

**LISTEN TO THE LAW!**  
**PART 2**

TEXT: GALATIANS 4:21-31

May 29, 2011

**INTRODUCTION:**

In 4:21-31, Paul is continuing his appeal to the Galatians to live in freedom from the law (cf. 4:12). In 4:21-31, he appeals to the Galatians on the basis of a lesson from the Law (Torah).

Specifically, Paul sees from the story of Hagar and Sarah an analogy, which illustrates the spiritual truth he is teaching (i.e., all who rely on self-effort end up in sin and bondage whereas those who trust in God's promise receive salvation and freedom).

Paul divides his analogy from the Law into three sections: The Historical Basis of the Analogy (vv. 21-23); The Spiritual Meaning of the Analogy (vv. 24-27); The Personal Application of the Analogy (vv. 28-31).

- I. SECTION 1: THE HISTORICAL BASIS OF THE ANALOGY (VV. 21-23)
  - A. PAUL'S QUESTION, V. 21
  - B. PAUL'S ARGUMENT, VV. 22-23
    - 1. TWO SONS, V. 22A
    - 2. TWO MOTHERS, V. 22B
    - 3. TWO BIRTHS, V. 23

Having rehearsed the historical facts of the births of Ishmael and Isaac in vv. 21-23, Paul employs them as an analogy to illustrate two antithetical approaches to religion (i.e., law versus grace, flesh versus Spirit, self-effort versus divine dependence; Note: Calvin refers to Paul's "allegory" as an "illustration of great beauty," *Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 21, p. 134*).

In vv. 24-27, Paul speaks of two antithetical covenants (or two covenantal arrangements taught in the Law—Torah—itsself):

- (1) A covenant of law established at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19-20);
- (2) A covenant of promise established with Abraham 430 years prior to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Gal. 3:17; Gen. 15).

It is of critical importance to understand that confusion of these two covenants lay at the heart of the Galatian heresy (this was a charge repeated by Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century, see Michael Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 35).

Paul shows through his figurative representation of these two covenants how the principles of law (i.e., personal performance) and promise (i.e., inheritance of an estate by virtue of the performance of another) give rise to two antithetical forms of religion (see *God of Promise*, p. 35).

Paul's analogy demonstrates the difference between spiritual slavery and spiritual freedom. All religions (spiritual slavery) are based on a covenant of law and live by the principles, "Do and live," or "I obey therefore I am accepted." This approach sees God as our debtor who owes us and it leads to bondage and slavery.

In contrast, a covenant of promise (spiritual freedom taught in both OT and NT) operates on the principles, "Live, now do," or "I am accepted therefore I obey." This approach sees God as a gracious benefactor and it leads to salvation and freedom.

By contrasting these two covenants, Paul insists that salvation is either by our obedience to the law or by someone else's. We are either justified by grace through faith in Christ alone or by our own merit and works/self-effort but it cannot be a combination of both.

Thus, it was confusion of these two antithetical covenants that rested at the heart of the Galatian controversy. It is also confusion of these two covenants that rests at the heart of one's personal troubles in life (cf. Gal. 1:7). Learning to properly distinguish these two covenants is of paramount importance for life and theology. The difference between them constitutes the heart of the Christian faith and life. Paul's point is that salvation has never been granted on the basis of self-effort (covenant of law) but rather God's promise (covenant of grace/promise).

## **LESSON:**

### II. SECTION 2: THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THE ANALOGY (VV. 24-27)

Paul begins, "Now this may be interpreted allegorically..." (ἀλληγορούμενα).

Paul is not saying the Genesis account is an allegory (e.g., like Pilgrim's Progress; see John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, pp. 135-136). The problem with allegorical interpretation of Scripture is that it violates the historical nature of the Bible and denies the value of redemptive history (see Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 88). Paul, however, has already established the historical basis of the Genesis account in vv. 21-23. Sidney Greidanus, quoting Theodore of Mopsuestia, writes of Paul, "The apostle did not do away with history, nor did he strip away actions which had occurred long ago." Greidanus continues, "...Paul used these past historical events merely as illustrations for his own message..." (*Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, pp. 92-93).

The NASB and NIV seek to bring out this meaning by translating Paul’s words, “This is allegorically speaking” (NASB) or “These things may be taken figuratively” (NIV). Paul is most likely adopting the Judaizers own method of exegesis and turning it against them (see George, *Galatians*, p. 334; Boice, *Galatians*, p. 482).

Paul’s analogy is complex. So, the best way to understand it is to divide it into parallel columns (συστοιχεῖ, “corresponds to,” v. 25). Paul presents 5 sets of contrasts as illustrated in the chart below:

<b>Slavery</b>	<b>Freedom</b>
Hagar	Sarah
Ishmael	Isaac
covenant of law	covenant of promise
Present Jerusalem	Jerusalem above
children of slavery	children of freedom
righteousness by law	righteousness by faith

(adapted from Ronald Fung, *Galatians*, p. 213)

In the left column we have slavery and in the right column we have freedom. Under these two headings, Paul sets forth five sets of contrasts:

Two Mothers (Hagar-Sarah)

Two sons (Ishmael-Isaac)

Two Covenants (covenant of law-covenant of promise);

Two Cities (present Jerusalem = Judaism; Jerusalem above = the Church).

Two Children (children of slavery = present Jerusalem/legalists; children of freedom = Jerusalem above/Christians)

Lastly, the left column corresponds to righteousness based on a covenant of law. The right column corresponds to righteousness based on a covenant of promise.

To understand what Isaac and Ishmael illustrate, Paul begins with their mothers, “these women are two covenants...” Sarah and Hagar illustrate two distinct covenants (a covenant of works—Mosaic—and a covenant of promise—Abrahamic).

A. THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF HAGAR, VV. 24C-25

Paul writes, “<sup>24</sup> ...One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. <sup>25</sup> Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.”

Hagar is a perfect analogy for the old covenant—the Mosaic covenant given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Note: It is important to distinguish the old covenant from the Torah and OT as a whole). First, Hagar was a slave and life under the Old Covenant (Mosaic Covenant) was like a form of slavery. The Mosaic Covenant was based on a principle of works and living under its requirements was a form of bondage (cf., Gal. 3:22-23). The old covenant was a conditional, covenant of works, which said, “You shall... You shall not...” It promised blessing upon personal, perfect obedience and curses for any transgression. In Exodus 24:1-8, we read of the old covenant ratification ceremony, which Moses led with the people of Israel. Exodus 24 begins,

<sup>1</sup> Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. <sup>2</sup> Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.” <sup>3</sup> Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” <sup>4</sup> And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>5</sup> And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. <sup>6</sup> And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. <sup>7</sup> Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” <sup>8</sup> And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

The critical point to note regarding the old covenant and this ratification ceremony is that there was no formal obligation on Yahweh’s part (suzerain). He swears nothing. All of the obligation is upon the people of Israel (vassal). Exodus 24 shows that the emphasis on personal performance could not be clearer. The principle is clear: “Do this and live or receive the consequences (v. 8)!” Israel’s response is also clear: “All this WE WILL DO.”

The Mosaic covenant then is a covenant of personal obligation requiring the oath-taker to fulfill all the terms and conditions or suffer the consequences. This is why Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 in Galatians 3:10 and insists that anyone who seeks to be justified by this covenant is under the curse—sanctions—of this law. The covenant of law doesn’t grade on a curve but requires absolute, perfect personal obedience to all that it demands.

Moreover, because Hagar was a slave she produced nothing but slaves (“...bearing children for slavery...” v. 24). Try as he may, Ishmael was born a slave and no amount of

good works could ever make him a legitimate, freeborn son. He would forever remain a slave. In the same way, the old covenant could not produce free children but only enslaved children (Gal. 3:22-23). A covenant of law cannot bring life (Gal. 3:21). The law is a ministry of death and condemnation (2 Cor. 3:7).

The astonishing point of Paul's analogy comes in v. 25 when he says that the old covenant (Hagar) corresponds to the present Jerusalem of his day, which was in spiritual bondage. This was a major refutation of the Judaizers.

Jerusalem, in the minds of the Jews, represented the place of God's people. However, when Paul mentions Jerusalem, he is not just speaking geographically but also spiritually. He mentions the present Jerusalem because this is where the Judaizers—Jewish legalists—had come from.

The present Jerusalem—Judaism—represents a false religion based on works righteousness/self-effort. When Paul said that the present Jerusalem corresponded to Hagar, he was calling the Judaizers—those who trusted in physical descent from Abraham and relied on legal observance as the way of salvation—Ishmaelites, spiritual descendants of Hagar! Phil Ryken points out that Paul's statement was tantamount to calling a Jew a Gentile or an Israeli and Arab (*Galatians*, p. 185)! Anyone who seeks to live by a "Do this and live" arrangement with God is a spiritually illegitimate child!

As we have learned, the Judaizers took pride in and trusted in the fact that they were the true sons of Abraham by virtue of their physical lineage as well as their observance of the Law. Paul, however, dismisses such a claim.

Michael Horton observes that the Judaizers may have thought Paul was totally confused about the fundamental details of his own people's history recorded in the Torah (*God of Promise*, p. 37). Everyone who knew the Torah understood that Sarah was the mother of Isaac (and therefore the mother of the Jews) and that Hagar was the mother of Ishmael (the mother of the Ishmaelites/Arabs). Moreover, Mount Sinai was the place of liberation and determinative of Jewish identity—as much as the Declaration of Independence is for Americans (Ibid, p. 37). It is highly unlikely then that Paul misunderstood the Torah because he states in Galatians 1:14 how he excelled in Judaism as a Pharisee far beyond many of his own people (cf. Philip. 3:4-6).

Jesus also made the same distinction that Paul is making here (which is where Paul learned this distinction!). In John 8:39-59, Jesus reminds the Jews that physical lineage doesn't make one a child of Abraham. In v. 37, Jesus agrees that the Jews were physically descended from Abraham. But, in vv. 39-59 He denies that they are truly Abraham's children because their behavior contradicts their claim (they are trying to kill Jesus! v. 40). Like Jesus, Paul is emphasizing that it is only those who believe in Jesus who are the true children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7, cf. Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6-8). Observance of circumcision and other Mosaic rites—the "approved means"—doesn't "legitimize" a Gentile (see George quoting C.K. Barrett, *Galatians*, p. 334).

Paul, then, was not confused. Rather, it was the Judaizers who were confused. To be specific, they were confusing two antithetical covenants (a covenant of law and a covenant of promise). Throughout Galatians, Paul has labored to show that the covenant of law (Mosaic) is totally different from the covenant of promise (Abrahamic covenant and new covenant).

Since the Judaizers were confusing the two covenants and thereby forsaking the gospel and going back under law Paul—like Jesus—says they are giving evidence that Abraham is not their father! Their desire to live by performance under the law rather than by faith in God’s promise shows that they must be sons of Hagar and in spiritual bondage.

This then is the first type of religion, “Do and live,” or “I obey therefore I am accepted.” In contrast to Hagar is Sarah.

#### B. THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF SARAH, VV. 26-27

Sarah—the free woman—was Abraham’s lawful wife. She is a perfect analogy for the Abrahamic covenant (also new covenant).

The Abrahamic covenant was not a covenant of law but of promise. Unlike the Mosaic covenant—a covenant of personal obligation, Ex. 24:1-8—the Abrahamic Covenant is an unconditional, unilateral covenant based on the performance of another. We read of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15.

In distinction to the Mosaic covenant where there is no formal obligation on the part of Yahweh, it is of paramount importance to note in Genesis 15 that Yahweh walks through the severed halves of animals alone (v. 17) while Abraham sleeps (v. 12). The LORD assumes all of the covenant obligations and curses and in turn dispenses all of the blessings as an inheritance rather than as wages earned. All depended upon God’s promise to Abraham rather than Abraham’s personal performance.

Thus, Isaac was not born according to self-effort but rather God’s promise (Gen. 21:1-2). Isaac stands for all who have become part of the church—the Jerusalem above—through faith in Christ alone. In contrast to the old covenant (Mosaic), where God commands, “You shall... You shall not...” in the Abrahamic (and new) covenant God promises, “I will” (Heb. 8:8-12; cf. Gen. 12:1-3; Jer. 31:31-34).

For example, God promised Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17:16, “*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” (emphasis mine). In Jeremiah 31:31-34, the LORD promises in the New Covenant,

<sup>31</sup> “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when *I will* make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> *not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their*

husband, declares the LORD.<sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that *I will* make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: *I will* put my law within them, and *I will* write it on their hearts. And *I will* be their God, and they shall be my people.<sup>34</sup> And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For *I will* forgive their iniquity, and *I will* remember their sin no more (emphasis mine).

When Paul says that Sarah is the mother of the Galatians (Gentiles) this was also staggering to the Judaizers! But, this was Paul’s point in 4:21-31. He is pressing home the fact that the Galatians—by virtue of trusting in Christ through the gospel—were like Isaac who was born of the free woman/promise/Spirit (cf. 4:28, 29, 31). Leon Morris notes, “The Jews, though Sarah’s sons, are described as the offspring of Hagar, because they, like Ishmael, are descendants by nature; the Gentile Christians are described as the offspring of Sarah, because they, like Isaac, are descendants by promise of God” (*Galatians*, p. 144, fn. 50).

Paul says the new covenant corresponds to the Jerusalem above—the Church—the true people of God. All who trust in Christ now belong to the New Jerusalem—the age to come (cf. Gal. 1:4). The “present Jerusalem” belonged to the old covenant, which concerned only earthly, temporary things that served as types and shadows of the heavenly, eternal reality promised and fulfilled in the new covenant.

Ultimately, the Jerusalem above—the age to come—will be the new creation, of which Paul says we are a part of now! The New Jerusalem is what the apostle John personifies as a bride “coming down from heaven” in Revelation (Rev. 21:2). Thus, the “heavenly Jerusalem” is not “up, up and away,” “or in the sweet by and by” but the age to come—God finally establishing His universal, cosmic reign without challenge. Philip Ryken writes,

The “new” Jerusalem has replaced the “now” Jerusalem. The spiritual Jerusalem has superseded the earthly Jerusalem in the plan of God. The promises of the Old Testament were not for the Jews only, but they are fulfilled in the church of Jesus Christ. Anyone who receives Jesus as Savior and Lord is a son or daughter of Sarah, a true child of Abraham. If we belong to God’s family in this way, we are free in Christ. We are citizens of the New Jerusalem and enjoy the freedom of that eternal city (*Galatians*, p. 187).

To prove that the Galatians were citizens of the Jerusalem above and comprised the true people of God Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1 (*LXX*) in v. 27. Even though Isaiah’s prophecy was originally written to encourage the Jewish exiles in Babylon the analogy to Sarah is appropriate. The link between Isaiah’s prophecy and Sarah is “barrenness.”

At the time of Isaiah’s prophecy, Israel was like a “barren woman”—they were in exile in Babylon. But, Isaiah promised the nation that God would one day establish a “new Jerusalem”—one that would be filled with far more children than the old Jerusalem. In

the same way, Sarah was a barren woman whom God had promised to bless with a child and through her child all the nations would be blessed (Gal. 3:8).

However, Sarah's barrenness seemed to be an impossible obstacle to the fulfillment of God's promise (cf. Gen. 25:21, Isaac and Rebekah; Gen. 30:1, Jacob and Rachel). Despite the seemingly impossible circumstances, God fulfilled His promise (Gen. 21:1-2). In due course, Abraham and Sarah's "offspring"—Christ—came (Gal. 3:16), through whom a joyous multitude would be blessed. Paul thus sees the gathering of Gentile believers in Christ into the church—the Jerusalem above not the earthly Jerusalem—as the fulfillment of Isaiah's joyful prophecy. Tom Schreiner writes, "The return from exile has arrived in the gospel of Jesus Christ" (*Galatians*, p. 304).

The point Paul is making is that Israel's deliverance from Exile and Sarah's birth of Isaac both resulted from God's promise and grace not self-effort. In the same way, faith in Christ through the gospel rather than self-effort under the law leads to justification. Again, Tom Schreiner writes,

The law did not produce God's children, for those under the law were enslaved by sin. The law puts to death, but the gospel proclaimed by Paul brings freedom. Further, the gospel produces true children for the Lord—children of promise like Isaac. Therefore, the Gentiles of Galatia should exult with joy because they are the fulfillment of the promise; they are the true children of the Lord" (*Galatians*, p. 304).

It is clear from Paul's analogy that the Abrahamic covenant (and new covenant) promises blessing as a gift on the basis of the performance of another. In contrast with Exodus 24:1-8 where the Israelites had the blood thrown on them we see in the upper room Jesus in effect splashing the blood upon himself ("...this is *MY* blood of the covenant..." Matt. 26:28, emphasis mine). In the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), Jesus came to bear the covenant obligations and curses that lie upon His people. He drank the cup of wrath so that you and I may drink the cup of salvation (Matt. 26:26-28).

#### **REFLECTION:**

Paul's analogy has established a contrast between two covenants. What we have seen are two principles, "laws" at work, which Paul calls "covenants." There is a covenant of law (Hagar), which promises blessing upon perfect obedience and threatens curses for the slightest transgression. And, there is a covenant of promise (Sarah), which promises blessing as a gift resulting from the performance of another.

Hagar illustrates a conditional covenant—Mosaic—that imposes obligations and Sarah illustrates an unconditional covenant—Abrahamic—that announces divine promises. One covenant results in cursing and the other in blessing; one slavery the other freedom; one salvation the other eternal condemnation.

As we reflect on Paul's analogy, there is one pressing question that demands to be answered: *Who is your mother?*

The question facing each of us is: To which of these two mothers do we belong? Do you belong to Hagar? Are you seeking to be justified before God by your own self-effort? Or, do you belong to Sarah? Are you looking to Christ's performance on your behalf for your justification?

A Hagar mentality lives by the principle, "I do therefore God accepts me." In contrast, a Sarah mentality lives by the principle, "I am accepted, therefore I do." A Hagar mentality views God as a debtor. A Sarah mentality views God as a gracious benefactor. Paul is giving what Tim Keller describes as "the acid test of being a Christian." Tim Keller writes,

This is actually an acid test... There are two kinds of people that go to church: there's religious people (Hagar mentality- J.F.) and real Christians (Sarah mentality- J.F.). And the way you can tell the difference is that a Real Christian is somebody who sees everything that comes as a gift... but a religious person is someone who is working hard and making an effort and trying to be good, going to Bible studies and just saying 'no' everywhere, and denying themselves a lot of pleasures, and so forth... a religious person is someone who is trying to put God in their debt. That is the difference ("The Acid Test of Being a Christian," <http://www.monergism.com/acidtest.html>).

If Sarah is your mother you think to yourself, "It is a miracle that God's loves me. It is a miracle that I am a Christian." A real Christian never gets over the fact that he is delivered from the present evil age (1:4), justified (2:16), redeemed from the curse of the law (3:13), adopted (Gal. 4:1-7) and known by God (Gal. 4:9).

However, if Hagar is your mother you think to yourself, "Of course I am a Christian, I have done my duty" (cf. Matt. 7:22-23). Paul wanted the Galatians (and you!) to see themselves as a miracle. Abraham was as good as dead and Sarah was barren in her old age (cf. Rom. 4:19; Heb. 11:12). Despite these seemingly impossible circumstances, God was faithful to His promise (Gen. 21:1-2)! Like Isaac, we too are children of Abraham—adopted sons—by virtue of God's promise and not our performance. We are all miracles of grace!

Therefore, the critical question you must ask yourself is, "Who is your mother?" If it is Hagar (covenant of law), she promises justification upon perfect, personal obedience and threatens curses for the slightest transgression. If it is Sarah (covenant of promise), she promises justification as a gift on the basis of the personal performance of another—Christ alone!

According to the gospel, you can become a citizen of the Jerusalem above—a child of God—through faith in Christ alone. All who belong to Christ belong to Abraham. These

alone are the offspring of Sarah who are born again by the Spirit of God on the basis of His promise and grace alone.

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