though His life, death, and resurrection.

4. The Law leads to bondage and unhappiness. Hagar gave birth to a slave. Speaking of Ishmael, [Genesis 16:12](#) adds, "**He will be a wild donkey of a man.**" Even though he was a slave, i.e., under bondage, nobody could control him, not even his mother. Like Ishmael, the old nature, the flesh, is at war with God, and the Law cannot change or control it. [Galatians 5:17](#) says, "**For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.**" Paul was saying that whoever chooses Hagar (Law) for his mother is going to experience bondage, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness. Whoever chooses Sarah (grace) for his mother is going to enjoy liberty in Christ and have the "**peace that passeth understanding**" ([Philippians 4:7](#)).

5. The Law has been cast out. In [Genesis 21:10](#), Sarah said, "**Get rid of that slave woman and her son.**" And in [verse 12](#) God told Abraham, "**Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maid-servant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.**" Hagar and Ishmael were cast out. Ishmael had stayed in the home for over 17 years, but his stay wasn't

permanent—eventually he had to leave. There was no room in the household for both Hagar and Sarah; for Ishmael and Isaac.

Similarly, it is impossible for Law and grace, for the flesh and the Spirit, to compromise and stay together. Like Hagar, the Law has been cast out. In [Luke 22:20](#) Jesus said, “**This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you**” The break was permanent and final. The Judaizers in Paul’s day, like those in our day, were trying to reconcile Sarah and Hagar; Isaac and Ishmael. It is impossible to mix Law and grace, faith and works. God’s gift of righteousness and man’s attempts to earn righteousness are incompatible. [Galatians 2:16](#) says, “**Man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.**”

D. Paul’s Application Paul concluded with an application. Sarah had been barren, and she tried to become fruitful through Hagar and Abraham. This failed and brought only trouble—even to this day, the descendants of Ishmael, the Arabs, are fighting Israel. For 17 years Ishmael had caused no trouble at home; but when Isaac came along, there was conflict. Christians, like Isaac, are the children of promise by grace. The covenant of grace, pictured by Sarah, is the Christian’s spiritual mother. The Law and the old nature, like Hagar and Ishmael, want to persecute Christians and bring them into bondage. There is only one response, “**Get rid of the slave woman and her son.**” As Sarah expelled Hagar and her son, so the Galatian believers needed to expel those who were trying to impose the Law of Moses on Gentile converts as well as the Law itself.

The nation of Israel had been in bondage under the Law, but this was a temporary thing, preparing them for the coming of Christ. Now that Christ had come, the Law had to go. Jesus Christ, like Isaac, was a child of promise, born by the miraculous power of God. Once He had come and died for the world, the Law had to go. To attempt to mix Law and grace is to attempt the impossible. Paul was pleading with the Galatians to accept the freedom that was theirs, and not to be reshackled by the bondage of law.

III. Conclusion

Some churches and individual Christians make the same mistake the Galatians were making—they fail to cast out Hagar and Ishmael—the Law and the flesh. Legalism is one of the major problems among

Christians today. Legalism doesn't mean setting spiritual standards, legalism means worshipping these standards and thinking that one is spiritual because they are obeyed. It also means judging other believers on the basis of these manmade standards. A person can refrain from smoking, drinking, or even attending movies, and read his Bible every day and still not be spiritual. The Pharisees had high standards, but they crucified Jesus.

The legalists hate the gospel of the free grace of God. They insist that that one must do something or seek something from another source, sometimes even from the Holy Spirit, or go through some ceremony or do some community service in order to be really saved. But if something has to be done beyond believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, then Jesus' death on the cross was useless. The Christian who claims to be spiritual or saved because of what he does or doesn't do is only fooling himself.

But be careful, God does have expectations for each of His children. Christians are to be doing good deeds, [James 2:26](#) says, “**As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.**” [1 Peter 2:12](#) says, “**Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.**”

Turn to [1 Corinthians 3:11-15](#). There are really 2 thoughts in these verses: 1st on what do you base your salvation, i.e., what is your “**foundation**”? Putting it a different way, “*When you stand before God and He asks why you should be let into heaven, what is your answer going to be?*” [John 3:16](#) says, “**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**” If your answer is anything else but “**Jesus is my Lord and my Savior**” ([Romans 10:9](#)), the Bible says that you don't have the right foundation. A 2nd question is “**With what are you building?**” “*Why do you do the things you do?*” Don't get caught in the trap of the legalists—you aren't saved by doing good deeds or observing some “*religious*” activity—that's the “**wood, hay, or straw.**” Your good deeds are to bring praise to God—that's the “**gold, silver, and costly jewels.**” Jesus said in [Matthew 5:16](#), “**Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.**”