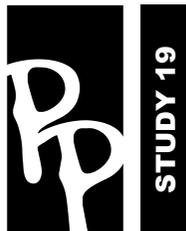


TWO COVENANTS AND

TWO JERUSALEMS



STUDY 19



Galatians 4:21-31

This Study Paper contains the following

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: Covenants in the Bible
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

Paul is coming towards the end of his defence of the gospel of grace. He started his argument at the beginning of chapter three by asking the Galatians about their own experience. He then turned to the Scriptures and used Abraham as an example of faith. Abraham lived before the law was given to Moses at Sinai. Paul contrasted freedom which faith in Christ brings against bondage, which results from those who try and keep the law. In our last study Paul made a personal appeal, reminding them of how they received him despite his physical disabilities. Those leading the Galatians astray were up to no good. Now Paul sets out one more argument. It is from the Old Testament and he tells his “children” (verse 19) a story! He uses a Scripture story to illustrate his argument that salvation is by God’s free gift and not by human effort. (Read Genesis 16, 17 and 21). Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael’s mother was Hagar, the slave woman. Isaac’s mother was Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Ishmael and Isaac represented two covenants: Ishmael, a religion of a covenant of works, which contained human scheming; Isaac, a covenant of blessing given by God’s gracious promise.

What these verses mean

Verse 21

Tell me,

Paul wants to make his readers think and starts off this section of the

letter with an invitation for them to respond to a question that he is about to ask.

you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?

Here, Paul says: “You who want to live by ceremonies, hear what the Mosaic Scriptures actually say.” He is using the word “law” in two different senses. The first “law” refers to the laws given to Moses at Sinai. The second use of the word “law” is the wider writings of Moses, as contained in the five books of the Bible. What Paul is doing is to point out that the law given at Sinai is part of a larger body of Scripture. The law of Moses has to be looked at in the context of all Moses’ writings. Had they done that they would have rejected what these false teachers were saying.

Verse 22

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.

The quarrel between Paul and the false teachers was about identifying who are the true heirs of the promises made to Abraham. It is not enough to claim physical descent from Abraham (see Romans 9:6-8). Only **one** son was heir **to the promise**. The background to this was that the promise God gave to Abraham involved his descendants. But time was going on and Abraham and Sarah did not have any children. So they devised a plan for them to have a child by Sarah’s slave, Hagar. Their faith had wavered, they reasoned in a human way (ordinary way) and tried to work out God’s plan through their own actions. Ishmael was born. Later, God fulfilled his promise and, though Sarah was beyond childbearing age, God brought about a supernatural pregnancy and the birth of Isaac.

Verse 23

His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way;

Ishmael represents those who seek salvation by their own works. The birth of Ishmael came about through human wisdom. The difficulty with this approach is that it is flawed and does not meet God’s requirements. This was the Judaisers’ mistake, they reasoned that human action will contribute to a person’s salvation. God has rejected human wisdom (Rom. 8:6).

but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

Isaac represents those who live by faith in God’s promises of salvation through Christ. By Sarah being too old for Isaac to be born by natural means, God demonstrated his direct involvement through this miracle.

The contrasting births of Isaac and Ishmael illustrate the way a person is regenerated and becomes a follower of Christ. Do the Galatians want to be like Isaac – son and heir of God’s promise; or like Ishmael – child of human schemes, born into slavery?

Verse 24

These things may be taken figuratively,

Jewish teachers often used stories to illustrate the truths they wanted to teach. Old Testament histories are often illustrations of New Testament truths: e.g. the exodus is a picture of the salvation of believers. See 1 Corinthians 10:11. Paul now turns to an actual historical event and will use it to illustrate spiritual truth as an allegory. ¹

for the women represent two covenants.

Though there are nine different covenants to be found in the Scriptures (see Focus Point), they fall into two types. The first type is the covenant of promise, which requires no human involvement. It is spiritual, being characterised by the activity of the Holy Spirit. The second type is a covenant of works. Under this arrangement God sets out what he requires of man, and man has to meet those requirements in order to satisfy God. In the first type of covenant it is God who promises. In the second type man makes the promises but fails to keep them and is justly condemned.

One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.

Hagar stands for the Mosaic law given at Sinai and represents those who think they can obtain God’s promises by their own efforts. See Romans 10:3. This is the second type of covenant. The scribes and Pharisees zealously maintained the Mosaic system of ceremonies.

Verse 25

Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem,

Paul in this verse introduces a third layer into his allegory. So far he

¹ An allegory is a story in which all the details represent a meaning different from themselves. By contrast, a parable is a story designed to teach one main lesson; the details do not usually have any special meaning. Paul is using the story of Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah and Isaac as an allegory because he gives all the details of the story special meanings.

Other examples of allegories in Scripture are:

Psalm 80:8-15	Proverbs 5:3-18	Ecclesiastes 12:3-7
John 10:7-18	John 15:1-8	1 Corinthians 3:10-15

See “Interpreting the Bible” by W.H.Kuhr, chapters 6,7 and 8 for a detailed study of figurative language and how to understand it (Grace Publications). Copies can be obtained by writing to Grace Baptist Mission at the address shown at the front of this study book.

has written about Hagar and Sarah and their two sons (first layer), representing the two types of covenant (second layer). The overall theme of these verses is the circumstances and the type of children that are born to these two women. Paul goes further and introduces Jerusalem in this and the next verse, making the allegory complex. In the same way that there are two types of covenant, so there are two types of Jerusalem. They represent the type of people that the two covenants give birth to. The first type of Jerusalem is compared to the city that exists on earth. However it is not the geographical or political city that is meant here, but the religious system of Judaism. This Jerusalem is connected with the law of Moses given at Mount Sinai. Take away this and the city becomes non-existent.

because she is in slavery with her children.

Hagar is linked to Mount Sinai, where the law was given to Moses. This has given birth to a nation that follows the rules of these laws. So the Jews in Paul’s day were the “children” of this religious system. They were bound to the Mosaic law, they could not free themselves from it. The Jewish people were in bondage to the system that came from the covenant that required their obedience and compliance. The covenant and the people were tied together and the earthly city of Jerusalem was a picture of this.

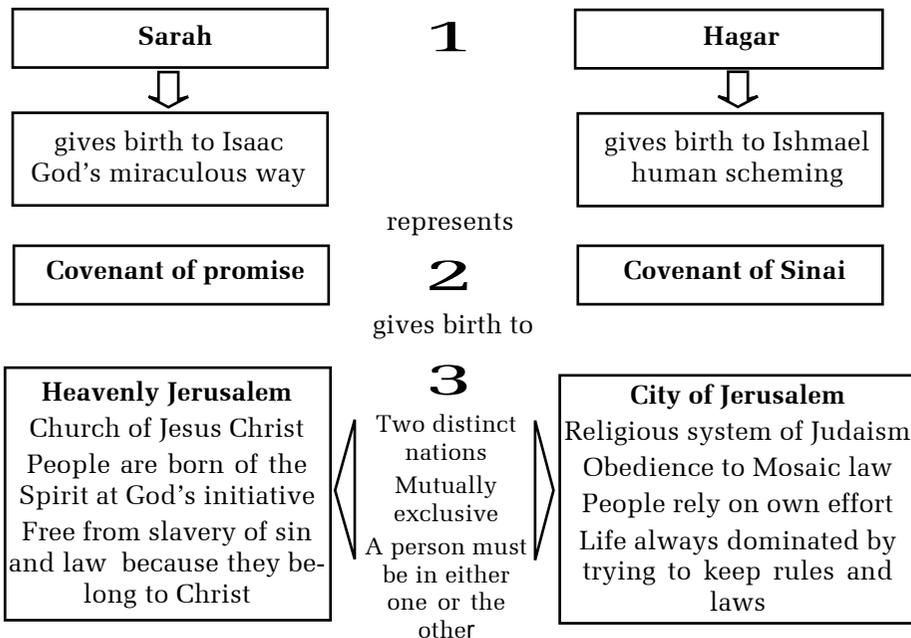
Verse 26

But the Jerusalem that is above is free,

By this Paul means the Christian church. The heavenly Jerusalem is identified with the church of Jesus Christ. (See Hebrews 12:22,23, Revelation 21:2-11 as examples.) Sarah, who had Isaac because of God’s promise, represents the new gospel covenant established by God’s promise from heaven to Abraham (3:16) and fulfilled by Christ. The believer in Christ is freed from the need to earn merit by performing ceremonies in an effort to please God. The believer in Christ is freed from the guilt and penalty of sin – see John 8:36. The covenant of promise and the Christian believer are inseparable.

and she is our mother.

Whoever is “born again” is born “from above” (John 3:3). (The Greek word “again” means “from above”). In other words, all believers are the result of God’s gracious action on them from above. See 4:4-6. The inhabitants of this heavenly city are the children of promise. Sarah’s inability to bear children until God’s miraculous intervention is a picture of man’s inability to be born again spiritually until God raises the person from being spiritually dead to being alive in Christ, in accordance with the promise given to Abraham. This is the picture of the heavenly Jerusalem.



Verse 27

For it is written:

Sarah's inability to bear children but God's intervention, which leads her to having a child who continues the family line and the raising of a people, prompts Paul to quote an Old Testament Scripture. It is from Isaiah 54:1.

"Be glad, O barren woman, you who bears no children; Break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labour pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband."

Isaiah sees the people of Israel prospering after being delivered from the Babylonian captivity. Jehovah² their "husband" had left them. But, says the prophet, though temporarily in captivity and "desolate", they will return and prosper. Paul understands that what happened in history, the promise given to Sarah (Gen. 17:16), is a picture of the way the promise would be fulfilled. Believing Jews will take the gospel to Gentiles and the resulting Christian church of all nations, ages and times will far outnumber the old Jewish nation which remains "married" to the Mosaic law (compare Isaiah 54:2,3). Therefore, Paul argues, the new covenant of salvation through faith in Christ by far exceeds anything achieved by keeping the law of Moses.

Verse 28

Now you brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

Those Galatians who live by faith in Christ are like Isaac, who was the child of Abraham and Sarah's faith in God, even though their physical condition made conception and childbirth humanly impossible (Heb. 11:11,12). Isaac represents Christians born by God's power. (Because of illustrations like this, it can be said that all Christians are now the spiritual Israel of God. Compare Romans 2:28,29; Galatians 6:15,16).

Verse 29

At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit.

Ishmael, whose birth was the result of human scheming and was born in a natural way, persecuted the one who was born in a miraculous way (Gen. 21:9). The two covenants are opposed to each other. Those of the covenant of works recognise this and persecute the "children of the promise". This is the pattern that is found in the Old Testament, continued in the New Testament and will not stop until the final day of this world.

It is the same now.

Paul was often persecuted by the Jews (Acts 13:50; 14:19), his life being in constant danger. Believers today are to expect persecution (2 Tim. 3:12) and here we are given an explanation for it. Persecution comes in many different forms, from physical hurt and imprisonment to being called names and being marginalised.

Verse 30

But what does the Scripture say?

At the beginning of our study, in verse 21, we considered the play on the word "law". There were two meanings, one the specific rules and the other the wider text of Scripture. Now in closing, Paul asks the Galatians what does the wider text of Scripture say? If you are going to use Scripture as the basis of your case, let us see what the full context is.

"Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share the inheritance with the free woman's son."

The inheritance, promised by God to Abraham, was for Isaac, the child of faith, only. Likewise gospel salvation is for believers only. God himself confirmed to Abraham the rightness of sending Ishmael away (Gen. 17:18-21; 21:12). Paul has a very strong argument here against the teachers of Jewish ceremonies as a way of salvation. Christian believers cannot live as the child of the bondwoman and free woman at the same

time. The law given at Sinai cannot save and cleanse a person from sin. It has to be removed and got rid of from the life of the person who follows Christ. Only the blood of Christ can purge and cleanse us from our sin, making us right with the living God.

Verse 31

Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

The Jewish teachers prided themselves on being Abraham's children. Remember, says Paul, Abraham had two sons; only one of them received the inheritance. Therefore, the path to acceptance with God is the "Isaac-path" – i.e. faith in God's gracious promises. Anyone trying to earn merit in God's sight by keeping ceremonies becomes a slave to those rules – as Hagar and Ishmael were slaves.

Notice in both this verse and verse 28 that Paul addresses the Galatians as brothers. This tells us that Paul still regarded the Galatians as Christian believers, though they had been tricked by false teachers. He was reasoning with them, so that they could see where they were going wrong and could return to the position they had when they first believed and trusted in Jesus Christ.



Summary

The false teachers were persuading the Galatian Christians that they could only be fully accepted by God by going through the Jewish ritual and ceremonies that are set out in the Old Testament. They were being pushed to become like Jews. In his great concern for these Galatian believers, Paul sets before them an event from the Old Testament, Sarah the wife of Abraham and her servant, Hagar. These women had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. At first reading it may appear as if it is just a record of what took place in history. However, Paul explains the significant, spiritual meaning of what happened and how it helps us today to understand biblical truth. The two women and their sons teach us that there are two types of covenant that God makes. One is that of promise and does not require anything from a person to receive it. Sarah and Isaac represent this. The second type requires human obedience. It was given at Sinai to be our teacher to bring us to Christ because of the impossibility for any person to keep to the rules of the covenant. Each of these types of covenant give birth to

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two different types of people. Paul uses the heavenly Jerusalem and the city of Jerusalem to represent the two categories. The city on this earth comes from the covenant of works and its entire people are in captivity to the old covenant. Their lives are totally ruled by the law because of the energy and effort required to keep the laws. The people of the heavenly Jerusalem are free from the law because their hearts are subject to the rule of Christ. The heavenly Jerusalem is the church of Jesus Christ. All who belong here have put their trust in Christ's saving work on the cross. This was what God promised to Abraham in his covenant that he made with him. Now the two types of covenant will not mix, they are so different. The false teachers were trying to make the Galatians think that they needed to rely on both Christ and the Jewish laws and ceremonies. How wrong they were!



Two suggestions of what to preach from these verses

1

“Abraham had two sons” (verse 22)

(i) Abraham's mistake and its consequences

Abraham decided that the promised blessing of a son to himself and Sarah was impossible (Gen. 16:1-3), so he worked out a human scheme to solve the problem, which was not God's way. So Abraham had Ishmael.

- (a) Abraham was sincere, but wrong.
- (b) Abraham's error arose from impatience with God.
- (c) Such impatience is a form of unbelief and therefore it is sin.
- (d) This unbelief arose despite the wonderful blessing of Genesis 15:7-21.
- (e) The temptation to this unbelief came through his wife's good intentions for her husband.

We learn:

- (a) Sincerity is not enough without knowledge of truth.
- (b) Good intentions are not enough if they are contrary to God's Word.
- (c) One blessed experience does not mean we will not sin thereafter. There must be continual alertness.

- (d) Spiritual dangers can arise suddenly, even appearing to be good intentions.
- (ii) The effect of Abraham's unbelieving action was serious
 - (a) In the family:
 - Hagar became proud (Gen.16:4)
 - Sarah became jealous (Gen. 16:5)
 - Abraham was troubled (Gen. 17:18; 21:10,11)
 - (b) In the tribe:
 - Ishmael persecuted Isaac (Gal. 4:29)
 - The Ishmaelites constantly troubled Israel (Ps. 83:6)
 - (c) In subsequent history:
 - From the line of Ishmael, Mohammed is descended! Ishmael and Isaac still struggle today

We learn

- (a) Unbelief has serious consequences; it is not a little sin.
- (b) We need to be sure we are using spiritual, biblical principles in shaping our lives; otherwise we may be making trouble for ourselves and others.
- (c) It is sometimes necessary to wait a long time for God to fulfil his promises. We need faith and patience (Heb. 6:12). Note 2 Peter 3:9.

2 The Christian believers' glory (verse 28)

(i) We inherit the promises of the Old Testament. The true fulfilment of the Old Testament promises are often not literal but spiritual. They are fulfilled today in Christ and in the people of Christ who believe. We Christians are Abraham's seed, who inherit the blessing promised to his descendants (3:29). Like Isaac we are "children of promise" (verse 28) and "children . . . of the free woman" (verse 31). We are all citizens of the true Jerusalem, "the Jerusalem above" (verse 26; cf. Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 3:12; 21:2). We are the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) and "the true circumcision" (Phil. 3:3). No doubt we shall be persecuted, but all the promises of God to his people in the Old Testament become ours if we are Christ's.

(ii) We experience God's gracious initiative to save us. We have seen that Abraham's two sons and their two mothers stand for the two covenants, the old and the new, and for the two Jerusalems, the earthly and the heavenly. What is the difference between them? The religion of Ishmael is a religion of nature, of what man can do by himself without any special intervention of God. But the religion of Isaac is a

religion of grace, of what God has done and does, a religion of divine initiative and divine intervention, for Isaac was born supernaturally through a divine promise. And this is what Christianity is, not "natural" religion but "supernatural".



Focus Point:

Covenants in the Bible

A covenant is an agreement between two or more parties. It enables the parties to come voluntarily together on an equal basis, after they have considered the duties and conditions that are placed upon them by the agreement. It can also involve a superior party coming together with an inferior party, the superior party accepting the situation. Each party binds itself to the stipulations of the agreement and this is confirmed by a solemn ceremony.

In Scripture, covenants between God and man are the result of God's sovereignty and his graciousness. There is an enormous gap between God and man, thus making it impossible for any agreements to be made on the basis of two equal parties. They are imposed by the will of God and they benefit man.

The concept of a covenant comes from the trinitarian being of God. God so ordered the life of man that the covenant idea became one of the pillars of social life of communities marred by sin. When God started to make covenants with man, the conceptual idea had already been formed in human thinking and living. In making these covenants God, as the superior being, graciously condescended to come down to the level of man.

The Covenant of Promise

Within the trinity of God, the **covenant of grace** was established between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. This happened before the world came into being. God the Father agreed to give his Son (John 3:16). Christ agreed to give his life as a ransom (John 10:17,18). The Holy Spirit agreed to work within those whom the Father had chosen, to bring about their salvation and prepare them for eternal life with God (Rom. 8:9, 14, 16). From this covenant of grace stem the various covenants of promise made with various men.

The Covenant with Adam

This followed the fall of Adam and Eve and refers to God's promise that the seed of the woman, i.e. Christ, would bruise Satan's head (Gen.

3:15). The promise looks forward to the coming of Christ, through whom salvation would be established by Jesus paying the penalty for sin.

The Covenant with Noah

God's promise, following the flood, that never again will there be a flood that destroys the earth (Gen. 9:9,11). It is linked to the covenant of grace in a general way because God undertakes to restore rather than destroy creation.

The Covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

This was a three-fold promise made to Abraham. Firstly, the inheritance of a promised land; secondly, descendants too many to count; and thirdly that in Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. The spiritual application was that Abraham would hold the promise in trust until the coming of his seed, the Lord Jesus Christ. Circumcision was given as a sign, to be a constant reminder of God's promise until the coming of the seed. When the seed came, i.e. Jesus Christ, the three-fold promise would be met. Firstly, Jesus would gain the promised land of salvation for his people who will one day inhabit the "new earth" (2 Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21:1). Secondly Jesus would acquire a countless number of people; and thirdly every nation of the earth would be represented. Abraham understood the spiritual meaning of the promise as well as the physical.

The Covenant with David

Under this covenant (2 Sam. 23:5), Christ was promised as the son of David. See also Psalm 132:11 and Acts 2:30. This is a continuation and development of the covenant of promise.

The New Covenant

The establishment of this covenant was prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-37). It is further expanded by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 8:1-12). This new covenant replaces the covenant given to Moses on Sinai. Not only does the new make the old obsolete, but the type of covenant changes too. The Sinaitical covenant required man's obedience, whilst the new covenant is one-sided, not requiring human promises in return. God, through the new covenant, made four promises:

1. God will put his law into his people's minds and write his commandments upon their hearts. God promises to give a new nature to his redeemed people so that they will come to appreciate and love his laws. They will want to please God and not resent the idea that God has a right to make demands upon them. The change of attitude

within the converted person will be through the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit that now dwells in the believer.

2. There is a new relationship; God says, "I will be their God and they shall be my people." (Heb. 8:10) It becomes a personal relationship. Paul in Galatians 2:20 expressed this when he said, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved **me** and gave himself for **me**."
3. It will be a new experience; God's people will know him. They will be able to relate to him and enjoy him.
4. All his people's wickedness will be forgiven and their sins forgotten.

The Covenant of Works

This is where the promises of God are conditional upon human obedience (Rom. 10:5). This makes the covenant of works susceptible to being broken by man.

The Covenant at Sinai

If the laws given to Moses on Mount Sinai were observed and obeyed, then God would keep his promise and give to such a person eternal life. But once man disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, the terms of the agreement had been broken. Yet man accepted the agreement with its conditions (Ex. 24:7).

In the Galatian churches, the false teachers were wanting the converts from Judaism to follow the Covenant of Works and not the Covenant of Promise.



Over to you

How have you found the passage of this study paper? Can you list ways to show how Paul's use of this Old Testament story can help you in your ministry? (For example, with people who consider their Christian faith to be that of outward ritual.)

In what ways do you experience the persecution of verse 29? How are you able to help the people in your congregation who suffer such troubles?

How much do you use the Old Testament to explain the teaching of the New Testament?