

## **GALATIANS – Lesson 16**

### **4:21-31 - “A Tale of Two Sons”**

**February 23, 2014**  
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*21 Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. 23 But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. 24 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. 25 Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.*

*26 But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. 27 For it is written,  
“Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear;<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor;<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
For more numerous are the children of the desolate<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
Than of the one who has a husband.”*

*28 And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.*

*29 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. 30 But what does the Scripture say?*

*“Cast out the bondwoman and her son,<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir  
with the son of the free woman.”*

*31 So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.*

In Charles Dickens’ “A Tale of Two Cities” Dickens contrasts life in England with life in France about the time of the French and American revolutions. He relates that both countries shared similar challenges, yet each was quite different from the other. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” the story begins. The overall theme of the novel is “resurrection” from the ashes of life.

The apostle Paul gives us “A Tale of Two Sons” in today’s Scripture lesson from Galatians 4:21-31. Both sons of Abraham shared similar challenges and struggles, yet Paul relates that they represent vast differences. Paul’s theme is “resurrection” in the sense that life and hope come forth from the loins of Isaac, whereas death and despair come from Ishmael.

Paul’s pattern of writing letters is that he wrote a doctrinal section followed and concluded by a practical section. These sections were linked by a verse that summarized the previous doctrinal section and introduced the practical section. Normally, this link is found at the beginning of a chapter (later added by editors).

In Galatians, Paul’s doctrinal theme is “Freedom from the Law Through Faith in Christ.” This doctrine is found in chapters 1-4, culminating and climaxing in today’s lesson. Chapters 5-6 will give us the practical working out of that doctrine.

***Galatians 5:1*** *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.*

Note that the first ½ of the verse summarizes chapters 1-4 with the doctrinal statement that Christ has set us free (from the Law). And the second ½ of the verse summarizes the practical challenge that will be set down in chapters 5-6: “keep standing firm in that freedom.” We will see that this is done by walking by the Spirit, and not the flesh.

So today’s “Tale of Two Sons” wraps up Paul’s contention that we have been set free from the Law through faith in Jesus Christ - and he does this magnificently, with the flair of a defense lawyer making his closing argument.

Through the opening chapters, Paul has used many methods to make his point:

1. CHASTISEMENT

***Galatians 1:6*** *I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel*

2. CONFLICT WITH PETER

***Galatians 2:11*** *But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.*

3. PERSONAL TESTIMONY

***Galatians 2:20*** *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.*

4. LINKING ABRAHAM TO OUR FAITH

***Galatians 3:9*** *So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham the believer.*

5. THE LAW AS AN INTERMEDIARY STEP

***Galatians 4:24*** *Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.*

6. THE MIRACLE OF SONSHIP

***Galatians 4:7*** *Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.*

7. REVEALING A PASTOR’S HEART

***Galatians 4:19*** *My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you.*

Now Paul concludes his doctrinal presentation contrasting the two sons of Abraham. This is a stroke of genius, for the Jews who were misleading the Galatians were proud children of Abraham. But Abraham had two sons! It is the story of these two sons that is the

background for Paul's teaching in today's passage, so let's read the background story.

READ GENESIS 16: 1-6 relating the birth of Ishmael, and Sarah's response

READ GENESIS 17:15-21 relating the promise of Isaac given 14 years later

Now we can better understand Paul's allegorical teachings from this history.

#### **v. 21**

Paul says "do you really want to be under the Law?" "Don't you listen to what it says?" It says that IF you obey THEN you will be blessed. And IF you don't obey you THEN you will be punished. Is this the life you want to live? Had they forgotten that when Moses was on the mountain receiving the Law the people were terrified. And when he came down from the mountain they received harsh punishment for their sins, scaring them even more. Paul is saying: "Is this the life you want to live – trying to appease a just and holy God by your inconsistent acts of righteousness??"

#### **v. 22-23**

Here Paul reminds them of the "Tale of Two Sons." Ishmael was the son of the slave-woman and was born by natural means – that is by the natural course of Abraham and Hagar having sexual relations. But Isaac was the son of the free woman, Sarah. Her birth was supernatural – only possible by the direct intervention of God opening an old womb.

#### **v. 24**

Now Paul relates that he is making an "allegory" of these two women and their two sons. In other words, he is going to draw from them spiritual conclusions, relating to the issue at hand – i.e. living by the Law or living by the promise (faith

He begins by making the amazing statement that Hagar and Sarah represent two covenants (or two agreements between God and man). Hagar represents the covenant made on Mt. Sinai when God gave the Law to Moses. This God-man agreement resulted to man becoming slaves to that Law. Paul doesn't here specify Sarah's contrasting representation of a mountain – but we can fill in the blank – it is Mount Moriah where Abraham went to offer up Isaac, which was later in history called Mt. Calvary where Jesus gave His life for our salvation by faith in Him. This is where the other God-man covenant was made – the covenant of grace through faith. This is the mountain that brings freedom, not slavery.

#### **v. 25**

Here he extends the allegory by identifying Hagar (and her son Ishmael) with the present (then) Jerusalem – where animal sacrifices were made continually for sin. Here is slavery to the Law.

#### **v. 26**

And Sarah (and her son Isaac) represents the heavenly Jerusalem, where there will be freedom for all, with all sin forgiven and gone. "She (Sarah) is our mother," Paul says – meaning that the Christian heritage is following the way of faith, not of Law.

**v. 27**

Paul here quotes Isaiah 54:1 where Isaiah recalls that Sarah was desolate and barren, but ended up rejoicing in the miracle child of promise and receiving the blessing of generations of offspring. Isaiah was prophesying of those who though desolate (poor of spirit) would be blessed by the coming Child of promise.

**v. 28**

And we who are relying on faith to save us, and not Law, are children (offspring) of Isaac – children of promise.

**v. 29**

The last part of the allegory speaks of the relation between the sons and their respective offspring. Just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, so also it is with their offspring. Those who follow the Law (the Judaizers) persecute those who walk by faith (Paul). Or for today, those who are keepers of self-made spiritual standards persecute those who live in freedom of those standards. (And historically, the Arabic children of Ishmael persecute the Hebrew children of Isaac.)

**v. 30**

This is a quote from Genesis 21:10 where Sarah asks to cast out Hagar and her son Ishmael, since they are not the heirs of Abraham's promise.

**v. 31**

And so we have the final summary statement: that we are not children of slavery (to the Law) but children of freedom (by faith).

The following will help to simplify what we have learned:

**HAGAR / ISHMAEL**

Slave woman & son  
Natural child of flesh  
Old covenant of Law  
Mt. Horeb (Sinai) - Moses  
Present Jerusalem (sacrifices)  
Children of slavery to rules

**SARAH / ISAAC**

Free woman & son  
Supernatural child of promise  
New covenant of grace  
Mt. Moriah (Calvary) - Jesus  
Heavenly Jerusalem (Lamb of God)  
Children of freedom by faith

**PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

Ishmael was a son of self-effort. Abraham thought he was doing what would bring God's promise to pass, but it was Sarah and Abraham's idea – not God's.

Isaac was a son of supernatural God promise. Abraham followed God's marching orders, even with some reluctance, but it brought about supernatural results – a miracle child.

Your salvation was a supernatural act of God brought about by your simple faith, and even that faith was a gift given you by God (Ephesians 2:8-9). Self-effort had no part.

In the same way, Paul wants us to know that we are to live out our life by simple faith – not by self-effort. Self effort might bring results (like an Ishmael) – but they will not be the ultimate supernatural results that will bring us the most meaning and God the most glory.

So how do we walk by faith? Well, that is to be Paul’s teaching in Galatians, chapters 5-6  
But for now:

God wants to bring forth Isaacs in our life – supernatural miracles brought about by trusting in God. Our “part” is faith – trusting in Him to guide and enable us.

***Proverbs 3:5-6** Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.*

This is a most-beloved verse, but let us examine it for its practical advice on how to walk by faith. There are 3 key elements – trust, lean, acknowledge.

And then there’s a promise – to make our paths straight, which mean to give us the “shortest distance between two points” – a straight line of travel – the “easiest” route.

**TRUST** – is yielding to his plans and directions. HE decides what my priorities are to be and I make plans based on his marching orders. And then I take action as He leads.

**LEAN** – Rather than lean on my understanding of how to problem-solve, I look to His Word, wise counsel and Spirit-given wisdom to guide me. I am even aware of my need for His strength to enable me. It is God our Father upon whom I must ever lean.

**ACKNOWLEDGE** – Once I do succeed, or at least make good progress, I am quick to give Him the credit, rather than pat myself on the back. I realize that He alone is the giver of all good things, including any good things that happen to and for me. I am simply the conduit. He alone must receive the credit and praise.

Lyrics to closing song by the “Minor Miracles” children’s choir (as it plays):

Trust Him with all your heart  
Lean not on your great smarts  
In all your ways acknowledge Him  
And your paths will be straight  
Right up to heaven’s gates  
Trust in the Lord with all your heart !