

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON SIXTY-THREE)

“WHO IS MY MOTHER?”

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.

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. But the affecting and strongly personal quality of his appeal in verses **12-20**, gives way in these verses, to a more objective argument as he turns from personal appeal to an illustration from Scripture. Since the Judaizers appealed to the Law, Paul accepts their challenge and uses the Law to prove that believers in Christ are not under the Law. Like a skillful attorney, he uses the Judaizers' own methods of argument to disprove their position. 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 elaborate allegory that is unique to Paul and unusual in the New Testament.

Charles Swindoll explains that in this section of his letter, the apostle,

"opens with a question (**Galatians 4:21**), provides some historical background from the life of Abraham (**Galatians 4:22-23**), then sets forth an allegory in typical Jewish form (**Galatians 4:24-27**), ultimately applying the allegory to the Galatians' situation (**Galatians 4:28-31**). After this fitting finale against the assailants of Christian freedom, Paul rests his case."

In contextualizing Paul's letter to the **Galatians** and this section in particular, **Dr. Jack L. Arnold** writes the following:

"Many of Paul's converts to Christ were beginning to go back under the Mosaic Law for salvation after they had been saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They were following the false teaching of the Judaizers and were ready to set aside grace and faith for law and works. These Galatians simply did not understand all the implications and ramifications of this move into the legalism of law. The law was never designed by God to give eternal life or spirituality, but it was given for the purpose of pointing out to men their sinfulness and showing them that they are condemned before a holy God. There are many people today who live under a law system for salvation. Their religion is legalistic and they imagine that the way to God is by the observance of certain rules. There are even professing Christians who turn the gospel into law. They suppose their relationship to God depends on a strict adherence to regulations, traditions and ceremonies. These poor souls, while sincere, are in bondage to legalism."

The issue that Paul is dealing with in Galatians is an issue of law **or** grace. It was not law **and** grace, but law **or** grace. It cannot be both. It is either one or the other. For a person to say that he or she is saved by God's grace, and then is kept by his or her works is to negate grace entirely, for then his or her ultimate salvation depends upon his or her performance instead of the grace of God. The belief that we are saved **initially** or justified by the grace of God, but are **being** saved or

sanctified by our performance, is the result of a total misunderstanding of what the Law, or any other system of rule-keeping really is and does. Once we understand the true purpose of the Law, we will never want to be placed under it again.

In verse **20**, Paul had written, *“I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.”* As we noted in our previous Lesson, Paul was in a state of perplexity because of how attracted the Galatian believers were to the Judaizers and the Mosaic Law. They had heard the truth of the Gospel and they had seemed to genuinely believe it, and yet they were falling so quickly for a lie! It is becoming increasingly clear to Paul that the Galatian believers had either not fully understood the difference between the Gospel and the Law, or had forgotten the difference, and so, in verse **21**, he asks them a very pertinent question: *“Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?”*

The **New Living Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“Tell me, you who want to live under the law, do you know what the law actually says?”*

Paul’s question is in a construction in the Greek which indicates that he is demanding an answer of them. He is sounding a call to responsibility. In the previous section (verses **12-20**), he had been more tender, but now he shifts rather abruptly to a penetrating, commanding tone. 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.

The words *“you who want to live under the law,”* imply that the Galatian believers had not yet fully embraced the Judaizers’ legalistic teaching, but they were at the point of doing so. The phrase *“you who want,”* is a translation of the Greek word **theló**: (**theh’-lo**), which is used in the New Testament to express a range of meanings related to desire, intention, and volition. It is often used to reflect the inner inclination or

purpose of a person. Apparently, the Galatian believers were making a conscious choice to place themselves under law.

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!

Why would anyone desire to be under law as a principle of life? **David Guzik** addresses this question in the following way:

“There are many ‘advantages’ to being under the law as your principle of relating to God. First, **YOU** always have the outward certainty of a list of rules to keep. Second, **YOU** can compliment yourself because you keep the rules better than others do. Finally, **YOU** can take the credit for your own salvation, because you earned it by keeping the list of rules.

Under the **law** it is what you do for God that makes you right before Him.

Under the **grace** of God, it is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ that makes us right before Him.

Under the **law** the focus is on my performance.

Under the **grace** of God, the focus is on Who Jesus is and what He has done.

Under the **law** we find fig leaves to cover our nakedness.

Under the **grace** of God, we receive the covering won through a sacrifice that God provides.”

Paul asks both the Galatian believers and the Judaizers, “*Do you know what the law actually says?*” 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 the Judaizers, and the Galatians 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?”

He is asking them, “Do you realize that the Law is a total unit and you can’t pick and choose what parts of it you’re going to keep?” “Are you aware that if you break any part of it, you’ve broken it all?” “Do you understand the Law and the consequences of breaking it?”

Earlier, in chapter **2** and verses **16** and **17**, Paul had written the following:

17 But suppose we seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ and then we are found guilty because we have abandoned the law. Would that mean Christ has led us into sin? Absolutely not!

18 Rather, I am a sinner if I rebuild the old system of law I already tore down.

(New Living Translation)

What the Galatian believers, and perhaps the Judaizers did not understand is that if they put themselves under the Law, they would be placing themselves in an impossible situation because they could not keep the Law perfectly, and a failure to do so would attract the curse of God.

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.” In this and the following verses, Paul, as we noted earlier, presents his final argument in order to make the case that the only way for a person to be made right with God, or to be justified, is by faith in Christ and not by keeping the Law. He begins by saying “*For it is written,*” invoking the divinely inspired Scriptures as his evidence. The word “*For*” 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!”

It was vitally necessary for Paul to refer to the Scriptures again and again. The legalists among the Galatians presented themselves as the elite group of Bible scholars. But Paul is going to use the same Old Testament Scriptures that they are using to show them that they are not handling the Scriptures correctly. By so doing he will show that a true understanding of the Law of Moses will support the true Gospel he preaches.

Paul mentions Abraham’s two sons **Ishmael** and **Isaac**, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. For the purposes of Paul’s illustration, he does not include the sons born to Abraham late in his life. The free woman mentioned is **Sarah**, Abraham’s wife. The slave woman is **Hagar**, Sarah’s Egyptian servant. Paul is engaging in a method of argument rarely seen in the New Testament, but which would have been quite familiar to his audience: allegorical interpretation of Scripture. An allegory is a story, play, poem, picture, or other work in which the characters and events represent particular qualities or ideas that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning relating to morals, religion, or politics.

Paul’s allegory concerning Ishmael and Isaac 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 to illustrate the distinction between trying to earn salvation by works, as opposed to accepting salvation by faith. Paul wants to convince his readers that they were in danger of joining the wrong branch of Abraham's family tree!

Thomas Constable, notes that,

“The fact that Paul just jumps into the story of Abraham with no other explanation or background, indicates that he assumed the *Gentile* believers in Galatia knew what he was talking about. It implies that when he was with them, he had taught them out of the Old Testament. And so Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael would have been familiar to them. Of course this also makes sense, because at this time in the early church history the only Bible Paul had from which to preach to the *Gentiles* was the Old Testament.”

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. Ishmael was Abraham’s and Sarah’s human solution to the covenant and his birth was of works and not of grace or faith. But 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 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.

Commenting on this verse, **John MacArthur**, writes the following:

"Throughout the analogy, all distinctions between the two sons are based on the fact that they had two different mothers, not on the fact that they had a common father, Abraham. The heritage of the line through one mother is lostness and bondage, and the heritage of the line through the other mother is salvation and freedom."

Ray Pritchard points out that,

"God's family is made up of those who have a relationship with him by faith in Jesus Christ. It's a matter of faith, not your family tree...The problem in Galatia was this: The Judaizers taught that you either had to be a Jew or you had to act like a Jew in order to be saved. That meant being circumcised and keeping the outward trappings of the Law of Moses. The Judaizers said, 'Who's your **father?**' Paul said, 'I've got another question. **Who's your mother?**'"

Brothers and sisters, let us ask ourselves this question. "**Who is my spiritual mother?**" Is it law or is it grace? is it works or is it faith? is it a message of works or is it the Gospel? is it an organization or is it the church? Who really gave birth to me?

Lord willing, we will continue to look at Paul's fascinating allegory in our next Lesson.