

STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 19

Galatians 4:21-31

August 22, 1999

Text Comment

v.24 The word Paul uses is the word from which we get "allegory," though "figure" may be a better translation. In any case, it is clear that the main argument is given above in 2:16-4:10. As Luther says (*Galatians*, 1535, 435), "Allegories do not provide solid proofs in theology; but, like pictures, they adorn and illustrate a subject."

Now we return to the theological argument that Paul is raising against the judaizers' position. It is admitted on all sides that 4:21-31, and the allegory of Hagar and Sarah is part of the same argument and is making the same point as have already been advanced from 2:16 onwards. This being so, one's interpretation of these difficult verses is bound to follow the outlines of one's interpretation of the preceding argument.

And, once again, there are broadly two approaches. One sees in Paul's characterization of the two covenants his view of the relationship between the Mosaic epoch and the epoch introduced by Christ and his apostles and formally launched at Pentecost. In that way these verses are taken to teach that there are two covenants succeeding one another in time: the old covenant, which is another way of speaking of the religion of Moses, and the new covenant, which is the religion of the apostles. The latter is superior to the former and replaces it. In this way the covenants are taken to refer to what most Christians understand by the terms Old Testament and New Testament, two religious situations succeeding one another in time, with the later a higher, more spiritual situation, governed by a more perfect revelation and leading men and women into a more spiritual experience. In other words the one covenant, the covenant from Mt. Sinai (v. 24) is the religion of the Old Testament rightly understood; the other covenant is the religion of the New Testament rightly understood.

Now, we have already said that, common though this understanding of Paul's argument in Galatians is, it is beset with punishing, I would say, fatal problems.

First, the contrast that Paul draws between the two covenants is too strong, too sharp, too antithetical to reconcile with his very positive view of what we call the OT.

Remember, he's already cited various texts from the OT to prove that his gospel is the ancient message of the Scripture: his gospel was the gospel preached to Abraham, which gospel, he explicitly said, was not set aside by the law revealed to Moses.

Yet here he says (24) that the one covenant produces slaves and the other freemen. Paul would never say that the religion of Moses rightly understood produced slaves! In Romans 10 he cites Moses to say that his message was simply the gospel of Christ and justification by faith in Christ. And he goes on to say (v. 30) that the descendants of that first covenant will never inherit the

promise of salvation. But Paul certainly did not think that about the faithful of the OT. He knew that the faithful were saved in the OT and that the unfaithful were lost, just as was the case in his own day, a point he makes specifically in 1 Corinthians 10.

Obviously Paul didn't think and didn't teach that one couldn't be saved until Pentecost. But, if you take the covenant of Hagar and Sinai to be a reference to the Old Testament **per se** or the religion of Moses, that is what Paul seems to be saying. The Sinai/Hagar covenant produces slaves and slaves, he says, will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son. If Paul's view of the OT is really that negative, his dependence upon the OT as the source of his gospel and illustration of its power and life become impossible to explain.

Second, Paul begins the entire section **by appealing to the law.**

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

In other words, Paul is saying that the Law, the Pentateuch, the Books of Moses, teach **his** doctrine, not that of the judaizers. The word "nomos" or law is used in a double sense in v. 21. In the first instance "you who want to be under the law" it means the commandments of the Mosaic law which must be obeyed; but in "what the law says" it is a reference to the Scripture as divine revelation. One commentator suggests this paraphrase:

"If you are so keen on the law you had better pay attention to what it actually says. If you do so, you will find that it is on my side and not on that of the judaizers who are persuading you not simply to listen to the Old Testament (which Paul himself certainly considered a good thing to do) but to understand it in a legalistic way." [Barrett in *Thesis*, 124, n.213]

Third, this allegory of the two covenants, one from Hagar and one from Sarah, one making slaves and one making freemen, must be understood in keeping with the larger context.

But the slavery that Paul has been talking about is not brought about by adherence to Moses, but by adherence to legalism, the prideful misuse of the law. The contrast is not between a preliminary and provisional and inferior stage of the revelation of salvation on the one hand, and a more complete and perfect stage of that the revelation of that same salvation on the other. The contrast Paul is drawing in the entire argument is between faith and works, peace with God and wrath from God, justification by Christ and justification by law-keeping.

In this context "being under law" as these folks seem to want to be, he says in v. 21, is tantamount to embracing the law as the principle of salvation, which, he has already said in several ways, amounts to a return to the religion they had before they became Christians! Such a return to slavery is opposite to and contrary to the gospel, the promise, and the Spirit, but Paul has already said that the law itself, rightly understood, is not contrary to those things at all (3:21).

Fourth, the particular contrast Paul draws further demonstrates that he is comparing unbelief and faith, or legalism and grace, rather than an earlier religious economy (that introduced by Moses) and

a later one (introduced by Christ and his apostles).

In v. 23 Paul describes the contrast between the birth of Hagar's son and Sarah's son by saying that Ishmael was born (kata sarka) "according to the flesh" [The NIV muddles that translation and hides a very important Pauline term] while Isaac was born according to the promise. Well, the contrast between flesh and promise in Paul is the contrast between the human effort made in one's own strength on the one hand, and dependence upon God on the other. One is of self, the other of God; one is of works, the other of grace.

You have the same "according to the flesh" in v. 29 but there is contrasted with "the power of the Spirit." The side of Hagar is the side of slavery to the law and birth by human effort. The side of Sarah is the side of freedom and birth by the grace, the power, and the Spirit of God.

It is interesting, of course, as you recollect the story, that both principles are illustrated in the same life, the life of Abraham. In the case of Hagar he tried to obtain the promised son and seed by his own effort, and conceived a child with Sarah's concubine, Hagar. But that was wrong and God would not make the issue of that union the promised seed. It had to be from Sarah, the child had to be born long after Sarah had given up any hope of having a child, when she was an old woman, and so, it required Abraham simply to believe that God would do what he had promised, even if, humanly speaking, it seemed impossible. It was human effort or works in the one case, faith in God's power in the other.

Fifth, you have that view of Paul's contrast confirmed by the fact that he identifies the children of Hagar with the "present city of Jerusalem" who is now in slavery with her children. That is to say the first covenant embraces the Jewish world of that day that had rejected Christ and embraced instead a religion of justification by works. Jerusalem is a metonymy (a figure of speech in which one name is used for another associated with it: Jerusalem for the Jewish people) for legalistic Judaism. So the religious relationship that Paul describes as the covenant represented by Hagar is the religious situation that prevailed in the Judaism of Paul's day, the covenant of grace understood legalistically and without regard to grace, not the OT rightly understood, but Judaism which was a perversion of the OT.

Sixth, and that conclusion receives final confirmation in vv. 29-30 where Paul, obviously, links the judaizers in Galatia to the covenant represented by Hagar. It is not the OT **saints** that are represented by Hagar, but the judaizers whom Paul has already said bring a different gospel which is no gospel at all. These legalist teachers have no part in the inheritance of God's children; because they do not accept the gospel, they do not have faith and because they do not have faith, they are not God's sons (3:26-29).

Now there is a question: why should Paul characterize the false position of his opponents as a covenant? A covenant with whom? God has no covenant with them; they are covenant breakers. Why speak of legalism and unbelief as a covenant?

Well, Paul is using the term with powerful irony. Just as he used the term "gospel." Remember he

spoke of the judaizers' teaching (1:6) as a "different gospel." He didn't really mean that they were bringing good news to the Galatians. He went on to say that it wasn't really a gospel at all. But it is striking that he speaks of their views as a different gospel. But, they were claiming it was the gospel. By referring himself to their teaching as a different gospel Paul sharply accentuates what he believes is the real issue: the gospel or no gospel at all! In 2 Corinthians 11:4 he speaks in a similar way. There he refers to the teaching of the false teachers who were troubling the Corinthian church as the teaching of "another Jesus", "a different Spirit," and a "different gospel." Well Paul doesn't, of course, mean that there **is** another Jesus or Holy Spirit. He means that they are passing off as Jesus and as the Holy Spirit and as the Gospel what are really not Jesus, the Spirit, and the gospel at all.

So here. The context and the antithetical terms "flesh" and "spirit" point out the sarcasm in this caricature of the judaizers' position as a "covenant." It was not a true covenant at all -- simply the rejection and perversion of the one true covenant God has made with his people.

These two covenants are really very like the two covenants Jeremiah is talking about in his famous text Jeremiah 31:31-34. The new covenant is the true covenant and the old covenant related to Sinai is what became of the true evangelical religion of Moses when it was corrupted into legalism, ritualism, and paganism by a lack of faith on the part of God's people.

That, I think, explains what Paul is saying in these 11 verses. He is saying again what he has already said in detail, this time in the form of an illustration, and he is making the same contrast again, between justification by faith and justification by works, between evangelical religion and legalism.

[But, I want to add, as an aside, that you will hear another view of all of this. There are some who are teaching that, while of course the OT taught the true gospel, the Mosaic covenant had **as an overlay** a legalistic strain, the covenant of works laid on top of the covenant of grace. The purpose of this was pedagogical, to teach Israel the folly of trusting to her own works and to teach her to trust in Christ alone.

This was, for those of you who were present, the view that was taught by Mike Horton, when he spoke the first night at the Church Music at the Crossroads seminar. The Abrahamic covenant was pure grace and faith. The Mosaic covenant was a mixture of grace and works. The NT form of the covenant returns to the Abrahamic pure grace covenant. This view was held by some of the Puritans, not most but some, and has been resurrected in the recent past in the work of Meredith Kline who teaches at Westminster Seminary and Gordon Conwell Seminary. Mike Horton studied under Meredith Kline.

I want simply to say that I think it is an impossible position. It mistakes the OT in some obvious ways. There is nothing in Moses that you don't get in the covenant God made with Abraham except detail. And, what is more fatal for the theory, there is nothing in Moses that you don't also get in the NT. The texts they take to be legalistic in Moses are certainly no worse, if not less troubling, than a number of texts in the NT that seem to connect justification with obedience. (John 5:29; Revelation 22:12; etc).

There is only one covenant of grace. It is the same from beginning to end. But it was often perverted by the reintroduction of the works, the flesh, the self principle. That is always and everywhere the contrast: between the true faith, on the one hand, whether in the form Moses taught it or Paul taught it, and, on the other hand, the corruption of the true faith by the spirit of flesh and works. There is no third thing anywhere in the Bible.]

And so the warning and the challenge for us. There are only two ways to live life in this world: the way of self-effort and the way of faith in God. Even the godly easily slip into the way of self-effort. Abraham did with Hagar. It is something we are to be inspecting in our lives all the time: the activity of our faith, how much we are turning away from ourselves to God, and whether our works, our acts of obedience and service, are, in fact, first acts of faith, because we seek to do them by the power of God and according to the principle of grace, which is a holy and grateful love.

But that is not a different thing, it is the same thing as what we were talking about last Sunday night, the examination of your motives. If you are always looking to be sure that faith in Christ and in the power of the Lord lies beneath your living and working, you will be making sure at the same time that your motives are pure and pleasing to God and so purifying your works. For you cannot do anything by faith, not truly, that is ill-motivated. You cannot be selfish by faith. You cannot be fearful by faith. You cannot be hateful by faith. Look to Christ, which is simply another way of saying, live by faith, and you will look to your motives at the same time. Faith, true faith, Paul will say in 5:6, "expresses itself through love." Find the faith, you'll find the love; and vice versa.