

Paul Refers to Abraham: Justification is By Faith Alone

Galatians 4:21-31

Galatians 4:21-31: *“Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. ²³ But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴ which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— ²⁵ for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— ²⁶ but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. ²⁷ For it is written:*

“Rejoice, O barren, you who do not bear!

Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor!

For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband.”

²⁸ Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. ²⁹ But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. ³⁰ Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” ³¹ So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

Background Notes

Some of you have been to the “traditional” Mt. Sinai - *Gebel Moussa*, or “Mountain of Moses.” *Gebel Moussa* is located in Egypt, in the southern Sinai Peninsula. The big question is whether *Gebel Moussa* is the “real” Mt. Sinai. Verse 25 says that Mt. Sinai is in Arabia, and thus some folks say that the “real” Mt. Sinai is not the traditional Mt. Sinai of the Sinai Peninsula, but is a mountain in Saudi Arabia. However, the “Arabia” of Bible days was not the same as Saudi Arabia today - “Arabia” in Bible days included the Sinai Peninsula. Of course this still does not mean that the traditional Mt. Sinai is the “real” Mt. Sinai - but it could be. In fact, several other mountains in the Sinai Peninsula could qualify.

In this last section of Galatians 4, the apostle Paul used Mt. Sinai as part of his illustration to drive home the point that he had been belaboring all through this epistle: justification before God is by faith alone - not by works, and not by faith plus works. The false teachers known as Judaizers were teaching that faith alone was not enough – that you also had to perform the works and rituals of the Old Testament Law of Moses.

The epistle of Galatians is still very appropriate for today! Our fallen human nature ***always*** wants to add human works to the finished work of Christ on the cross, because human works appeal to human pride. That’s why Ephesians 2:8-9 says, ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”*** [emphasis added].

By the way, when Paul said that these things are “*symbolic*” (v24) or an allegory, he did not mean that they are fictional or mythical. These events were true historical events - they really happened! The apostle was simply indicating that he was using these true events as an illustration. Let’s look at the illustration from the life of Abraham.

Doctrinal Points

1. Hagar and Ishmael represent salvation by works.

Do you remember the story of Hagar back in Genesis 16? Abraham did not wait on God in faith for the son God had promised. He went ahead on his own and wrongfully had a son, Ishmael, with Sarah’s servant Hagar.

In the apostle Paul’s illustration, Hagar represented the Law, the covenant made at Mt. Sinai. Just as Ishmael was born of Hagar, the slave woman, through an act of the flesh, so the Law, wrongly used, had produced a religion of bondage to human works. This religion was Judaism (“Jerusalem” v25). Judaism was centered in Jerusalem. Followers of this religion remained in bondage, enslaved to the Law that they were unable to keep.

This truth still applies today. Just as Abraham produced Ishmael by human plans (not God’s plan), Hagar and Ishmael represent salvation by human works. Salvation by works doesn’t get anyone into Heaven, either then or today. Furthermore, those who attempt to attain salvation by works will never experience the freedom that can be enjoyed in Christ.

If you are thinking that you can earn salvation by keeping the works of the Law, or doing good works, or by religious rituals - you’re wrong! First of all, you can’t keep God’s Law. It’s impossible to keep the Law perfectly – in fact, you’ve already broken it. Furthermore you can’t do enough good works to outweigh your sin, because **God demands perfection** as His requirement for entering Heaven.

There is no salvation and there is no freedom in a works-oriented religion. Hagar and Ishmael represent salvation by works.

2. Sarah and Isaac represent salvation by faith.

Verse 28: *“Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.”*

As Isaac was the promised son, and was born to Sarah supernaturally (by God’s plan) when she was past childbearing years, so believers today are the “children of promise,” and we experience a supernatural birth at conversion. Look back at Galatians 3:22, *“But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”*

Sarah and Isaac represent salvation by faith. In the illustration, Sarah was likened to the “Jerusalem of above,” and the mother of all the faithful. Verse 26: *“But the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.”* This New Jerusalem is the heavenly Jerusalem, the home of all the faithful. Hebrews 12:22: *“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels.”*

Verse 23 says that all the faithful are there in the heavenly Jerusalem. The Church - that consists of all believers of the New Testament Age - will be there. In addition, the *“spirits of just men made perfect”* - all the believers of the Old Testament – will be there as well.

In the future, this New Jerusalem will descend from its heavenly location to this earth. Revelation 21:2 says, *“Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”* If you have come to God through faith in Jesus Christ (and not trying to come to God through your own human works), then you can look forward to living in the New Jerusalem.

Galatians 4:27 is a quote from Isaiah 54:1: *“For it is written: “Rejoice, O barren, you who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband.”* This is a prophecy about the changing fortunes of Israel. The inhabitants of the heavenly Jerusalem will be far more numerous than those of the earthly Jerusalem. The “children of promise” - Jews and Gentiles who have come to God by faith in Christ - will far outnumber those enslaved to the Law in Judaism.

What a great truth! Sarah and Isaac represent salvation by faith.

Practical Application

Cast out “the teachings of Judaism”!

Verses 29-31: *“But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.”*

In these verses, Paul continued his illustration from the Genesis account of Hagar and Sarah. After Isaac was born, Ishmael (who was a teen at this point) mocked young Isaac, the child of promise. As a result, Sarah asked Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Genesis 21:10 was quoted in Galatians 4:30: *“Therefore she said to Abraham, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son [Isaac].”*

Little did Abraham realize that this event would be used two thousand years later as an illustration of casting out any legalistic teachings that suggest that salvation and sanctification come through good works! Just as Isaac, Ishmael, Sarah

and Hagar didn't mix, so Law and grace cannot be mixed. Human works cannot be mixed in with faith because **salvation and sanctification are not attained by human works.**

Thus, any "teachings of Judaism" or legalistic religion must go. Have you "cast out" the "teaching of Judaism"? Have you "cast out" the idea that salvation can be earned by doing good works or by keeping religious rules and rituals? You may say you've "cast out" these ideas, and that you're trusting the Lord alone for your salvation, but it never hurts to examine your heart and your thinking.

The truth is that good works are the **result of your salvation**, not the **means of earning your salvation**. Your good works are only a means of serving the Lord, who saved you by His grace alone. If you can say that, then you've cast out the "teaching of Judaism" as to salvation.

But what about sanctification? Have you cast out the "teaching of Judaism" – the idea that you can live a more holy life by strictly following man-made religious rules and rituals? For example, do you think that as a Christian you are more holy because you read a certain translation of the Bible? Or because you pray in a specific position? Or because you like certain kinds of Christian music? Or because you have your quiet time early in the morning?

Are any of you "closet legalists" in these (and other) areas of man-made rules and regulations? We're **not** talking about *personal preferences* in forms of music or *personal choice* in things like a good translation of the Bible, or the time of day we choose to have our devotions! We are talking about the subtle (but dangerous) idea that you are somehow more holy or more spiritual because of what you choose to do - or not do - in these areas. For example, the idea that certain types of Christian music are "better" or more holy, or the idea that a spiritual believer will always have devotions in the early morning – that's legalism! If you think you are more spiritual because of keeping a set of man-made regulations in areas like these, you have become ensnared in **works-oriented** sanctification, or religious legalism.

Legalism always leads to personal pride. Legalists always think of themselves as being spiritually superior to non-legalists - and they actually can **appear** to be more spiritual – but only externally. Legalists look down and despise - and even persecute - non-legalists. *"But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now" (v29).*

Unfortunately the false "teachers of Judaism" didn't just exist in the 1st century. Religious legalists are alive and well today, and there is plenty of legalistic teaching today. This is certainly true in the area of salvation, as history has shown. It is also true in the area of sanctification.

What's the solution? The solution is to serve the Lord out of a heart of love, because of what He has done for us - and cast out the legalistic "teachings of Judaism"!