

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON SIXTY-FIVE)

“WHO IS MY MOTHER?” (PART 3)

GALATIANS 4:24-26

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

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

25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

26 But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

In **Galatians 4:21-31**, 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 his Comments relative to this section of Paul’s letter, **Warren Wiersbe** explains that,

“The events described in this passage 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.”

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?*” Paul is getting ready to draw an analogy from the writing of Moses in order to make the point that a strict observance of 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!”

He 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.

In verse **23**, he 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 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.

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. The two mothers represent two contrasting covenants.

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.

The following table summarizes the contrasts in Paul’s argument in **Galatians 4:21-27**:

HAGAR	SARAH
Slave	Free

Ishmael Son of bondwoman Born into slavery	Isaac Son of free woman Born as a free man
The way of the flesh Born because of work, effort	The way of promise Born by promise of God
The natural, fleshly way	The miraculous way
The way of religious self-effort	The way of faith
Works righteousness	Imputed righteousness
The way of legalism	The way of grace
Symbolic of only natural birth Trust in their own works	Symbolic of spiritual birth Trust in the work of Jesus

Representative of the Covenant of the Law (Mosaic Covenant)	Representative of the Covenant of Grace (Abraham Covenant)
Present Jerusalem Represents Legalism	Jerusalem Above Represents Life in the Spirit
Leads to Slavery and Eternal Death	Leads to Freedom and Eternal Life

In verse **24**, Paul explains to his readers that the story of Hagar and Ishmael and Sarah and Isaac, is an allegory. He writes, “*Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar.*” As we have pointed out, an allegory is a statement of facts which is to be understood literally, and yet it allows for a moral or a figurative interpretation. Paul is inspired by the Holy Spirit to take a literal story from Genesis and use it as a spiritual illustration, in order to argue that the Law is superseded by grace.

Don Anderson gives us some background on the two covenants:

“Now what you’re going to have—just in order for us to get the picture—in the passage that we’re looking at, you’re going to have two

covenants. You're going to have the **Mosaic** covenant and you're going to have the **Abrahamic** covenant.

You understand, the Mosaic covenant is different from the Abrahamic covenant in this sense—the Mosaic covenant is **conditional**. It is two people—Moses and the Lord together—and **it's conditional on obedience**. The blessing of the Mosaic covenant is conditioned on obedience and fulfilling the 10 requirements for the Law. **So there's no blessing if you break it.**

The Abrahamic covenant is different. [The] Abrahamic covenant is **unconditional**. **It is God alone walking between the pieces saying "I promise to do this."** **And there is no stipulation in that covenant.** So he's going to play the Abrahamic covenant against the Mosaic covenant."

Paul says, "*these women are two covenants.*" Of course, Hagar and Sarah are not two **literal** covenants, but Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uses them as **illustrations** of two covenants. The two mothers and the two sons represent two covenants. **Hagar** and **Ishmael** represent the **conditional Mosaic** Covenant of **Law** and **works**, while **Sarah** and **Isaac** represent the **unconditional Abrahamic** Covenant—the Covenant of **grace** and **faith**, which was the predecessor, or forerunner, so to speak, of the **New** Covenant.

Paul identifies Hagar as the woman who illustrates the Mosaic Covenant "*from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery.*" At Mount Sinai God gave the Law through Moses. The Israelites who were God's chosen people, were required to keep all the stipulations of the covenant.

Exodus 19:10-25, and **20:18-21**, testify eloquently that the Mount Sinai experience was a terrifying one for the Israelites:

10 the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments

11 and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

12 And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.

13 No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain."

14 So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments.

15 And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman."

16 On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

17 Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

18 Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

19 And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

20 The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

21 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish.

22 Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.”

23 And Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.’”

24 And the LORD said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them.”

25 So Moses went down to the people and told them.

18 Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off

19 and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”

20 Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”

21 The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

The point is that Mount Sinai symbolizes the Law and if you break the Law you die. The phrase, “*bearing children for slavery,*” speaks to the fact that it is humanly impossible to keep the Law perfectly, and thus the Law is incapable of liberating those who are enslaved by sin. All that the Law is capable of doing is to produce “religious” slaves, who are bound to a master from whom they can never escape. Anyone who attempts to be justified by keeping the Law is a “spiritual” child of Hagar, the slave woman and a “spiritual” brother or sister of Ishmael, the slave son.

Paul is comparing the Judaizers to Ishmael, a **Gentile**, instead of to Isaac, a **Jew**, because they proudly, but erroneously, considered themselves as the “spiritual” children of Abraham. They missed the vital truth that the Abrahamic Covenant could be entered into only by grace through faith, not by Law through works. And so, they failed to recognize that they were in reality under the Mosaic Covenant of Law and bondage! Attempting to be saved by obeying the Law or any other system of rule-keeping leads to slavery, and those, like the Jews who persist in doing so, demonstrate that they are enslaved to law as a principle of life. All that the Mosaic Covenant on Mount Sinai can do, therefore, is to “bear children for slavery!”

In verses **25** and **26**, Paul explains that the two women, Hagar and Sarah, and their two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, not only represent two **covenants**, but they also represent two **Jerusalems**. He writes,

25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

26 But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

In verse **25**, Paul identifies Hagar, the slave woman with Mount Sinai in Arabia where the Mosaic Covenant of Law was enacted. He says that Hagar and Mount Sinai correspond, or agree with, or answer to, the existent city of Jerusalem, which was, and still is, the centre of the apostate observance of Judaism. It is, so to speak, the capital city of a works-based, performance-driven, legalistic religious country! Just as Hagar, a slave, bore children that by birth became slaves themselves, so the followers of legalistic Judaism are in bondage to law.

It is worthy of note that Mount Sinai is located in the Sinai Peninsula, which is a desert land and is not the Promised Land. Hagar’s son Ishmael in fact eventually moved to the desert areas east and south of the Promised Land.

Hagar represents any religion, church, group, or person who seeks to be righteous and acceptable to God by virtue of their own merit or works.

One commentator says that,

"Paul is speaking of the Jerusalem of his day, the Jerusalem of the first century. What is he implying? This ancient Jerusalem is the city from which the Judaizers had come with their legalistic (Pharisaic) system connected to Mount Sinai which in turn is connected to Ishmael who in turn is connected to Hagar. This is not what the Judaizers would want to hear because...they took great pride in being in the line of Abraham. Paul is saying with this illustration that [while] they might be genetically physically related to Abraham, from a spiritual standpoint, they were the children of Hagar; the children of Ishmael."

John MacArthur, makes the following remarks relative to verse **25**:

"Hagar equal Ishmael equals Sinai equals Jerusalem equals the flesh equals the law equals bondage equals condemnation, trying to do God's will in the flesh. That's what the Judaizers were doing. That's what all false religion does. Hagar, Sinai, Ishmael, the present Jerusalem just produces more slaves, more slaves, more slaves in bondage to sin, in bondage to the judgment.

Sinai, by the way, is in Arabia. That's a desert, not the Promised Land. So, Hagar, Ishmael, Sinai, Jerusalem of today are all in the same line. They all produce slavery and bondage."

In light of all this, Paul's statement in **Romans 10:1-4**, Evokes a sense of sorrowful tenderness:

1 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

In verse **26**, Paul contrasts the “*present Jerusalem*” which is in slavery with her children, with the “*Jerusalem above*” which he says, “*is free, and she is our mother.*”

Kenneth Wuest explains that,

“The phrase ‘*Jerusalem which is above,*’ was familiar to the rabbinical teachers who thought of the heavenly Jerusalem as the arch-type of the earthly. The heavenly Jerusalem which is free, therefore represents Sarah; and finally, grace, and the faith way of salvation, for it is contrasted to the earthly Jerusalem which represents legalistic Judaism.”

Sarah represents the heavenly Jerusalem. She is the free woman, and she is our mother. She is a type of the **New Covenant** between God and human beings, the covenant of grace. Grace, is seen in the “*Jerusalem above,*” which Paul identifies as the spiritual and eternal city which God has promised to those who approach Him through faith. Sarah and grace and the promise of a heavenly city are all free. Any person who accepts God’s promise of an eternal, heavenly city by faith is acceptable to God. God takes that person’s faith and counts it as his or her righteousness. He or she is given the promise of God freely, without having to work for it by observing rules and regulations.

It is important for us to understand that Paul is **not** referring here to the **New Jerusalem** referred to in **Revelation 21** and **22**. He is using “*Jerusalem above*” to speak of a present possession of all believers, not as a new **place** to live, but as a new **way** to live—a way to live by grace, not by the flesh and works. This spiritual freedom in the “*Jerusalem above*” is in stark contrast to the enslavement of “*present Jerusalem*”

which is in slavery with her children. As citizens of this “*Jerusalem above*,” believers live Holy Spirit energized lives that are pleasing to God. They are able to live in the reality of **Philippians 3:12-13**:

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,

13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

In **Hebrews 12:18-24**, the author contrasts the Hagar, Ishmael, Mount Sinai, present Jerusalem, experience, with the Sarah, Isaac, Jerusalem above experience:

18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest

19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

20 For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.”

21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The line of works and self-effort looks like this: Abraham-Hagar-Ishmael-Mount Sinai-The Law-Works-Present Jerusalem-Bondage-Eternal Death.

The line of faith looks like this: Abraham-Sarah-Isaac-Mount Zion-Grace-Faith-Jerusalem Above-Freedom-Eternal Life.

Note that Abraham stands at the head of both lines. It is from him that the two lines of humanity come from. That is why it is not enough to be Abraham's son. You must also be a son of Sarah if you want to be saved. So, the real question is not, "Who is your father?" but "Who is your mother?"