

## The Contrast of the Covenants

Galatians 4:21 – 5:1

Up until this point in the letter, Paul has vigorously defended salvation by faith in Christ alone, apart from any works of the flesh. While these truths are relative, regardless of the context, we must bear in mind that Paul is arguing against the false teachings of the Judaizers. Some of the Judaizers were willing to accept the atonement of Christ for sin, but argued His finished work on the cross was not sufficient without also keeping the law of God.

Our text today reveals a pointed argument which faithfully challenged the doctrine of the Judaizers. Using an Old Testament example, of which the Judaizers would have been very familiar, Paul continues to argue for salvation by faith in Christ, apart from works. He will defend and prove that salvation is an act of God's grace, not received by human merit or effort.

In the example of Isaac and Ishmael, Paul reveals the contrast between law and grace, works and faith. As we examine the [contrasts](#) revealed in the text, I want to consider: [The Contrast of the Covenants](#).

**I. The Historical Consideration** (21-23) – Paul begins his discourse by reminding them of the historical implications and contrast between Isaac and Ishmael. Notice:

**A. The Declaration** (21) – [Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?](#) The Judaizers demanded that those who would be acceptable to God must also live under the law. Paul challenged such demands with a sobering question – are you willing to genuinely listen to what the law teaches? If so, are you willing to live according to all the law reveals? (This is the problem with such thinking. The Judaizers were focused primarily on the matter of circumcision, but that was just one part, a very small part of the law. If one chooses to seek righteousness through keeping the law, then one must be willing and able to keep the entire law. Such an approach is unwise and futile – no one can keep the law in its entirety and obtain righteousness.)

**B. The Descendants** (22-23) – [For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman.](#) <sup>23</sup> [But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.](#) Here, Paul refers back to the two descendants of Abraham. The first-born was born of a bondwoman, out of the desire and work of the flesh. The second was born to a free woman, the son of promise, born of grace and the provision of God. Consider:

➤ **Ishmael: The Son of the Flesh** – God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son, through which the nations of the earth would be blessed. However, in their impatience for God to deliver His promise, they arrived a plan to have a son apart from the provision of God. The Lord allowed their plan to come to fruition, with Ishmael being born of Sarah’s servant, Hagar, but Ishmael was not within the plan of God in regard to His promise to Abraham. While Ishmael was a legitimate son of Abraham, he was not the son of promise. He was conceived in the flesh.

➤ **Isaac: The Son of Promise** – While Abraham and Sarah may have doubted the faithfulness of God, He kept His promise to provide the son promised to Abraham. Sarah was well beyond years for childbirth, but through a miraculous conception, Isaac was conceived and born, according to the promise of God. He was conceived through supernatural means. [Heb.11:11-12 – Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.](#) <sup>12</sup> Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

**II. The Biblical Interpretation (24-27)** – Paul argued that the two sons each illustrate a covenant of God. We discover:

**A. Two Distinct Covenants (24a)** – [Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants.](#)

Paul declares that through the two sons of Abraham, God made two distinct covenants. While Ishmael was born of the flesh, outside the plan and promise of God, the Lord was faithful. As Ishmael was born of the works of the flesh, his life illustrates a covenant that is associated with bondage. Isaac being born according to the promise and plan of God, his life illustrates the covenant of grace and liberty, being set free from the works of the flesh.

**B. Two Different Covenants (24b-27)** – [the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar.](#) <sup>25</sup> [For this Agar mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.](#) <sup>26</sup> [But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.](#) <sup>27</sup> [For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband.](#) The covenants are distinct, and yet they are different. The covenant of Ishmael and Hagar illustrates the covenant made in Mount Sinai; the Law of Moses being received on Sinai. The covenant of Sarah and Isaac illustrate the covenant of grace fulfilled outside Jerusalem as Christ provided redemption from sin and condemnation, delivering us from its bondage.

➤ It is interesting that Paul speaks of the Jerusalem, which now is, referring to the geographical city of Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem which is above, referring to the city of God, which is yet to come. Many of the Judaizers were yet bound, although they were in the geographical Jerusalem. Jesus fulfilled the law of God as He finished the work of redemption on Calvary's hill outside the city gate. One must be saved by grace through faith in Christ alone to live apart from bondage and sin. This is obtained within the covenant of grace, rather than through the covenant of law.

**III. The Personal Application (28-31, 5:1)** – Here, Paul sought to make application regarding the contrasts in the covenants. He spoke of:

**A. Our Identity (28)** – *Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.* Clearly, Paul is referring to those who are born again in Christ, the brethren – those who are the children of promise. In Christ, we have received the promise of God, made to Abraham. Through Christ the Son, all nations would be blessed. We have received that blessing through salvation by faith in the atoning work of Christ. We are under the covenant of grace, illustrated through Isaac, being set free from the bondage of the law and its demands.

➤ Remember, Ishmael was born of the flesh. Isaac was supernaturally born through miraculous means. Every believer is supernaturally born-again in Christ. Our salvation was not obtained through the works or desires of the flesh, but of the grace of God and His glorious provision.

**B. The Difficulty (29)** – *But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.* Again, Paul is referring back to the lives of Isaac and Ishmael. Ishmael was born prior to Isaac. Being the son of the bondwoman, the son of the flesh, Ishmael was jealous of Isaac and the position he held with the father. Scripture reveals that Ishmael mocked Isaac, [Gen.21:9](#). The division and animosity of Ishmael was evident.

➤ So it was with the believers in Galatia. Whether they were willing to admit it or not, the Judaizers were behaving much like Ishmael. They mocked the believers and sought to discredit their faith and relationship with the Lord. They took pleasure in harassing those who rested in faith in Christ alone, seeking to add bondage to their lives.

➤ We are not forced to deal with Judaizers within our context, but the difficulty remains. Christianity is the only religion in the world that embraces faith alone to be reconciled to God. Every other religion demands works of the flesh. We are mocked, and many are severely

persecuted for their faith. Like Isaac, we must remain faithful to our Father, resting in His promise rather than succumbing to the demands of the world.

**C. Our Liberty** (30-31; 5:1) – Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. <sup>31</sup> So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free. <sup>5:1</sup> Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Due to the animosity and hatred of Isaac by Ishmael, he and his mother, Hagar, were sent away, not allowed to remain with Abraham and the family. God made provision for them due to Ishmael being Abraham's son, but he was separated from Abraham. He was not the son of promise.

➤ Paul reminded the church that they were not children of bondage, but they had been set free in Christ. They had been separated unto the Lord, being heirs of the promise. God continues to provide blessing for all humanity – it rains on the just and the unjust alike; however, the promise of inheritance and eternal life in the Jerusalem which is above is reserved for the children of promise.

➤ Paul then challenged the church to remain steadfast in the liberty they had received in Christ and refuse to be entangled with the yoke of bondage. Their salvation by grace through faith in Christ was sufficient; it did not depend on any works of the flesh. There was no reason to worry about doing enough good deeds, or keeping enough traditions. Their liberty was provided by faith in Christ. He had secured their eternal redemption. His work was sufficient, and their faith was sufficient to please God. [Rom.8:1-4 – There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.](#) <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: <sup>4</sup> That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

**Conclusion:** Paul faithfully challenged the doctrine of justification by works of the flesh. We are all living according to one of the two covenants – the covenant of law or the covenant of grace. Only through God's grace and the provision of Christ is justification possible. One must receive salvation by faith in the finished work of Christ. Once salvation is obtained by faith, the believer is secure. We work because of our salvation, having a desire to serve our Lord, but not in order to maintain our salvation.