

Galatians 4:21-30 "Two Women, Two Covenants"

GAL 4:21-30 "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."

As we come to this lengthy passage it could be easy to get caught up in all of the imagery of the two sons born to Abraham; of the concubine Hagar who bore Ishmael; the Jerusalem in Israel, as opposed to the Jerusalem from above, and so on. This might sound more like we're studying the book of Revelation rather than Galatians.

But like Revelation, if we understand the intent of the imagery the message becomes quite clear. And as we keep the context of Paul's letter to the Galatians in mind we can zero in on the point he is trying to make to these people.

The answer is actually found in our text as Paul continues his theme of the law versus grace as a means to salvation.

GAL 4:24 "These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants...."

This is the point Paul is making, that these two covenants determine the future of all mankind. If you embrace the covenant associated with Mt. Sanai you will be enslaved and lost. If you

embrace the covenant associated with Abraham, you will be free and have hope through faith. This is the overarching message; the forest, if you will, through the trees.

But there are the individual trees which make up this forest and we want to take a look at these to get a better handle on this spiritual forest Paul addresses.

GAL 4:21 “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?”

What Paul is about to do here is to take what the Judaizers already believe and turn it around on them to prove his point that they are wrong. In other words, he is asking them the question, “are you willing to listen to what the law really says?” (John MacArthur)

And the implication is that they may say they believe the law, but when it comes right down to it they have not applied the law properly and have therefore come to the wrong conclusion.

This is a technique used in debating and it’s been around a long time. In fact, in Paul’s day he was taught how to use such techniques as a Pharisee and Rabbi so as to be able to confound the critics of the Jewish faith. It’s known as the “Jewish formula of citation” (R.Alan Cole) which uses an accepted truth; in this case, the formula, “it is written.”

Paul basically comes along-side the Judaizers and agrees with them about a written passage of Scripture. It’s not unlike what a lawyer might do in a courtroom when cross examining a witness. He might cite different events that he knows the witness will agree on.

And he’ll take this witness down the path he has laid out for him, but instead of delivering this witness to the destination he thinks he’s taking him, the lawyer takes him down a path which will actually destroy his testimony and therefore prove him to be uninformed at best, or a liar at worst.

Remember, Paul was a lawyer as it related to the things of the Mosaic Law. He knows what he’s doing here and the Holy Spirit is using Paul’s background and training to instruct the Galatian Christians and expose the Judaizers who are trying to bring them to the wrong side of the issue of salvation.

So, he sets them up by suggesting that he and the Judaizers both agree on the written word of God as it relates to the law. They

think Paul is taking them down a particular path, but Paul is about to take the road less traveled which leads to freedom.

GAL 4:21-23 “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.”

Okay, Paul says, we can agree that the Scriptures teach that Abraham had two sons. And we can agree that one son was born of a slave woman, Hagar, who happened to be the servant of Sarah, and the other son was born to the free woman who happened to be Sarah.

But, that in and of itself, is not the most important aspect of this truth. So, what if Abraham had two sons, one born of a slave the other born of his wife, Sarah? And so, Paul drives home his point, again something the Judaizers would agree on.

GAL 4:23 “His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.”

Now, the NIV takes a bit of liberty here in explaining how Ishmael was born when it says, “in the ordinary way.” The actual translation from the Greek is that he was born according to the flesh. This could take on two meanings instead of just one.

In other words, he was born according to the flesh, or as the NIV suggests, in the ordinary way as people are normally born into this world. According to the flesh they are conceived, carried to term and born.

But there is a possible second meaning here according to our text and that is that in Ishmael’s case he was born according to the flesh, or according to the sinful passions of the flesh. Specifically, he was born according to a lack of faith on Abraham’s and Sarah’s part as they tried to accomplish God’s will by doing their own will.

However, the other son, Isaac, was not born in the ordinary way, or according to the flesh in the sense that, in contrast, he was born according to a promise given to Abraham by God. Now, this doesn’t mean that Isaac was born out of the ordinary. He too was conceived, carried to term and born. But what makes his birth

different is that God intervened in a situation where Sarah couldn't conceive and miraculously allowed her to conceive.

But more than that Isaac was a child whom God promised to Abraham to be part of the bigger promise of being a descendant who was in the Messianic line; a descendant through whom the Savior of the world would be born.

And here is where Paul is about to take the Judaizers down the path they weren't prepared to go and yet they would have to logically agree the Scriptures subscribe to this as the right path.

Paul now moves to his next approach in making his point. This too was a method every Jew would be familiar with and it involved spiritualizing a truth. In other words, taking a plain historical fact, for example, and reading into it an insight arrived at according to God's word, which taught a spiritual truth.

Now, admittedly this can be a very dangerous approach to the Scriptures because it can go almost anywhere you want it to go to say almost anything you want it to say. And so, in the ordinary course of studying the Scriptures we need to stay with the plain teaching of a passage in most cases unless the Scriptures themselves allude to such spiritualizing.

Let me give you an example. When Jesus taught on the law when preaching his famous "Sermon on the mount" He was taking the written word of God, the plain teaching of a passage, and bringing to light the spiritual ramifications of that teaching.

For example, every Jew knew that when the commandment said, Thou shall not commit adultery, they understood that as not going outside of their marriage to have sexual relations. Many took that literally and so arrived at the conclusion that as long as they didn't physically touch another woman they hadn't committed adultery.

Well, Jesus comes along and brings a spiritual element to this truth which many of them had not considered; a spiritual element which addressed the heart of God when He originally wrote that command. And we all know what Jesus taught on that truth when He gave the spirit behind the command. "If you even look on another woman with lust you have already committed adultery with her in your heart."

Paul is doing the same thing with the teaching of Isaac and Ishmael when he says, "These things may be taken figuratively." He means that though they involve real people in time and history,

there is something else about their lives which teaches a real spiritual truth from God.

And though the use of the word figuratively or even allegory, as it's used in some translations, is applied here in our text, the better sense of what Paul is saying is analogy. This is an analogy of how God used two sons to show two truths of bondage and freedom.

And, after all, this is what Paul has been teaching throughout this letter. The bondage of the law and freedom of Christ. And so, Paul continues to make his point as he uses real historical figures the Judaizers can agree on.

GAL 4:24-25 "These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children."

Paul takes Hagar and makes her the spiritual equivalent of the law given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Now, this would have been repugnant to any Jew because all Jews viewed the descendants of Hagar and Ishmael as being in essentially the same category as all Gentiles, who were viewed by the Jews as dogs or vermin.

And so, Paul is saying that Hagar, who birthed these "dogs," is Mount Sinai, and therefore that which is not desirable. But these Jews would contend that Mount Sinai is holy and beloved and not to be put in the same breath with Hagar and Ishmael.

And that's Paul's point. He is saying that the word of God teaches that as far as salvation is concerned Mount Sinai, and the law associated with it, is a spiritual wasteland. It never was intended to produce salvation as the law emanated from it.

And then Paul furthers his analogy by saying, "just look at present day Jerusalem." Israel was a slave nation, if you will, during Paul's day. They came under the yoke of Rome. They weren't free. They perceived themselves as free to the extent that they were allowed to practice a limited form of Judaism, according to the law, but they were still subject to a power outside of Israel.

And so, Paul is saying that as much as you might think Jerusalem is free it's only an illusion. And to think the law can save is also

an illusion. It's a pipe dream which turns out to be a nightmare if followed.

At this point in this letter Paul is hoping that the Galatian Christians are seeing how the word of God has made this contrast between the law, and Christ, who is the fulfillment of the law. And, whether or not the Judaizers see this, Paul hopes that their influence over the Gentile believers is beginning to wane.

And by the way, this is always the reason we need to be ready to give a defense; an answer to those who either don't know the truth about the gospel, or to those who are being assaulted by those trying to influence other Christians in a negative way. Peter points this out in his first letter.

1PE 3:15-16 "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

When Peter says to be prepared to give an answer he uses a word in the Greek which is apologia, which is where we get our English word apology. Be prepared to give an apology.

Now when we think of the word apology we usually associate it with being an, "I'm so sorry" attitude. And unfortunately, many Christians take this attitude towards the gospel, as though it were something we should apologize for.

But when Peter uses the Greek word apologia he means it in the same way we use the word apologetics, which means a defense of something. We need to defend the faith with the truth instead of being defensive. We all need to be apologists who stand firm in the faith. In fact, someone once said, regarding the sharing of our faith, "to give an apology is never having to say you're sorry."

We should never feel ashamed of the gospel, nor the Savior who is the gospel. We have been called to be witnesses for Jesus Christ and that is a privilege we should defend in the truth and in love. Never compromise that.

But Paul continues as he brings back into the picture this analogy of the Jerusalem under bondage and the Jerusalem which is meant to be free, and how that is obtained. Again, keep in mind that Paul's present day Jerusalem boasts of the law and yet is enslaved

by the Romans. The analogy being that the law as a means of salvation can only enslave, it can't save.

On the other hand, there is a Jerusalem which is free, but it has nothing to do with the law as a means of salvation.

GAL 4:26-27 "But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband."

Two images are used here. One is of a Jerusalem which is above. And the inference is a heavenly Jerusalem. The other image is of Sarah who was barren.

The actual passage from which the barren woman is taken here is in Isaiah and is actually in reference to a barren Israel, but Paul uses it here to identify Sarah who was barren. But, let's quickly look at both of these images.

Paul is saying that though the present city of Jerusalem speaks volumes to bondage, it doesn't mean that Israel and Jerusalem don't speak of a greater spirituality; a spirituality which was always meant to bring freedom.

The problem is that if your Israel or Jerusalem is limited to a piece of real estate, and the laws governing that plot of land, as your salvation, you're in big trouble, because God always meant for Israel and Jerusalem to be spiritual in nature, again as it relates to salvation.

So, where is this Jerusalem from above that is free?

Well, first of all this Jerusalem which is above is a Jerusalem which is from God and established by God. The word Jerusalem is made up of two words in the Hebrew; Yeruw / shalaim, and it means founded peaceful.

The idea of Jerusalem as it relates to Israel and the world is that God has founded a place for us built on peace. And this peace comes only through the one who brings peace, and that is the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

In fact, the writer of Hebrews points this out when he makes the comparison of Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem.

HEB 12:22-24 “But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

When we come to God, to Jesus Christ the Son of God, for our salvation by faith, we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. We have come to that peace established by the Lord; that rest found only in our Messiah.

This is precisely what Abraham looked to and the point Paul has been making with the Galatians. Again, the writer of Hebrews shows us that Abraham understood the heavenly Jerusalem as a spiritual reality.

HEB 11:9-10 “By faith he [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

What Paul has been trying to convey to the Galatians and the Judaizers is that Abraham found his refuge of peace, his city of peace, if you will, not in the land he was wandering around in, but in the hope of the promises God had given him and which he received by faith.

That hope was eternal in nature and that hope was to be with God in the new heavens and new earth forever. This same image is found in the book of Revelation as Jesus describes the New Jerusalem.

REV 21:2-3 “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”

Though there will certainly be a literal place which God has prepared for His people as we know that the present earth and heavens will be destroyed by fire and replaced with a new heavens

and new earth, it doesn't negate the fact that there is a spiritual reality when we speak of this new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

In fact, our Lord Jesus addresses it in this passage from Revelation when He identifies the new Jerusalem coming down from where? Out of heaven. And then in the very next verse he alludes to this new Jerusalem as the dwelling which will be among men. And where will that dwelling be? On the new earth as the Son of God dwells among His people.

REV 21:3 "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

The word dwelling in the Greek is the equivalent to the Hebrew word for tent or tabernacle. And so, we could translate this as, "Now the tabernacle of God is with men."

How many times in the O.T. is the expression, "God tabernacled among His people" used? In other words, it wasn't the tabernacle in the temple which was the focal point, but the presence of God in that tabernacle.

And so, when we speak of the Jerusalem from above, as Paul does in our text, he is contrasting, as he's been doing all along, Jesus Christ who gives life, with the law which brings death.

He is bringing into focus where our eyes need to be when it comes our salvation and they are never to be focused on the things of this world when it comes to either our eternal destiny or our spiritual walk with God.

Our peace from above is not dependent on what is happening around us. There is no peace here in this world which will last. I know, I sought it until I came to the realization that there is only one city of peace, one Jerusalem which has any eternal significance, and it's not in the mid-east. It's from the throne of God and His name is Immanuel, God with us; God who tabernacles among us.

If our hope is on anything less than Jesus Christ, then we'll always be disappointed. If it's on getting that raise, or new home, or even on the hope that we'll be enjoying the streets of gold forever, then our eyes are on the wrong thing. It doesn't mean we can't enjoy

all of these things, but they can never replace the person who is our Jerusalem, or refuge of peace.

Paul wants these Galatians to get their eyes off of the bondage and back onto the peace and security found in Christ alone by faith.

GAL 4:28-31 “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.”

If we've placed our faith in Christ then we are children of promise just as was Isaac. In other words, we are children of God. It was God who gave Abraham the promise of Isaac his son, and it was Abraham who believed God who received that part of the promise.

In contrast, the son born of the flesh, Ishmael, proves himself to be a persecutor of God's people. In a literal way this has haunted Israel for thousands of years. You see, the sons of Ishmael are the sons who have turned out to be the Arabs who have always fought against Israel, and to this day continue to fight against Israel.

If you think one bad decision can't effect many people then just look at the history of Israel who have fought the Arabs. All because Sarah wanted to hurry God's timetable.

And in a spiritual sense the spiritual Arabs, those unbelievers in the world, continue to persecute God's people, the church, as they fight against the truth of God and His word. And if you question that just look at our own country where God and prayer have been outlawed from our public schools.

GAL 4:30 “But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.”

Though Paul may certainly be alluding to being separate from the world here we must keep the context in mind and it has been dealing with how one is saved from the penalty of their sin and that is through the One who brought peace through His blood, Jesus Christ.

The contrast is found in this verse. And what Paul is saying to the Galatians is that their salvation must be founded only on Jesus

Christ. While the Judaizers are trying to introduce the law and its covenants it must be thrown out. And since the slave woman represents one aspect of the covenant which includes the law it must go as a means to salvation.

That is what the Scriptures say. "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."

In other words, get rid of the bad teaching from the Judaizers which promote the law as a means of salvation. No one who adheres to the law will be saved. Only those who embrace Christ by faith will.

GAL 4:31 "Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."

We are free only in Christ. Any other attempt to gain heaven and salvation is futile. But if we belong to the free woman, the promise of salvation found in Christ alone, then we need to act as though we are free and faithfully represent the one who has given us life.

Let me end with a verse we'll begin with next week. May we ponder it, meditate upon it and live in the reality of it by the power of the Spirit.

GAL 5:1 "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.