

Exegetical Notes – Galatians 4:21-31

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(This is one of the most difficult texts in the Bible to exegete correctly. Remember that Paul's main point through the Book of Galatians was that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ to save us. He was very concerned that the Galatian Christians had been swayed by certain teachers to embrace a works-based Gospel. These teachers were saying that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus and by keeping the Old Testament Law. To persuade the Galatians away from this error, he is now going to speak to them about events in the life of Abraham. The events about which he speaks are historical, but Paul is drawing truth from them by treating them "figuratively." He is, almost, using Abraham's life as an allegory.)

Galatians 4:21-31

Verses 21-23

²¹ Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. ²³ His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

- See Genesis 15-25. In these chapters, the story of the birth of Abraham's sons, Ishmael and Isaac, is told. This brief recounting tells the basic facts that are essential to the figurative interpretation which follows. These are those facts: 1. Abraham had two sons. 2. His first son, Ishmael, was born of a slave woman in his household by normal means. 3. His second son, Isaac, was born by his wife, Sarah, who was barren and could not conceive children. 4. Isaac's birth was promised by God.

Verse 24

²⁴ These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.

- Paul explained that he now intended to use the historical facts figuratively. He was going to use the historical events to draw out lessons which apply to the Galatians.
- The two women who bore children to Abraham represented two covenants. The first covenant is with the slave woman, Hagar. This covenant is from Mount Sinai, the place where the law was given to the people of God. Her descendants are doomed to slavery.

Verses 25-27

²⁵ Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷ For it is written:

***“Be glad, barren woman,
you who never bore a child;
shout for joy and cry aloud,
you who were never in labor;
because more are the children of the desolate woman
than of her who has a husband.”***

- Mount Sinai is the place where the Law was given to Israel through Moses. The earthly city of Jerusalem is the center of Judaism which is based on keeping the Law of Moses. Figuratively speaking, they are the same and Hagar stands for them because she is a slave as are those who are under the Law.
- “The Jerusalem that is above” (see Revelation 21:2) is not bound by the Law. She is free. Christians are born of she who is free not of she who is enslaved.
- The passage Paul quotes is from Isaiah 54:1. The children of promise, Abraham’s children who come to God by faith are the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. The promise is fulfilled through faith, not by being bound to the Law.

Verses 28-31

²⁸ Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. ³⁰ But what does Scripture say? “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the

inheritance with the free woman's son.”³¹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

- Like Isaac, Christians are children of promise.
- Ishmael mistreated his younger brother Isaac. Just as Jews persecuted the Church in Paul's day.
- As a result of this mistreatment of Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael were put out of Abraham's camp. Christians are not born bound to the Law. They should, therefore, have nothing to do with anyone or any teaching which binds them to the Law as a means of salvation. We are saved by God's grace alone. We receive this grace by trusting Jesus Christ alone to save us. We should never be bound to anyone or any teaching that says grace plus works is the way to be saved.

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