

## The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

### Lesson 13: Two Covenants (4:21 – 5:1)

Paul has just concluded his personal appeal to the Galatians, as from a father to a child, for them to once again hear the gospel of Christ and believe it! The Judaizers were hard at work, pursuing the Galatians with eager and constant reminders of the necessity of obedience to the prescribed Jewish law. They were hard at work against the gospel message of Christ crucified. They were hard at work to convince the minds of the newfound Christian believers that grace was not free, but that salvation required the keeping of the law, beginning with circumcision. These Judaizers were hard-after the Galatians, but clearly not for their spiritual welfare. And so Paul is pleading with the ones who once embraced the gospel, and saw its beauty. He is pleading with a broken heart over the ones who are being led astray by the same system of legal imprisonment that once restrained them. But now Paul moves to convincing them through the use of a good image from scripture.

There is nothing more that I love (as someone who has the blessing of expounding God's Word regularly) than making a point crystal clear through the usage of imagery. Now, some of you have heard many of my analogies, and you think that my analogies make things worse. If that's the case, you're in luck, because the teaching image from this lesson is from Paul...and it's a good one! So, let's dive into the text, and then we will break it down. Read [Galatians 4:21-5:1](#).

Paul begins with the facts, verses 21-23, **"Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise."**

Who is Paul referring to when he says, "Tell me, you..."? It's possible that Paul had the Galatians in mind here, he is after all writing to them. But it could also be possible that Paul had the whole of his detractors in mind. He might have just bunched everyone who lived on that side of the law into one group, and said, "Tell me, all of you who desire to be under the law." When Paul speaks of the law throughout the NT, he's typically referring to the entire Old Testament. But here, Paul is specifically referring to the Law of Moses, the Pentateuch, what we recognize to be the first five books of the Bible. These were the writings that the Jews clung to for eternal life. These were the texts that they hoped to find life and freedom in. Paul is about to show, once again, that the law brings only slavery. So Paul is going to make his point, using the very text that they held so tightly.

Next Paul asks his opposition the question, **"Do you not listen to the law?"** IOW, *"You quote the text, hope to have eternal life through the text. Are you ready to listen to the truth of what the law really says about life and freedom?"* Jesus, in His classic Sermon on the Mount, challenged the hearer to consider the heart and life of a person who would be saved. In Matthew 5:8, Jesus said, **"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."** And later in verse 48, Jesus set the bar high, **"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** Absolute perfection is the standard. Throughout the entire sermon, Jesus was expounding on the present truths of the law. He was meeting them at every point and challenging their interpretation of the text. He met the self-righteous people and stopped them in their tracks using their own text. How many times do you remember Jesus challenging the religious leaders of the day with the words, "Have you not read?" These people had a text, and they

thought they had an authoritative interpretation of it, but they were wrong. This is the same line of thinking that Paul has when he challenged them with, “Do you not listen to the law?”

Paul recalls three basic historical facts that were recorded in the book of Genesis. The first fact is that the scripture records that Abraham had two sons. The oldest son was Ishmael, born of Hagar, and the second came fourteen years later, Isaac, born of Sarah. The second fact that Paul recalls is the difference in the social status of these two mothers. Hagar was a slave-woman, while Sarah was free. And the third fact that Paul recalls is the manner of the birth between the two boys. Ishmael was born naturally as any other boy would have been, but Isaac’s birth was special. Isaac was the child of promise made by God to Abraham.

**Genesis 17:18-21, “And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”**

To refresh our minds, Abraham was promised by God to have a son when he was already an old man. Sarah had been barren her entire life, and she was well past child-bearing days. Many years had passed since the promise of God had been given, and his patience had run out. Sarah wasn’t getting pregnant, and so she had the idea of giving Abraham her servant Hagar. I would have thought that Abraham would have saw the sin in both having relations with another woman, and disbelieving God, taking matters into his own hands. But he didn’t. And so Ishmael was brought into the world. It wasn’t until fourteen years later that God’s promise would come to fruition. Abraham, now 100 years old, and Sarah, 90, finally gave birth to Isaac, the child of promise.

So where is Paul going with all of this? What does this have to do with the Galatians and their deviation from the gospel towards the law-keeping of the Judaizers? He’s painting a spiritual analogy, and he’s going to explain it in verses 24-27.

**Verse 24, “Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar.”**

Paul is being clear from the beginning that he is speaking allegorically. IOW, Paul isn’t interpreting the truths that Moses intended for the reader in Genesis. He’s taking the liberty of making a comparison, and using it as a teaching point. For this image, Paul explains that each woman (Hagar and Sarah) represent two covenants. Hagar is the woman who produces bondage. In those times, when a man would have a child with a slave-wife, his children were destined to be slaves themselves. Sarah is the woman who produces free children. Paul’s image show that the covenant of faith runs through Sarah and Isaac.

**Verse 25, “Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.”** Whenever we think of Mount Sinai or Jerusalem, we think of Jewish people, not Arabs. It was on Mount Sinai, of course, where the law was given to Moses, who then passed it along to the Jewish nation. This was the law that the Judaizers were presently misinterpreting, and they were using it to lure the Galatians away from the gospel, and back to them. So it’s important that we

pick up on Paul's clues as he paints this picture for us. Paul is first linking slavery with Arabia, and with the descendants of Ishmael from Hagar. Secondly, he is linking them with the law given on Mount Sinai. It's important that we actually interpret these things allegorically, as Paul asked us too in verse 24. Thirdly, he connects Hagar (and therefore Ishmael) along with their slavery, and the Law, to the *present Jerusalem*. If we are able to follow Paul's imagery, we will be able to see how Paul has just connected the Judaizers into the same slavery that is true of Hagar's descendants. This would have been an absolutely stunning statement to have made at that time. But Paul is trying to paint the Galatians the mental picture that the Judaizers were selling them the message of slavery once again, and they were buying it! This is what Paul meant when he mentions how Hagar is in slavery with her children. Anyone who would adhere to the law as their means of justification is accepting slavery instead of the freedom that the gospel brings.

Charles Spurgeon gives us a lengthy application to this allegory. He asks the question, "Where Did Your New Birth Come From?" Then he answers, *"How were you converted? Was it by yourself, by the persuasion of men, by carnal excitement—or was it by the operation of the Spirit of God? You profess to have been born again. From where did that new birth come? Did it come from God in consequence of His eternal purpose and promise, or did it come out of yourself? Was it your old nature trying to do better and working itself up to its best form? If so, you are Ishmael. Or was it you, being spiritually dead, and having no strength whatever to rise out of your lost estate, were visited by the Spirit of God, who put forth His divine energy and caused life from heaven to enter into you? Then you are Isaac. All will depend upon the commencement of your spiritual life and the source from which that life first proceeded. If you began in the flesh, you have gone on in the flesh, and in the flesh you will die."*

*Ordinary religion is nature gilded over with a thin layer of what is thought to be grace. Sinners have polished themselves up and brushed off the worst of the rust and the filth, and they think their old man is as good as new. This touching up and repairing of the old man is all very well and good, but it falls short of what is needed. You may wash the face and hands of Ishmael as much as you please, but you cannot make him into Isaac. You may improve nature, and the more you do the better for certain temporary purposes, but you cannot raise it into grace. There is a distinction at the very fountainhead between the stream which rises in the bog of fallen humanity and the river which proceeds from the throne of God.*

*Do not forget that our Lord Himself said, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). If you have not been born again from above, all your churchgoing or your chapel-going stands for nothing. Your prayers and your tears, your Bible readings, and all that have come from yourself only, can only lead to yourself. Water will naturally rise as high as its source, but no higher; that which begins with human nature will rise to human nature, but to the divine nature it cannot reach. Was your new birth natural or supernatural? Was it of the will of man or of God? Much will depend upon your answer to that question."*<sup>1</sup>

Verse 26, **"But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother."** As the allegorical picture continues to be painted, Paul speaks of the 'Jerusalem above'. Because he has just spoken of the 'present Jerusalem', linking them with slavery, it's logical that we'd assume that 'Jerusalem above' might be a future Jerusalem, but this isn't what Paul means. What Paul has in mind, is what he spoke of in Romans 9:6-7, **"But it is not as through the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through**

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Charles *Commentary: Galatians* Lexham Press, p.102-103

**Isaac shall your offspring be named.”** Paul’s point in both passages is that there is an earthly Jerusalem, run by its legalistic system of works-righteousness, descended from Ishmael. And there is a true Israel, who has been spiritually regenerated by God, descended from Isaac. As Romans 11:6 tells us, **“So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.”** Just as the church today is comprised of people chosen by the grace of God to receive new life through the provision of God’s Son, there was always a remnant of God’s chosen people Israel who were chosen by grace amongst a nation of people who were wayward. God is always the architect. Let’s read of Abraham’s faith in Hebrews 11:8-10, **“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”** God the Father is the One who builds, He is the One who calls, He is the One who makes promises and always delivers on them.

Paul uses the language of the Jerusalem above being our mother. This is clearly language that allegorically speaks of the source of life. The mother of Jerusalem above is Sarah, the free woman. The final application of this not being that there is anything special with Sarah, or Isaac, but simply that they were the ones whom the promise was made through. The inhabitants of Jerusalem above are those who are free from the attempt to justify themselves through works, as they are already justified by the finished work of Christ.

Verse 27, **“For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.”**

Here, Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1. These words, in context, were written to encourage the Jewish exiles who were in Babylonians captivity. But here, Paul chose to cite this verse, in connection with the barren one, Sarah, whose barrenness seemed to them the thing that would keep God’s promise of a son of ever coming true. Just as in Isaiah 54, freedom did come to the nation under captivity, so also did freedom come to the nation through the ultimate fulfilment of the promise to Abraham in Christ, descended through the line of Isaac.

In a sense, every Christian is a type of Sarah. We were, every one of us, barren and incapable of producing life in us. Sarah could have done, and probably did do, everything that she could to aid her efforts in producing life in her. But it wasn’t until God moved (in His right time), that life was given to her. So it is with us. Therefore, the Jerusalem above, the Heavenly Jerusalem, will be populated by men and women who had spiritual life breathed into their nostrils by the Holy Spirit of God Himself. This is always the manner by which God has operated. There are those who believe that the God of the New Testament is different towards people now than He was in the Old Testament. I hope that these verses have proven to you that God’s ways have never changed.

Verses 28 – 5:1, **“Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “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.” So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.”**

This is the third time in this letter that Paul has addressed the Galatian believers as brothers. (1:11, 4:12) Reminding them that they are children of the promise like Isaac was. How are believers like Isaac? As I've tried to stress just a few paragraphs ago, Isaac was a miraculous birth. The life of Isaac was the result of the supernatural hand of God upon an old, barren woman. And the Christian is likewise one who was born-again at a time later in their life by the merciful and gracious hand of God. When a Christian starts to understand their utter inability to save themselves, and when they recognize what God has done for them in saving them, He gets all of the praise and glory.

There are three principles that Paul brings out in our text that tell us what being like Isaac means for the Christian, one who is a child of promise. The first thing that the Christian ought to expect is persecution. Verse 29, **"But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now."** At that time, when Isaac and Ishmael were young men, there was an intense hatred by Ishmael towards Isaac. We see his hatred of Isaac early in the book of Genesis. In chapter 21, when Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned, **"Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham (this is what our passage in Galatians is quoting) "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. 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 (promise)." (Gen. 21:9-12)** This mocking laughter from the fourteen year old Ishmael towards his baby brother Isaac resulted in Sarah demanding that Hagar and Ishmael be put out from them, and they were. Like mother, like son, Hagar hated Sarah too, Genesis 16:4-5, **"And (Abraham) went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt."**

The hatred between the two boys led to great persecution of the descendants of Ishmael towards the descendants of Isaac. Throughout the rest of scripture we see it, and we still see it today. Those who hold fast to the doctrine of works-righteousness (the descendants of Ishmael) still persecute those who hold to a faith-in-Christ-alone salvation (the descendants of Isaac). Paul's message to the Galatians is to expect the same results, to expect the same persecution for their faith, since they are likewise children of promise.

Phil Ryken has some tough words on persecution that we should hear, *"Persecution is one way to tell the difference between true and false religion. Persecution is the opposition Christians face for speaking or doing God's will. It can include ridicule, loss, violence, and even martyrdom. One of the distinguishing marks of a real Christian is that they are willing to suffer persecution for their faith, and even to die for it. By contrast, it is false religion that always does the persecuting. So whenever people who claim to be religious start to oppress minorities, hate Jews, or attack homosexuals, we can be sure that they do not represent true Christianity, even if they do it in the name of Jesus. Sooner or later, they will start persecuting the real Christians as well. Often, the most serious persecution comes from people who claim to be religious."*

*Christians should be prepared for this. If what we really want is to be liked, then we will never make very good Christians. Indeed, one wonders if we can really be Christians at all. Martin Luther said, "If someone does not want to endure persecution from Ishmael, let him not claim that he is Christian."<sup>2</sup>*

In their own minds, the Judaizers felt like they were doing the right thing by super-imposing the law upon the Galatian Christians. They felt in their minds that they were God's chosen people, the legitimate descendants of Abraham. But what Paul is saying in this text was quite sharp. He was telling the Judaizers that they were just as much the spiritual descendants of Ishmael, as the Arabs were the physical descendants of Ishmael. This is what Paul spoke of in Romans 2:28-29, **"For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter."** Whether we're considering the persecution of the Jews in this letter, of the persecution of religious Christians today upon those who hold fast to the gospel of Christ, persecution has always come from the legalists of the day.

So there are three principles of what it means for a believer to be like Isaac, a child of God's promise. The first principle was that Christians will be persecuted for their faith, like Isaac was persecuted. The second principle is that Christians will likewise receive an inheritance. Verse 30, **"But what does the Scripture say? 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."** Just as Hagar and Ishmael were cast off, since they had nothing to do with the Isaac and his inheritance, so every religious persecutor will be cast aside for judgment, while the Christian receives the inheritance of Christ.

The third principle of being a child of promise like Isaac, is that all believers are obligated to live according to their position in Christ as free men. Verse 31 and chapter 5, verse 1, **"So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."** Do you remember the image that Paul gave of the function of the law as a prison? Have you ever tried to imagine what it would be like to be incarcerated for a long prison sentence? Why would anyone ever desire to go back to jail, once they've been freed? It doesn't make any logical sense that anyone would ever go back to that lifestyle, and yet that's exactly what the Galatians were doing, in a spiritual sense.

Paul was thankful that the Romans became slaves of righteousness, remembering that they were once slaves of sin. Read [Romans 6:17-19](#). We are to live then, as those who were bought with a price! We are to live our lives by faith, just as Abraham, and Sarah, and Isaac did. We need to stand firm as Paul warned the Galatians, and not desire in some twisted and illogical way to climb back into the shackles of sin and death. There are two roads that are before every person, the way of man and the way of God. All of us are born going down the way of man. Only God puts us on the way that leads to Him. Let us not like fools be allured by the crafty speech of another shackled man who wants to trap us in the same sin as he. The Christian must remain sober-minded and alert, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and strengthened by God's Word, so that he remains on the path that leads towards the Celestial City, where he will one day be with his Lord forever!

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<sup>2</sup> Ryken, Philip Graham, *Galatians: Reformed Expository Commentary*, P&R Publishing, 2005 p.190