Gal. 4:21-31; Gen. 21:1-14; The Covenant Explained by Allegory I. The Old Covenant II. The New Covenant

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is better- the old or the new? Take, for example, transportation. Is the horse drawn carriage better than a modern vehicle? Well, it looks like very few of you took a horse to church this morning. That is because the new has replaced the old- making the old obsolete and antiquated by comparison. Today Paul is going to use an Old Testament event to illustrate the difference between the Old and the New. What we find today is really a tale of two mothers- two households established in two very different ways which lead to two very different ends. Children, do you remember the book called “Are You My Mother?” In that book you will find a little baby bird on its journey to find its mother. How does the baby bird know which one is its mother? Well, does it look like it’s mother? So today we consider the covenant as Paul explains it by way of allegory. With this theme: Jesus Christ promises entrance into the heavenly Jerusalem to all the true children or Abraham.

**I. The Old Covenant**

In our first point, we consider the Old Covenant as it is explained here by Paul. To begin, we have to keep in mind our reading from Gen. 21. Here we find one man- the father Abraham. This one man had two wives- each having their own son. Paul is going to be comparing and contrasting these two women and their sons- using these two as a way to illustrate a spiritual point. So Paul says in v. 24- this event may be interpreted allegorically. To be clear, Paul is saying that this event did happen- it is a historical and true event. However, this event can also be interpreted symbolically- teaching us a spiritual truth through a historical event. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is another famous example of an allegory- but *Pilgrims Progress* was not a historical event. This passage is both historical and used allegorically. The contrast is going to be between 2 wives and their two sons as v. 21 opens. These two women will represent two covenant and lead to two very different ends. One is pre and the other is post bondage. So let’s start with the Old Covenant. In referring to the old covenant, Paul means the OT Law as it has been twisted into legalism. The old covenant represents rites, rituals, ceremonies and other laws as we have been seeing. The first covenant is directly linked to the Law of Moses as it was given from Mt. Sinai. But for the sake of clarity, there are 4 things that illustrate this Law in our text. Children, I want you to remember these 4 things. A woman, a son, a mountain and a city. So the OT Law is linked to Hagar, Ishmael, Mt. Sinai and the earthly Jerusalem. You remember Hagar. She was the Egyptian slave that was given to Abraham as a wife of sorts. From Hagar was born Ishmael- as v. 22 says- he was born of the slave woman. So Ishmael represents Egypt- the land of slavery. He was born according to the flesh by way of human reasoning and schemes. Sarah did not think that she could have a child, so she came up with the plan and idea to give Hagar to her husband. Thus Hagar and Ishmael come to represent rebellion and slavery- human effort which brings only bondage. Continuing this line of thought- in v. 24- Paul says that Hagar and Ishmael represent the Law as given at Mt. Sinia. And then the punch line- this slavery continues in Jerusalem today! The ceremonies which cannot save- the blood of bulls and goats which cannot secure the forgiveness of sins- were still being offered. So this line of Hagar and Ishmael represent the old way- the way of bondage- earthly things. As v. 25 continues- this earthly city- Jerusalem- along with the Pharisees and their laws- are the continuation of this line. Now do not miss this point- for Paul to say that the earthly Jerusalem with its earthly temple was really the line of Ishmael would be shocking! This is not what the people would expect! We have Isaac and Abraham as our father the people would normally say. But Paul turns this around- you have Ishmael as your father if you are still going to the earthly temple and looking to animal sacrifices for deliverance! Abraham had two sons- you are acting more like Ishmael than Isaac! If you trust in the Law of Moses or look to the earthly city of Jerusalem as your home- you are an Ishmaelite!

But where does this line- Hagar and Ishmael’s line- where does it lead? Well, it leads to slavery! As v. 24 says- the children born in this line are slaves. Empty formalism leads to bondage as we have seen again and again! There is no deliverance here! Any religion that rests on man’s effort or understanding ultimately leads to bondage- which in the end leads to death! As v. 30 puts it- those who trust in the works of man will be cast out- they will not receive a lasting inheritance. Legalism and those who practice it have no place in the NT church! They have made themselves an enemy of Christ and his people- a point which is also illustrated with Ishmael. You will remember that back in Gen. 21, Ishamel was mocking Isaac- laughing at the child of the promise. So our reading in Gal. 4:29 says that those who are born in the line of slavery persecute those who are born according to the Spirit. An implication is that if you are not in Ishmael’s line, you will be persecuted! In other words, those who are enslaved to the elementary principles of this world- those who trust in their own wisdom and works- will always hate Christ and his people! The world will not be a friend to grace- rather it will hate those who walk in the light! So how did the Jews and Gentiles respond to the arrival of Jesus and the spread of His church- with hatred! As I John 3 says, do not be surprised if the world hates you, for it hated Christ as well! There can be no peace between the children of Ishmael and the children of Isaac- between the world and the church! But ultimately those who are children of Ishmael will be cast out as they miss out on the true and lasting blessings of the covenant!

**II. The New Covenant**

Now that we have considered the Old Covenant and its inability to save, we move on to the New Covenant and the time of fulfillment. Children, do you remember the 4 things that we are considering in each point? A woman, a son, a mountain and a city. In our first point, we found Hagar, Ishmael, Mt. Sinai and the earthly Jerusalem. These lead to bondage, and they cannot save. But in this point we find Sarah, Isaac, Mt. Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem. So the second or the New Covenant is a short hand way of referring to salvation by Jesus Christ- that we are saved by grace through faith in God’s messiah. This point was missed by those who were trying to go back into the shadows of the old way. Or as John 1:17 puts it, the law came by Moses but grace and truth through Jesus Christ. Now Sarah was the free mother- not the slave. And her son, Isaac, was the child of the promise. As God had promised, it would be through Sarah and Isaac that the world would be blessed. The arrival of Isaac was according to promise of God- his birth was a miraculous birth. Isaac was born not by the schemes of his parents- but by waiting in faith until God provided! So the arrival of this child is a case in point that life comes only as we trust in the promises of God- and is not found in our works or schemes. So the line of Sarah and Isaac symbolically represent salvation by faith in Jesus Christ.

Added to this, the line of Isaac is said to represent the new covenant- which corresponds to Mt. Zion and the Jerusalem above as v. 26 puts it. Members of the New Covenant are those who belong to the true church- these are members of the spiritual kingdom- and they are to be known as children of the promise like Isaac. Stated another way- those who believe in Jesus Christ are the true children of Abraham and are recipients of the promised blessings. These blessings are reserved for us in the heavenly Jerusalem- an inheritance that is kept in heaven- one that is imperishable and undefiled. Those who belong to this new covenant have liberty and life- unlike those in the line of Ishmael who had bondage and death. As v. 26 says- the Jerusalem above is free and she is our mother. Those who belong to Jerusalem above are also known by their attitude. Freedom leads to a life of joy- they rejoice as v. 27 continues. Paul quotes from Isaiah 54 as he speaks to the joy that the barren woman can have- the joy that Sarah had- the joy of those who believe! The membership in this new covenant is not limited to a few biological sons- but a whole host of children gathered from all nations. What unites them is not their blood linage but their bond of faith! It is this life and liberty that moves us to joy! In this the true children of the promise are identified. Now lets bring this passage home. Once again, Paul reminds the church of their privilege. You are children of the promise- a v. 28 says. How do you know which line you belong to? How do you know who your mother is? Well, are you joined to Isaac, Sarah and Abraham in the faith? Does your hope for the future rest on the God of the promise? Is your desire to receive eternal blessings and citizenship in the Jerusalem above? Do you trust in Jesus who is ruling from the heavenly, Mt. Zion? Then you are a child of the New Covenant! Rev. 14 speaks of Mt. Zion as the place where Jesus gathers His people- the heavenly Jerusalem of Rev. 21 is where God and man dwell together in peace! If this is what you hope for- then Abraham is your father! Sarah and Isaac your family. You are a child of the promise! However, if you are like Hagar and Ishmael- you will continue trusting in your own works. Your hope remains in what is earthly and elemental. The Law and your obedience to it is the source of your comfort! To these there is nothing but bondage and death! For those who boast about being Abraham’s children- remember that Abraham had 2 sons! One lives by faith and the other dies by works of the flesh.

As we close, remember that the Judaizers in the Galatian church were using Abraham and Isaac as the grounds for their pushing circumcision. They were trying to resurrect the Law to do what the Law could never do! But as Paul makes clear, the narrative of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac proves salvation by grace and not by works! Those who want to live by their own works are in the line of Ishmael- not Isaac! The old is passing away- behold the new has come as II Cor. 5 puts it. As Cyprian of Carthage famously said, you cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your mother. Those who are part of the new covenant enjoy spiritual birth from above! Jesus Christ promises entrance into the heavenly Jerusalem to all the true children or Abraham. So then, we are not children of slavery but of those who are free!