

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON SIXTY-FOUR)

“WHO IS MY MOTHER?” (PART 2)

GALATIANS 4:21-23

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

21 Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman.

23 But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Last week we observed that in verses **21-31** of chapter **4**, Paul continues his appeal to the Galatian believers to forsake legalism and return to a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. Paul began his appeal in verse **12**, but the affecting and strongly personal quality of his appeal in verses **12-20**, gives way in verses **21-31**, to a more objective argument as he turns from personal appeal to an illustration from Scripture. In verses **21-31**, we have Paul’s concluding argument to support his position that justification is by faith in Christ Jesus and not by keeping the Law. In this passage, he addresses those who “*desire to be under the law,*” with an allegory that is unique to Paul and unusual in the New Testament.

In verse **21**, Paul asks the Galatian believers a very pertinent question: “*Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?*” His question is probably directed primarily to the Galatians who were in danger of succumbing to the legalistic teaching of the Judaizers,

but it could also have been directed to the Judaizers themselves. It is noteworthy that in the first clause of verse **21**, the definite article is absent before the word “*law*” in the Greek text. This clearly indicates that Paul is not referring here only to the Mosaic Law, but to law **as a principle of life**. He is referring to any system of rule-keeping as a means of justification or sanctification.

The words “*you who want to live under the law,*” imply that the Galatian believers were making a conscious choice to place themselves under law.

Paul asks both the Galatian believers and the Judaizers, “*Do you not listen to the law?*” In this second clause, the term “*the law*” refers particularly to the **Pentateuch**, the first five books of the Bible written by Moses. Paul is getting ready to draw an analogy from the writing of Moses in order to make the point that the Law cannot be a means of salvation but is rather the way of spiritual and moral bondage. As an introduction to the analogy, Paul suggests to both the Judaizers, and the Galatian believers who had been so misled by them, to look carefully at the very Law they are so strongly promoting. He is saying in effect to them, “Since you insist on living under the principle of law, are you willing to listen to what the Law really says?”

In verse **22**, Paul writes, “*For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman.*” The word “*For*” at the beginning of the verse, connects verse **22** with verse **21**. The idea is, “Your desire to be under law is not in harmony with Scripture. Let me tell you what Scripture really says!”

In his Comments relative to this section of Paul’s letter, **Warren Wiersbe** writes the following:

“Paul...takes the familiar story of Ishmael and Isaac (**Genesis 16-21**) and draws from it basic truths about the Christian’s relationship to the Law of Moses.

The events described actually happened, but Paul uses them as an **allegory**, which is a narrative that has a deeper meaning behind it. In an allegory, persons and actions represent hidden meanings, so that the narrative can be read on two levels: the literal and the symbolic...

Perhaps the easiest way to grasp the historical account is to trace briefly Abraham's experiences as recorded in **Genesis 12** through **21**. Using his age as our guide, we will trace the events on which Paul is basing his argument for Christian liberty.

75-Abraham is called by God to go to Canaan; and God promises him many descendants (**Genesis 12:1-9**). Both Abraham and his wife, Sarah, wanted children, but Sarah was barren. God was waiting until both of them were 'as good as dead' before He would perform the miracle of sending them a son (**Romans 4:16-25**).

85-The promised son has not yet arrived, and Sarah becomes impatient. She suggests that Abraham marry Hagar, her maid, and try to have a son by her. This act was legal in that society, but it was not in the will of God. Abraham followed her suggestion and married Hagar (**Genesis 16:1-3**).

86-Hagar gets pregnant and Sarah gets jealous! Things are so difficult in the home that Sarah throws Hagar out. But the Lord intervenes, sends Hagar back, and promises to take care of her and her son. When Abraham is 86, the son is born, and he calls him Ishmael (**Genesis 16:4-16**).

99-God speaks to Abraham and promises again that he will have a son by Sarah and says to call his name Isaac. Later, God appears again and reaffirms the promise to Sarah as well (see **Genesis 17-18**).

100-The son is born (**Genesis 21:1-7**). They name him Isaac...as commanded by God. But the arrival of Isaac creates a new problem in

the home: Ishmael has a rival. For fourteen years, Ishmael has been his father's only son, very dear to his heart. How will Ishmael respond to the presence of a rival?

103-It was customary for the Jews to wean their Children at about the age of three, and to make a great occasion of it. At the feast, Ishmael starts to mock Isaac (**Genesis 21:8**) and to create trouble in the home. There is only one solution to the problem, and a costly one at that: Hagar and her son have to go. With a broken heart, Abraham sends his son away, because this is what the Lord tells him to do (**Genesis 21:9-14**).

On the surface, this story appears to be nothing more than a tale of a family problem, but beneath the surface are meanings that carry tremendous spiritual power. Abraham, the two wives, and the two sons represent spiritual realities; and their relationships teach us important lessons."

Paul mentions Abraham's two sons **Ishmael** and **Isaac**, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. The free woman mentioned is **Sarah**, Abraham's wife. The slave woman is **Hagar**, Sarah's Egyptian servant. His allegory concerning these Old Testament characters will be interpreted by him to show that law and grace are incompatible and cannot co-exist. He will use the differences between Ishmael and Isaac, and Sarah and Hagar, to illustrate the distinction between trying to earn salvation by works, as opposed to accepting salvation by faith.

One commentator makes the following remarks concerning Paul's allegory:

"In this passage, we are going to note together that there are: **Two Women, Two Sons, Two Covenants, Two Mountains, and Two Cities**. There is: the **Law** as opposed to the **Promise** and the **Flesh** as opposed to the **Spirit**. The application of the whole illustration will be: **Bondage under the Law or Freedom in Jesus Christ**."

In verse **23**, Paul writes, “*But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.*” Abraham and Sarah had waited many years for God’s promise of a child to be fulfilled. Finally, Sarah gave in to impatience and gave her servant Hagar to Abraham as a slave-wife, so she might have a child by proxy. Hagar’s son, born in this way, was Ishmael. Eventually, though, Sarah did indeed have her own birth son, Isaac. Paul uses Ishmael and Isaac to illustrate two births. **Ishmael** illustrates the **physical** birth that makes us **sinners**, and **Isaac** illustrates the **spiritual** birth that makes us the **children of God**.

Ishmael, Abraham’s eldest son, born of Hagar, the slave, was born after the flesh, that is, by natural generation in the ordinary course of nature. His conception and birth required no promise of God, no miracle of God, no dependence on God, no trust in God. His conception and birth were the products of **self**-reliance, not **Spirit** reliance. Ishmael was Abraham’s and Sarah’s human solution to the covenant, and his birth was of works and not of grace or faith. Abraham and Sarah did not rely on God’s power to fulfill His promise. Instead, they relied on their own power and ingenuity to get a son in a futile attempt to fulfill God’s promise.

In contrast to Ishmael, Isaac, Abraham’s son, born of Sarah, the freewoman, was born according to promise, through the miraculous intervention of God when both parents were too old to have children. The phrase “*was born,*” is in a construction in the Greek which indicates that Paul was not thinking simply of the historic fact of the two births, but of the existing results. Ishmael’s descendants do not belong to the covenant people, Israel. Isaac’s descendants are those that have the promises. In the previous verse, Ishmael and Isaac are linked together as the sons of one father. Here they are contrasted in that they each had a different mother.

By the use of this illustration, Paul makes a clear distinction between ordinary, man-made religion and supernatural, miraculous,

God-made salvation. Ishmael is a type of all those who seek to be saved by their own works. Isaac on the other hand, is a type of all those who are saved by the work of Jesus Christ on their behalf.

I believe that it will be instructive for us to briefly examine the following passages which are pertinent to our study:

Genesis 16:1-4

1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.

2 And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife.

4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

In his concise commentary on this passage, **Matthew Henry**, writes the following:

"Sarai, no longer expecting to have children herself, proposed to Abram to take another wife...her slave, whose children would be her property. This was done without asking counsel of the Lord. Unbelief worked, God's almighty power was forgotten. It was a bad example, and a source of manifold uneasiness. In every relation and situation in life there is some cross for us to bear: much of the exercise of faith consists in patiently submitting, in waiting the Lord's time, and using only those means which he appoints for the removal of the cross. Foul temptations may have very fair pretences, and be coloured with that which is very plausible. Fleshly wisdom puts us out of God's way. This

would not be the case, if we would ask counsel of God by his word and by prayer, before we attempt that which is doubtful."

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that waiting is difficult when you have a promise but no tangible results or evidence. It had been twenty-five years since God first promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, and yet nothing seemed to be happening. Both Sarai's and Abraham's faith wavered. Their wavering faith illustrates what it looks like to walk by sight and not by faith, seeking a human solution to accomplish a heavenly purpose. They acted as if they believed what **Benjamin Franklin** said thousands of years later: "God helps those who help themselves." This is an absolutely unbiblical statement, and Scripture strongly refutes such a false, humanistic philosophy. The Promises of God do not need our help to be fulfilled. They just call for our obedience to His revealed will.

The effects of Abraham's and Sarah's lack of faith is still having a negative impact on that region in particular, and the world in general. Today it is referred to as the Middle East conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Genesis 17:15-21

15 And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

18 And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!"

19 God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

20 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.

21 But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”

Commenting on verse **18**, **Jon Courson** writes the following:

“The Hebrew text makes it clear that this is the passionate cry of a father who says, ‘I already have a son who I love deeply. Let him be the one through whom the covenant and blessings come.’ In other words, Abraham is saying, ‘I know I got ahead of You when Ishmael was conceived. I know that was not Your plan. I know I made a mess, but, Lord, bless my mess.’ Have you ever done that? Maybe your motives were sincere, your intentions were right. But you didn’t wait on God or talk things over with Him. Instead, you just plunged into that relationship, that job opportunity, that ministry. And when it turned out to be a mess, you asked God to bless it anyway...**I have found that God gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him. Thus, prayer is not giving God orders. Prayer is simply reporting for duty. Prayer is not ‘Bless my mess.’ It’s, ‘Lord, have Your way.’**”

God promised to bless Ishmael and He has kept His word. The Arab world stretches from the seaboard of the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf, and embraces several of the most strategically placed and economically wealthy countries of the world. But the covenant blessings were not a part of Ishmael’s heritage. Isaac alone was to be the heir of all things.

It is worthy of note that while both Abram and Sarai’s names were changed by God to reflect a change in their status, Ishmael’s name was

never changed, because he represents the fallen, unregenerate, adamic nature, or the flesh, and the flesh cannot be changed. As our Lord stated in **John 3:6**, *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

In **John 6:63**, He said, *“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”*

The flesh can be disciplined, subdued, and even to some extent controlled, but it cannot be changed. Ishmael was greatly blessed of God but he was never regenerated!

Genesis 18:10-15

10 The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.

12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?”

13 The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’

14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”

15 But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”

God’s promise *“I will surely return to you about this time next year,”* does not mean that the Lord would visibly appear to Abraham and Sarah again in a theophany or Christophany at the same time the following year. Rather, it means that He would exercise His omnipotence and

miraculously intervene on behalf of Abraham and Sarah so as to fulfill His promise that Sarah would have a child with Abraham. The Lord promised to graciously act in a supernatural manner in respect of the “deadness” of both Abraham and Sarah in order for him to impregnate her.

In **Mark 10:23-27**, we read the following:

23 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

24 And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!

25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

26 And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?”

27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”

The point of these narratives is that the creation of Abraham’s offspring, which eventually became Israel, and the regeneration of a sinner, are no less miraculous works of creation than the creation of the world itself!

Genesis 21:1-7

1 The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.

2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.

3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac.

4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.

5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

6 And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me."

7 And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

In his introduction to **Genesis 21**, **Paul Apple** wrote the following:

"For those that find the doctrine of the sovereignty of God distasteful or offensive (due to their understanding of free will or what they think is fair), this passage will be unsettling...Yet, as we have taught before, **'a God who does not control everything, cannot control anything.'** It is an all-or-nothing proposition."

Verse 7 indicates that not only did God miraculously enable Sarah to bear a son, but He also enabled her to nurse him.

Spurgeon comments that,

"It was far above the power of nature, and even contrary to its laws, that the aged Sarah should be honoured with a son; and even so it is beyond all ordinary rules that I, a poor, helpless, undone sinner, should find grace to bear about in my soul the indwelling Spirit of the Lord Jesus. I, who once despaired, as well I might, for my nature was as dry, and withered, and barren, and accursed as a howling wilderness, even I have been made to bring forth fruit unto holiness. Well may my mouth be filled with joyous laughter, because of the singular, surprising grace which I have received of the Lord, for I have found Jesus, the promised seed, and he is mine for ever."

Hebrews 11:11-12

11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

There is a difficult interpretive issue in respect of verse **11**, reflected in the difference between some translations which make Sarah the subject of the sentence, and others which make Abraham the subject of the sentence. For example, the **English Standard Version**, which we just read, makes Sarah the subject. The **New English Translation** on the other hand, makes Abraham the subject. It translates the passage as follows:

*11 By faith, even though Sarah herself was barren and **he** was too old, **he** received the ability to procreate, because **he** regarded the one who had given the promise to be trustworthy.*

12 So in fact children were fathered by one man—and this one as good as dead—like the number of stars in the sky and like the innumerable grains of sand on the seashore.

The problem with making Sarah the subject of the sentence is that the phrase “*received power to conceive*” in the **English Standard Version**, is literally “power to deposit or lay down seed” in the Greek which is exclusively a male function. Whatever the correct interpretation is however, the author of the letter to the Hebrews is emphasizing the point that the conception and birth of Isaac was the result of a miraculous intervention. And just as Ishmael’s birth is a picture of works-based salvation, Isaac’s birth is a picture of salvation by faith alone. Just as Abraham believed God and God supernaturally fulfilled His will in Abraham, a sinner who believes in Jesus Christ through the declaration of the Gospel is saved by the miraculous intervention of God.

We will conclude this evening with a quote from **John MacArthur**:

"Ishmael pictures all those who try to please God and accomplish God's will by the flesh. It's sinful, it's useless, it creates bondage. Isaac symbolizes all those who do the will of God by faith in His promise. He does the work; He brings it to pass; He receives the glory...Paul is saying- "Why would you who are the children of promise...think to accomplish the purposes of God through the flesh?"

Why Indeed?