

“Two Covenants”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Texts: Galatians 4:21-31; Genesis 16:1-16

Although we know him as the Apostle Paul, Saul of Tarsus was once the standout student of the famed Rabbi Gamaliel. An up and coming Rabbi himself, Saul was well-known throughout the Jewish community in Jerusalem for his zeal for the religion of Israel and his fierce opposition to a new sect called “Christians.” But after Jesus called Saul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul understands the Bible much differently than he did when a student of Gamaliel. In his response to the false teachers plaguing the Galatians, the Judaizers now find themselves dealing with a master of demonstrating how Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of the Old Testament messianic expectations of Israel. In Galatians 4:21-31, Gamaliel’s prized student will reinterpret the course of redemptive history through the lens of the person and work of Jesus. Paul will explain the relationship between the covenants YHWH made with Abraham and Moses in a way that Gamaliel could never envision, and which demonstrates the Judaizers to be blind guides, not to be followed.

As we have seen from our time in Galatians, Paul has expressed his anger, his amazement, and his sorrow over what was happening to the Galatian Christians. When he had been in Galatia not long before, recuperating from what seems to be a serious illness effecting his vision, Paul used the opportunity to preach the gospel—or, as he puts it, he publically placarded Christ. In his providence, God used Paul’s preaching as the means to call many living in Galatia to faith in Jesus—both Jew and Gentile. As a result, a number of new churches were established. The Galatians responded favorably to the gospel and they warmly embraced Paul as a kind of spiritual father. He led them to a knowledge of the Savior, and they demonstrated great hospitality to him, nursing him back to health. But soon after leaving the area to continue on with his missionary activity, reports got back to Paul that something was amiss in Galatia. Wolves entered these churches and were deceptively leading the Galatians astray in great numbers.

These wolves, known to us as the Judaizers, were Jewish converts to Christianity who came to believe that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, but did not believe that Jesus’ obedient life and sacrificial death were sufficient to save sinners from God’s wrath. Judaizers taught that Gentile converts to Christianity must submit to ritual circumcision, keep the Jewish religious calendar and dietary laws, and obey the law of Moses as a means of obtaining or maintaining justification, a “right standing” before God.

According to Paul, the Judaizers were teaching a different gospel which was no gospel at all, and in doing so, placed themselves under God’s curse. Paul is angry with these false teachers, whom he contends have deceptively entered the Galatian churches and were spying on Gentiles exercising their liberty in Christ. But when he addresses the Galatians—the same people he led to faith in Christ, and who demonstrated great hospitality to him—Paul is utterly bewildered. How could these same people turn from following Christ and then allow these deceivers to lead them back into slavery? Jesus Christ died to set the Galatians free. But the Judaizers were doing their best to convince them that slavery to the law and “the basic principles of the world,” was somehow better than freedom in Christ.

Making an impassioned appeal to the Galatians not to fall prey to the schemes of these deceivers, Paul explains the overall course of redemptive history and the Old Testament Scriptures (the box-top to the puzzle, so to speak) to illustrate the way in which the Judaizers distorted the proper understanding of

God's saving purposes. This is theme of our text, verses 21-31 of chapter four.

After making his personal appeal earlier in chapter 4 (vv. 8-20), Paul changes focus and takes up a discussion of the way in which the Judaizers were misreading the Old Testament. This section of Galatians gives us additional evidence of one of Paul's favorite rhetorical devices—the refutation of the arguments of the Judaizers by using their own biblical proof-texts against them. In doing so, Paul demonstrates that the biblical evidence is overwhelmingly on his side. We have seen Paul do this throughout this epistle, and it is helpful to briefly survey these prior instances.

In Galatians 3:6, Paul quoted from Genesis 15:6, in order to demonstrate that Abraham, the great patriarch of Israel, was justified by faith alone and not by works. This point by itself is utterly fatal to the Judaizers' arguments. But Paul is not going to let up. He employs same rhetorical technique in Galatians 3:10, when he quotes from Deuteronomy 27:26—“*Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.*” He also does the same thing in verse 21 of our text. “*Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?*” His point is “if you want to be justified by means of obedience to the law, then carefully consider what the law actually says!” To paraphrase, “if you want law, I will give you law!” When we consider what the law truly requires of us, we immediately discover that God demands perfect obedience to his commandments in thought, word, and action, *if we are to be justified on the basis of our works.* For those listening to Judaizers, Paul is saying “do not forget to consider this, if you do not maintain perfect obedience you come under God's curse!”

In Galatians 3:16 Paul's argument hinged upon a singular noun, not a plural—“*now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ.*” The Judaizers were obviously misreading the Old Testament, this time by appealing to the promise that God made to Abraham, and to his seed, who is none other than Jesus Christ. The promises of a coming Messiah and the gift of the Holy Spirit come to both Jew and Gentile alike, through the means of faith, not through works.

By demonstrating that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ in all of these ways, Paul is able to prove that his gospel is not an innovation! His gospel is the same that Abraham believed. It is the same gospel proclaimed throughout the Old Testament (although in type and shadow). Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all Old Testament messianic prophecies. Even though the Judaizers may claim to have embraced Christ as the Messiah, their argument that justification is based upon Christ *plus* human merit, illustrates that while the Judaizers may have been right about the person of Christ (as Messiah), they certainly did not properly understand the work of Christ, nor the Old Testament.

Paul continues his appeal to the Old Testament in Galatians 4:22-27. Taking a key argument used by the Judaizers, one based upon a faulty reading of the Genesis accounts of Sarah and Hagar, the two mothers of Abraham's children, Isaac and Ishmael, Paul shows how badly the Judaizers misunderstood and/or misrepresented the whole point of the biblical account. Based upon the thrust of Paul's argument in Galatians 4:22-31, it is possible to reconstruct some of what the Judaizers were falsely teaching the Galatians in this regard. Such may have been what Paul learned from Gamaliel as well. The argument runs something like this: The Jews are the true people of God and had their beginning with Abraham and God's promise to him and his descendants. But God's covenant with Abraham was radically redefined by the Sinaitic Covenant which God made with Israel through Moses at Mt. Sinai. This means the gracious covenant which God made with Abraham, was redefined by the national covenant of works made with Israel at Mount Sinai. This reading completely distorts the Abrahamic covenant.

The practical application of the Judaizer's basing the fulfillment of the promise upon personal obedience to the law of Moses, is that while "God's promise was given to Abraham and his offspring . . . the obligations of the offspring were clearly revealed in the law; hence, to receive the spiritual blessing, it was necessary to fulfill the demands of the law."¹ To put it another way, the promise does not come to God's people through faith alone. Rather, according to the Judaizers, God's people receive the promise through obedience to the Ten Commandments.

Given the fact that Paul refers to the two women associated with Abraham, (Hagar and Sarah—as in Genesis 16, our Old Testament lesson), it is very likely that the Judaizers were appealing to "the story of Abraham and the two women: the Sarah-Isaac-Moses-Law-Jerusalem line alone represented the true offspring of Abraham, and if the Gentiles were to have a part in it, they had to be incorporated through circumcision into Abraham's family and acknowledge to sovereignty of Jerusalem."² The two different covenants God made with Abraham and Moses are read consecutively so that Moses trumps Abraham, and not as two covenants which run parallel to each other throughout the course of redemptive history.

If the Judaizers were correct about this, the reception of the promise is contingent upon human obedience to law. It also means that what was central under the old covenant—circumcision, obedience to the law of Moses, keeping dietary laws, following the Jewish calendar, revering the temple, and placing the earthly Jerusalem at the center of the religious life of God's people—remains central even after the coming of Christ. This amounts to making the types and shadows of redemptive history the reality. It also means misreading the biblical account of Abraham, a return to the bondage of slavery, and a denial that the redemptive work of Christ is sufficient to save. This is another gospel.

Paul is a follower of Jesus Christ. No longer known as Saul of Tarsus, Paul now reads the Old Testament through the eyes of faith in the Son of God. This requires reinterpreting the account of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, in light of the coming of Christ. Paul now sees the entire Old Testament, including the Genesis story of Abraham, through the lens of Jesus Christ's person and work. Paul understands the Abraham-Moses story line quite differently than in the literal historical sense—it is the Apostle Paul who admittedly allegorizes the story in the light of the coming of Christ—flipping the Jewish way of interpreting the Abraham-Moses relationship on its head.

Remarkably, Paul puts the Jews and Judaizers in the line of Hagar, who represents the law and slavery (Mount Sinai). He also understands the physical children of Sarah (the Jews) to be the spiritual children of Hagar (the slave woman), while the physical descendants of Hagar (the Gentiles) have become the true spiritual children of Sarah (citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem). Paul quotes from Isaiah 54:1 (in verse 27) to prove his point that God's purposes now extend to the Gentiles, because of Christ, who is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham.³ The Judaizers miss this point entirely. This re-interpretation of the role of Abraham and his descendants play in redemptive history and the covenant of grace, turns the tables on those who saw themselves as defenders of the religion of Israel. Paul places them in the same category as the descendants of Ishmael! The Judaizers know exactly what Paul is doing. They are not heirs to the promise. They are apostates from the faith.

¹ Fung, Galatians, 220.

² Fung, Galatians, 220.

³ Fung, Galatians, 220.

At this point, it is important to turn to the specific points of Paul's overall argument. Paul begins by recounting the facts of the Genesis account in verses 22-23. *"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."* Abraham had two sons through two different women, Ishmael, and his younger brother by 14 years, Isaac. According to Genesis 16:1-16, Hagar was a slave and the mother of Ishmael. According to Genesis 21:2-5, Sarah gave birth to Isaac and was a free woman. The son born by the slave woman was born *"in the ordinary way,"* literally by means of natural procreation. But the son born to Sarah was born according to the promise, meaning not in the ordinary way. As Genesis 17:17 makes clear, natural procreation and the fulfillment of the promise seemed impossible since Abraham was at least one hundred and Sarah at least ninety. The birth of Isaac, while the product of natural procreation, nevertheless, came about by supernatural means, namely the restoration of Sarah and Abraham's ability to bear children.

In contrast to the Judaizers, Paul interprets the historical events of Genesis allegorically in light of the coming of Christ (not by reading Abraham through Moses). He dismisses the attempted reversal of redemptive history by the Judaizers as spelled out in verses 24-26. *"Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother."*

This does not mean that Paul understands the Genesis account to be fictional or non-historical. But it does mean that Paul reinterprets the historical events to make an important theological point, a point which was certainly not evident to Moses at the time Genesis was written. It is this ability to find Christ in the Old Testament that is in view, at least in part, when we speak of Spirit-given prophecy in the apostolic church. The Holy Spirit enables us to see the reality of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament type and shadow. It is in this sense that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament.

Using one of the texts to which the Judaizers were most likely appealing as a proof-text for their argument that obedience to law fulfills the Abrahamic promise, Paul asserts that both women, Hagar and Sarah, are each illustrative of two respective covenants. On the one hand, Hagar stands for the law and the covenant given on Mt. Sinai, a covenant in which the people of God swore the oath of ratification and promised obedience to the demands of the law. Hagar's children were, therefore, born in bondage, because they are born *"under law."* The children produced by the union of a master and one of his slaves are not destined to be free, but are instead, born as slaves. In this case, these are the natural children, children born in the *"ordinary way."* Such was the case of the spiritual children of Hagar who, according to Paul's re-interpretation of this, are the Jews, born in slavery to the law, since the law was given, in part, to excite and exacerbate human sinfulness, not to provide a means of justification.

Sarah, on the other hand, is the free woman who is the spiritual mother of those who are united to Christ through faith. Sarah represents the covenant of grace, the covenant made with Abraham in which God himself swears an unconditional oath to be God to his people and which includes children of promise, children not born in the natural way. Hagar's children, however, are the natural children (those enslaved to law) who are the citizens of the earthly Jerusalem (v. 25). Just as Hagar was in physical bondage as a slave, so the spiritual children of Hagar (the Jews) are themselves enslaved to the law, and that which Paul identified as the *stoicheia*, or the *"elementary principles of the world"* (4:9). It is this bondage to the law and basic principles that enslaved both the historical children of Hagar, the physical descendants of Ishmael, as well as the spiritual children of Hagar, the Jews, the citizens of the earthly Jerusalem. Paul's exegesis of this text flips the Judaizer's argument on its head.

A key point in his argument is the identity of the city he describes as “*Jerusalem above*,” (v. 26), a city whose inhabitants are not in bondage, but free. There is some interesting word play in the original language. This is yet another instance of Paul explaining things eschatologically—that is, Paul seeing salvation in terms of “this age” and an “age to come.” The “age to come” is an age of redemption ushered in by the coming of Jesus Christ (things eternal), and stands in marked contrast to “this evil age” which is passing away (things temporal). The earthly Jerusalem (tied to this age) stands in opposition to the Jerusalem above (the heavenly Jerusalem). Paul’s teacher, Gamaliel, might accuse Paul of confusing the future Jerusalem (the eschatological city yet to come) which stands against the present earthly city as in the Old Testament prophets (i.e., Zechariah 8:1-8), and the heavenly Jerusalem which already exists (as in Isaiah 62). Paul clearly combines the two images to make a point. The Jerusalem the prophets said was yet to come has *already arrived* in the form of the heavenly Jerusalem. The heavenly Jerusalem represents the age to come which stands over and against the earthly Jerusalem dominated by *stoicheia* and legalism. It is this heavenly Jerusalem to which Christians belong, not the earthly Jerusalem—the city of the Jews. The heavenly city is our spiritual mother, not the earthly city.⁴ We are free, not slaves.

“The Jerusalem that is above,” is the city which represents “the age to come,” and our redemption in Christ. According to Revelation 21:2, this heavenly Jerusalem is even now coming down out of heaven. This city is that spiritual Mt. Zion, to which the author of Hebrews refers in Hebrews 12:22; the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God to which we as Christians now freely approach as citizens of heaven. The heavenly Jerusalem is also the eschatological home of those in the covenant of grace through faith in Jesus. The Jerusalem from above stands in contrast to the earthly Jerusalem, the city of the law where citizenship is based upon the principle of human obedience and the covenant of works, things characteristic of the present day city of Jerusalem (of Paul’s day) with its temple and Torah.

Paul is clearly an eschatological thinker who sees history as the overlap of two great ages of redemption, “this age,” and the “age to come.” As Christians, we are citizens of the heavenly city which is above, though we still live in “this age” (the earthly city) anticipating “the age to come” in all of its fullness and glory. This dual citizenship ends with the return of Christ when “this age” finally and completely passes away when the “age to come” is a present, visible, and final reality. This is why Paul speaks of us as children of promise, we live in the present in light of Christ’s life and death, anticipating the citizenship and the inheritance yet to come. This is what we mean when we speak of “the already” and “the not yet.”

As a further proof of his point, in 4:27 Paul raises an additional theme from the Genesis account. “*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.*” Sarah was barren with no children (Genesis 11:30). But we are told in Genesis that she shouted with joy at the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21:6 ff). Her children through Isaac were more numerous than those of Hagar’s through Ishmael. The church, as the spiritual descendants of Sarah and children of the promise are far more numerous than those of Hagar, since Hagar’s children were enslaved to law and were separate from the people of God. Since Sarah’s children included both believing Jews and Gentiles, Paul sees this as a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham and Isaac, namely that their descendants would become a great nation and be more numerous than the stars in the heavens.⁵

⁴ Fung, Galatians, 210.

⁵ Fung, Galatians, 211.

In verse 28, Paul applies the allegory he has just set forth to the contemporary situation in the Galatian church. *“Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.”* Those who are trusting in the merits of Jesus Christ through faith alone, and not in the elementary principles of works-righteousness, are the true children of Isaac and the children of promise. The children of promise are children born by supernatural means, not in “the ordinary way” and heirs to all the inheritance. The Galatian Christians owe their very existence to the unconditional promise that God made under the terms of the covenant of grace, not to their own obedience to the law of Moses. This is most clearly seen in the promise that God would justify the Gentiles, just as he did Abraham, by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.

In verses 29-30, Paul makes two more points from the Genesis account. *“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. 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.”* First, at that time, the natural-born son, Ishmael, (literally *“born according to the flesh”*) as reported in Genesis 21:9, actually mocked the son that was born according to the promise (literally *“according to the Spirit”* in Paul’s words). In verse 30, Paul concludes that the current situation in Galatia was, *“just as at that time.”* In abandoning the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, the Judaizers, mock the gospel and those who have trusted in it. It is the Judaizers who seek to undo redemptive history. It is the Judaizers who seek to divide what Christ has joined together into one body (Jew and Gentile). It is the Judaizers who seek for themselves what belongs to the true heirs to the inheritance. It is the Judaizers who seek to return to slavery. It is the Judaizers who are spiritual children of Hagar. It is the Judaizers, who, by believing and teaching these things, mock God!

As to the second point, in verse 30 Paul reminds us that according to the Genesis account (Genesis 21:10-12) the slave woman and her son are to be cast out! The religion of promise, the religion of the covenant of grace, the religion of justification by faith alone, cannot co-exist with the religion of law, the religion of works righteousness, the religion of basic principles. The *stoichiea* belong to this age and will pass away! This is why those who preach, teach, or believe another gospel are anathema (Galatians 1:6-10). They are under God’s curse because they renounce Christ and his saving merits. Since the Judaizers are the children of Hagar, like Ishmael, they mock the true heir, so they too, must be expelled!

We have come to a good place to summarize. Throughout Galatians, Paul makes a number of contrasts when making his case against the Judaizers and their flawed understanding of redemptive history.

Righteousness through law-keeping is contrasted with righteousness through faith alone

Slavery to the law and the “basic principles” are contrasted with freedom in Christ

The works principle of the Sinai covenant (Moses) is contrasted with the covenant of grace and the “hearing of faith” (Abraham)

Mt. Sinai is contrasted with Mt. Zion (actually Mt. Calvary)

The law is contrasted with the gospel

Hagar (the slave woman) is contrasted with Sarah (the free woman)

Ishmael (born according to the flesh) is contrasted with Isaac (born according to the promise—the Holy Spirit)

The enslaved citizens of the earthly Jerusalem (legalism-Judaizers) are contrasted with the free citizens of the Jerusalem above (Christians)

Paul reminds the Galatians in verse 31 of what has become so very clear to his reader: “*So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.*” The question is obvious. Why would free people, children of the free woman, want to once again take up the shackles of slavery, renounce their inheritance and embrace Hagar, the spiritual mother of slavery to the law and the basic principles of this world?

In light of the fact that there are two covenants in view (one of works, one of grace), why would a free people reject their citizenship in the “Jerusalem above,” preferring instead to reside in the earthly Jerusalem, in which the light of the gospel has been extinguished by the darkness of the law, the temple and type and shadow? The Judaizers have turned back the course of biblical history, and in doing so, have turned their backs upon the one called the “light of the world”—Jesus Christ—Israel’s final prophet, great high priest, and all-conquering king.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are Sarah’s spiritual children. We are the children of promise, children not born in the “ordinary way.” We have been called to faith in Christ through the word. We have been born in a supernatural way—through the sovereign electing grace of God, not by means of natural procreation. In Jesus Christ we are justified, given the gift of the Holy Spirit, become heirs to the promise, adopted into God’s family, clothed with Christ through baptism, and can cry out “Abba, father.” We are children of the promise. We are free. We are citizens of the Jerusalem above. Does anybody want to go back to Egypt? Or to Jerusalem in the days of the Pharisees?

No, as children of the promise and heirs to the inheritance, let us do as the author of Hebrews (12:22 ff.) exhorts us to do—draw near “*to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 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, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*” There are two covenants (one with Moses and one with Abraham). We belong to the new and better covenant, in which everything God promised to Abraham has been fulfilled in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ!

Amen.