

Two Sons

Galatians 4:21-31

The Galatians who want to return to the law have a big problem—they don't know the law. Paul hops into the car they are driving to show them where it's actually going--over the guardrail to the bottom of a cliff (Prov. 26:5). Isaac and Ishmael are not just classic opposing brothers, but examples of two covenants within Israel.

Hear the Law

God promised Abraham the land of Canaan, descendants as numerous as the stars, a multitude of nations and blessings upon all the families of the earth. What's more, Abraham believed Him and it was accounted to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). Because of this everyone in Israel wanted to be "in" Abraham, for both good and bad reasons. Some trusted God and received His undeserved grace like Abraham, but others wanted to deserve God's grace *because* they were "children of Abraham". When Abraham and Sarah failed to trust God and wait for the son of promise, Abraham took Hagar as a concubine and had Ishmael (Gen. 16). When Isaac was weaned and celebrated at three years old, Hagar mocked him and was sent out along with violent Ishmael (Gen. 21:9-10, 16:12). Just because someone is a physical of Abraham or part of his household doesn't mean that person is a spiritual descendant. John the Baptizer warns people about saying, "'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Matt. 3:9). It was never about being physically connected to Abraham, and the law tells us this as well as the propensity of the human heart to insist on it anyway.

An Allegory

Allegories don't generally appeal to us, spiritual truth communicated in material forms. Poor allegory is simplistic and tends to fanciful abuse because it's divorced from original context. But when Scripture gives us an allegory, we receive the beauty, complexity and limit of the form. Isaac and Ishmael are symbolic of two covenants: Sinai, Hagar, bondage, and then-current Jerusalem versus Sarah, freedom, and the Jerusalem above which is our mother (vv25-26). God gives us this allegory so we can think biblically and understand the world. No one born in Israel is automatically a true Israelite, and if someone is born outside of Israel they are not prevented from trusting in God. Many spiritual Ishmaelites repent and trust in the Lord just as Abraham did, bearing "fruits worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8).

The Church, Mother of Us All

By the Spirit we call out to God our Father, enjoy fellowship with our brothers

NOTES:

Galatians: Free in Christ

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and sisters (4:6; 1:11), and the church is the mother of us all (v26). Sarah is a type of the church. She was barren for a long time, stumbled with Hagar, but then had Isaac. Isaac himself was not the ultimate seed, but a picture of the one to come, Christ (3:16). The church was weak and barren in the Old Covenant, but in the New Covenant she has born many children (v27; Is. 54:1). Paul's quotes Isaiah 54 which comes right after the passage about the suffering servant. Just as He predicted, Jesus would suffer and then gather: "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself" (Jn. 12:32). The heavenly Jerusalem comes from above and can't be touched in a single location like Sinai could. Instead we have come to the true "Mount Zion and to the city of the living God...to the general assembly and church of the firstborn..." (Heb. 12:22-24). This Jerusalem comes down from heaven to earth, and we've seen much more of this process than Paul did. We are children of the promise, not orphans (v28).

Even So It Is Now

We live in the time that Sarah believed would come (Heb. 11:13). Jesus has come, the bondwoman has been sent out, and no one is visiting the temple to offer sacrifices (cf. Heb. 10:26-27). But there are still those who are born according to the flesh persecuting those of the Spirit (v29). The fact that many people who are called Christians or consider themselves spiritual reject the biblical Jesus and persecute Christians is not the fault of the true Church. This is evidence that there is a true church, and we are privileged to engage and win as heirs with Abraham of the world (Rom. 4:13). We should do what Scripture says and live as free people (vv30-31).