

June 1, 2008

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Two Women – Two Covenants*

Galatians 4:21-31

*Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?* Galatians 4:21

In other words Paul is saying: 'You who despise grace and do not value faith and set Christ aside and run to the law for salvation – you want to be under the law and think that is wisdom? – let me tell you about what you have chosen.'

*For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman.* Galatians 4:22

Here we need to tell the story as it were because Paul is taking for granted that his audience is very familiar with the story of Isaac and Ishmael from the book of Genesis. In chapter 12 of Genesis, God comes to Abraham and promises him a blessing: *Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* Genesis 12:1-3

And we saw in chapter three of Galatians that **the blessing of Abraham was the promise of God to send a Savior – the Seed of Abraham** – into the world and that through Abraham all the nations would be blessed. And in chapter 15 we saw that God confirmed this again to Abraham and specifically told him: *Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your [exceeding great] reward.* Genesis 15:1b

Apparently however, that wasn't enough for Abraham because he tells God in verse 2: *O Lord God, what will You give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?...Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.* Genesis 15:2-3 Now God had just promised that He Himself would be Abraham's blessing – what more could you want than God Himself? But Abraham, like us, was concerned about **how** God was going to keep his promise. He was concerned because he was over eighty years old and Sarah wasn't getting any younger. If God was going to make a great nation out of him and through him bless the nations, then it was probably necessary for him to have at least one child – and realistically he didn't see that happening. Instead what he saw as very probable was that according to his culture's practices – he would have to adopt Eliezer into his family and make him his heir.

How very like us. God promises, we don't see it happening on our time schedule, so we plot and plan to make it happen. But God is so gracious – He lets us fret and stew, and even chastise Him like Abraham – and yet He has not forgotten His promise. He tells Abraham: *This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir. And He brought him outside and said, Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. Then He said to him, So shall your offspring be. And he believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.* Genesis 15:3-6 God is not put off by our doubts and wonderings and questions of Him – He asks only that in the end we believe Him. **To have this kind of faith does not mean that we are not overwhelmed at times by doubts and fears – but it does mean that we don't live there.** Ultimately Abraham believed God – and God reckoned that to be righteousness.

And in Abraham's case the battle for faith went on for a very long time. I'm not sure how old he was in Genesis 15, but by the time we get to Genesis 16, Abraham is at least 86 years old and Sarah is seventy-six and they began to get anxious about the promise. So Sarah conceives the idea which sounds odd to us, but to that time and culture was a very normal thing – she would have a child through her handmaiden, Hagar. Sarah owned Hagar so whatever Hagar had, it first belonged to Sarah. So she cooks up this plan and even wraps it up in spiritual language and sells it to Abraham: *And Sarai said to Abram, Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.* Genesis 16:2

Two things to note here: **It is always a bad idea to presume on God.** Notice Sarah's words: *Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.* I think she was saying, 'Maybe this is God's way to fulfill His promise. After all, God helps those who help themselves.' Many of us may live with that kind of theology even though we know deep down that God doesn't need our help for anything. But we get anxious when we've prayed and sought God in the word and yet the answers don't seem to come at the time we think they should – so we give our handmaiden to our husband so to speak and help Him out.

***The second thing is that everything rises and falls on leadership.*** This would never have happened if Abraham had acted like a man and took charge here and told Sarah something like: 'No, God said He would give us a son and I don't think He wanted our help in the matter. Let's wait on God some more.' He might have quoted something like Psalm 37: *Wait for the Lord and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land;* Men, husbands, a lot of bad things happen when we do not take the lead spiritually in our families. You can trace this clear back to the Garden of Eden when Adam stood by while the serpent seduced his wife and said nothing. Abraham had face to face meetings with God and heard His promises and yet quietly acquiesced when his wife put up this plan. ***Our culture and world is crying out for men of integrity and strength, who lead, not follow, and who embrace the word of God even when the circumstances say different.***

In any case, the result of this was Ishmael – and years of heartbreak and strife, not only for Abraham and his wife – but for generations to come and yet to come even now. This was the work of the flesh, Paul says. *But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh,* Galatians 4:23a And when the Bible talks about the work of the flesh, it is talking about our own, God-despising, self-effort. I say God-despising because that is just what it is – even though we may gild it with a thin veneer of spirituality – as Sarah did – we are really in our hearts despising God – because we think we can make this thing go a little better than God can. And here Paul is speaking to those who would make the law their refuge – our attempts to keep the law and not live by grace always turn out to be Ishmaels.

But thank the Lord, fourteen years later – when there was no possibility of procreation for this ancient couple – Abraham being 100 and Sarah being 90 – Isaac, the son of the promise came. *and the son by the free woman through the promise.* Galatians 4:23b One came through a slave woman – the other through the free woman. ***One was slave to the law – the other a debtor to grace.*** Paul goes on: *This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.* Galatians 4:24

Here now is Paul's main point in giving this allegory. And an allegory is a literary form that represents an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms – and the forms here are two women – **Hagar and Sarah.** And Paul says that they represent two covenants – ***one of works, the other of faith.*** In the **covenant of works**, God says, ***'Here is My law – if you will keep it then I will bless you. If you keep it perfectly, wholly, fully, without a single misstep – then I promise salvation. But if you break My law in the smallest regard, then you are under the curse and destruction is your end.'*** It is not enough to claim that you are mostly good – that you mostly follow God's law – the Bible says that if we break the smallest part of the law we have transgressed the whole law. 99% is not good enough. Even by man's somewhat liberal standards it is not good enough for some things.

***If 99% were good enough there would be no phone service for 15 minutes each day. 1.7 million pieces of first class mail would be lost each day. 35,000 newborn babies would be dropped by doctors or nurses each year. 200,000 people would be getting the wrong drug prescriptions each year. We would have unsafe drinking water three days a year and 2 million people would die from food poisoning each year.***

But in the other covenant – ***the covenant of grace*** – God says. ***'My Son, Christ Jesus will bear the penalty of the law-breakers, taking their sins on His shoulders, dying in their place – and I promise to save all those for whom My Son dies, and I will put My law in their hearts that they will not depart from it forever.'*** The Hagar covenant of works says 'Do this and live'. The Sarah covenant of grace says, 'Christ has done this so that you may live – only believe.' ***The one is conditional upon our doing – the other is conditional upon Christ's doing. The one demands obedience – the other grants us the power to obey.*** The covenant of Hagar only makes slaves – the covenant of Sarah only makes free men.

In contrasting these two women – and allegorizing them as types of the covenants – there are several things to notice. The first thing we see is that Sarah was before Hagar – she was his wife before Hagar came into the picture. Which leads to the inescapable conclusion that ***grace preceeded the law.*** There are some bad theologians who teach that the covenant of grace came after the covenant of the law because they are time-bound. That is they see that Moses came before Christ and the Bible says that the law came through Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ***But if their conclusion is accurate then all men before Christ were saved by what they could do and grace had nothing to do with it.*** But that is not what the Bible teaches.

God did not change His mind – He did not look down at the world and say to Himself, **'Well I gave them the law of Moses and they're not doing very well with that – I'd better give them grace.'** And the grace of God becomes some sort of afterthought of God, some sort of recovery plan. No, grace was there in the beginning – even before the beginning.. The Bible tells us that we were **chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world** (Ephesians 1:4); we are said to be **elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father** (1 Peter 1:2); we were purchased by the blood of the Lamb **who was slain before the foundation of the world.** (Revelation 13:8) **That is grace!** Long before we even thought of breaking the law of God, He knew us and loved us and chose us – and He allowed us to fall to demonstrate the riches of His grace. **Everyone who has been saved, is being saved and will be saved, is saved by grace through faith.**

The second thing to notice is that Hagar was never intended to be Abraham's wife – she remained only a handmaiden – a servant – to Sarah. This tells us that the law was never intended to save – **it was only designed to serve grace. The law is the handmaiden to grace** – or as Paul put it - **'the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.** Galatians 3:24

And finally, **Hagar needs to go.** That is, all dependence upon self and the flesh must be driven into the desert – just like Hagar and her son were. **But what does the Scripture say? "CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON, FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN."** Galatians 4:30 When Hagar produced a child through the effort of the flesh, the Bible records that **'Her mistress was despised in her sight.'** She thought she was something special because she was able to conceive and Sarah was not. But the problem was is that she still did not have the child of promise – she produced something – but he wasn't Isaac. It is so like us to boast in what we can do and miss what God wants to do.

Suppose God reduced all the commandments to just one – 'Thou must jump so high as to touch the moon.' No need to love your neighbor or pray or follow Jesus; just touch the moon by virtue of a jump, and you'll be saved. Now there would be some of us that could jump two, three or even four feet – and some of us might jump a little higher. I think the world record for the high jump is nearly eight feet. But the moon is 240,000 **miles** away. **That is 12,672,000 feet!** All of a sudden even eight feet doesn't look so good. And yet so many of us who can jump 3 feet, look at the guy who jumps only 3 inches and say, 'What a lousy jump!' But we fail to recognize that **all of our jumping will not produce the promise** – Isaac. All we get is Ishmael.

**And all our Ishmaels are sworn enemies of the child of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.** Galatians 4:29 Paul was telling the Galatians that if they thought to be justified by their works that they were hostile to the things of the Spirit and enemies of God. **At the heart of their problem was pride** – pride in what they could do – and pride is always hostile to the grace of God. And the Bible says that 'God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' 1 Peter 5:5

**But the covenant of grace produces the child of promise** and Paul breaks out in celebration of that by referring back to Isaiah 54:1: **For it is written, "REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND."** Galatians 4:27 In chapter 64 Isaiah spoke of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon by the Babylonians sometime in the future. The Jews secretly thought that this would never happen – God would not dare to let the uncircumcised nations boast that He was not able to defeat them and thereby admit that their gods – Marduk and Ishtar – were bigger than the God of Israel. But in point of fact that is exactly what happened. And in 586 BC the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and carried away most of the inhabitants back to Babylon.

Israel had become spiritually barren. But the Jews still counted on a special relationship with God because they were Abraham's descendants – they just didn't have Abraham's faith. In fact, there is good evidence that ever since the Babylonians conquered the Jews in 586 BC and destroyed the Temple – the ark of the covenant had been lost, and the Temple of Jesus' day and Paul's day was just an empty shell – a monument to pride in their rituals, ceremonies, ordinances and regulations. The mercy seat, where God met with man, was no longer in those empty rituals and ceremonies, but was now to be found in Christ – the seed of promise.

**But the barren Jerusalem in the plan of God, would become the spiritual Jerusalem and there the Church would be born of all those who put their trust in God's covenant of grace.** And so everyone connected to this covenant Paul says, are children of promise. **And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.** Galatians 4:28 **So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.**

*Our gracious and loving Heavenly Father,*

*You know all about our weak and stuttering faith, our inability to do anything for Your glory, our distressing coldness of heart and raging pride that keeps us from the throne of grace – and yet You lovingly call us to return to You and be healed. You have been long-suffering and compassionate with us as we produced our Ishmaels, acting like children of the bond woman, and walked before You in unholy pride, and in Your mercy You have not turned us away, but rather call us to repent and be restored. Restore our hearts once again to seek You with our whole hearts. Return again with showers of converting grace to poor-gospel abusing sinners. Help our souls to breathe after holiness – after a constant devotion to You – after growth in grace more and more each day. Lord You have promised and said, 'I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.' And we are the children of that promise. Fulfill Your promise in us we pray – so that we who have been made glad in You may live to make the nations glad in God we pray in the promise-fulfilling name of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto You.  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.***