

Religion vs Relationship Galatians 4:21-31

Galatians 4:21-31 offers a bit a sidetrack in the straightforward message that has been presented throughout the letter. The sidetrack is important, however, because it uses a well-known story from the Old Testament to illustrate the overall point that salvation by grace through faith is greater than the covenant of works found in the Mosaic covenant.

To understand the illustration, we need to first understand a bit of the history of salvation as it relates to Abraham.

Genesis 12:1-3 is the hinge on which the entire book of Genesis turns.

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. ² 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. ³ 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."

God makes a one-sided (faith) covenant with Abram that he will bless Abram with land, a great name, and an heir to possess those things. Abram's part in the covenant is that he believes God. That is all.

Later in the story, Abram and his wife start to believe that God would not deliver on his promise, so they decide to conceive a son with Sarai's handmade. This is Abram's disobedience to the covenant God has made with him because Abram is attempting to create an heir through his own schemes (works).

When God miraculously delivers Abraham an heir through his wife, there is immediate conflict between the family that Abram produced through a slave and the family that God has given him through a promise. This conflict is indicative of the conflict that is raging in our hearts between relationship with God by faith and the futility of attempting to earn our salvation through works.

Read together the way that Paul describes this conflict.

Galatians 4:21-31

²¹ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴ Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she

corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷ 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.”**

²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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.” ³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Before we begin to discuss this passage, we need to talk about how we are supposed to interpret Scripture. We should always first read Scripture to mean what it what it meant to its original audience. We must then explore the differences and similarities between the original audience and the twenty-first century reader. We are not supposed to draw meanings from Scripture that are not embedded within the text. This can lead to all sorts of wrong beliefs about what God is teaching.

But there is a second important principle to interpreting Scripture: that the best interpreter of any passage of Scripture is other Scripture. While we, today, could not assign the sort of allegorical meaning to Sarah and Hagar that Paul assigns to them, because Paul is writing Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we can know with certainty that Abraham’s two sons are indeed meant to illustrate for us the difference between a relationship with God and the religion of works.

Discussion Questions

- **What is an allegory (v. 24)?**
- **Why would we not interpret Scripture as allegory on our own?**
- **What is the symbolism of Hagar and Sarah?**
- **What is the symbolism of Mount Sinai, the present Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem above?**
- **How did seeking to achieve God’s blessing by his own works create havoc in the life of Abraham?**
- **What did Abraham and Sarah do to deserve the blessing of Isaac?**
- **What conflict arose between Sarah and Isaac and Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis?**
- **Why is salvation by works and salvation by grace through faith always in conflict?**

- **What havoc is created when we attempt to let works salvation coexist with grace?**
- **What steps have you taken in your life to “cast out” the idea of salvation by works (v. 30)?**