

The Two Covenants



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 4:21–31; Gen. 1:28; 2:2, 3; 3:15; 15:1–6; Exod. 6:2–8; 19:3–6.*

Memory Text: “But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother” (*Galatians 4:26, NIV*).

Christians who reject the authority of the Old Testament often see the giving of the law on Sinai as inconsistent with the gospel. They conclude that the covenant given on Sinai represents an era, a dispensation, from a time in human history when salvation was based on obedience to the law. But because the people failed to live up to the demands of the law, God (they say) ushered in a new covenant, a covenant of grace through the merits of Jesus Christ. This, then, is their understanding of the two covenants: the old based on law, and the new based on grace.

However common that view may be, it is wrong. Salvation was never by obedience to the law. Biblical Judaism, from the start, was always a religion of grace. The legalism that Paul was confronting in Galatia was a perversion, not just of Christianity but of the Old Testament itself. The two covenants are not matters of time; instead, they are reflective of human attitudes. They represent two different ways of trying to relate to God, ways that go back to Cain and Abel. The old covenant represents those who, like Cain, mistakenly rely on their own obedience as a means of pleasing God. In contrast, the new covenant represents the experience of those who, like Abel, rely wholly upon God's grace to do all that He has promised.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 2.

Covenant Basics

Many regard Paul’s interpretation of the history of Israel in Galatians 4:21–31 as the most difficult passage in his letter. That’s because it is a highly complex argument that requires a broad knowledge of Old Testament persons and events. The first step in making sense of this passage is to have a basic understanding of an Old Testament concept central to Paul’s argument: the concept of the covenant.

The Hebrew word translated as “covenant” is *berit*. It occurs nearly three hundred times in the Old Testament and refers to a binding contract, agreement, or treaty. For thousands of years, covenants played an integral role in defining the relationships between people and nations across the ancient Near East. Covenants often involved the slaughter of animals as part of the process of making (literally “cutting”) a covenant. The killing of animals symbolized what would happen to a party that failed to keep its covenant promises and obligations.

“From Adam to Jesus, God dealt with humanity by means of a series of covenant promises that centered on a coming Redeemer and which culminated in the Davidic covenant (Gen. 12:2, 3; 2 Sam. 7:12–17; Isa. 11). To Israel in Babylonian captivity God promised a more effective ‘new covenant’ (Jer. 31:31–34) in connection with the coming of the Davidic Messiah (Ezek. 36:26–28; 37:22–28).”—Hans K. LaRondelle, *Our Creator Redeemer* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2005), p. 4.

What was the basis of God’s original covenant with Adam in the Garden of Eden before sin? *Gen. 1:28; 2:2, 3, 15–17.*

While marriage, physical labor, and the Sabbath were part of the general provisions of the covenant of Creation, its main focal point was God’s command not to eat the forbidden fruit. The basic nature of the covenant was “obey and live!” With a nature created in harmony with God, the Lord did not require the impossible. Obedience was humanity’s natural inclination. Yet, Adam and Eve chose to do what was not natural, and, in that act, they not only ruptured the covenant of Creation, they made its terms impossible for humans now corrupted by sin. God Himself would restore the relationship that Adam and Eve had lost. He did this by enacting a covenant of grace based on the eternal promise of a Savior (*Gen. 3:15*).

Read Genesis 3:15, the first gospel promise in the Bible. Where in that verse do you see an inkling of the hope that we have in Christ?

The Abrahamic Covenant

What covenant promises did God make to Abram in Genesis 12:1–5? What was Abram’s response?

God’s initial promises to Abram make up one of the more powerful passages in the Old Testament. These verses all are about God’s grace. It is God, not Abram, who makes the promises. Abram has done nothing to earn or merit God’s favor, nor is there any indication that suggests that God and Abram have somehow worked together to come up with this agreement. God does all the promising. Abram, in contrast, is called to have faith in the surety of God’s promise, not some flimsy so-called “faith” but a faith that is manifested by his leaving his extended family (at the age of seventy-five!) and heading to the land God promised.

“With the ‘blessing’ pronounced on Abraham and through him on all human beings, the Creator renewed His redemptive purpose. He had ‘blessed’ Adam and Eve in Paradise (Gen. 1:28, 5:2) and then ‘blessed Noah and his sons’ after the flood (9:1). This way God clarified His earlier promise of a Redeemer who will redeem humanity, destroy evil, and restore Paradise (Gen. 3:15). God confirmed His promise to bless ‘all peoples’ in His universal outreach.”—Hans K. LaRondelle, *Our Creator Redeemer*, pp. 22, 23.

After ten years of waiting for the promised son to be born, what questions did Abram have about God’s promise? *Gen. 15:1–6*.

It often is easy to glorify Abram as the man of faith who never had any questions or doubts. Scripture, however, paints a different picture. Abram believed, but he also had questions along the way. His faith was a growing faith. Like the father in Mark 9:24, Abram basically said to God in Genesis 15:8, “I believe, help my unbelief.” In response, God graciously assured Abram of the certainty of His promise by formally entering into a covenant with him (*Gen. 15:7–18*). What makes this passage so surprising is not the fact that God enters a covenant with Abram but the extent to which God was willing to condescend to do so. Unlike other rulers in the ancient Near East, who balked at the idea of making binding promises with their servants, God not only gave His word, but, by symbolically passing through the pieces of slaughtered animals, He staked His very life on it. Of course, Jesus ultimately give His life on Calvary to make His promise a reality.

What are some areas now in which you have to reach out by faith and believe in what seems impossible? How can you learn to keep holding on, no matter what?

Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar

Why does Paul have such a disparaging view of the incident with Hagar? *Gal. 4:21–31, Genesis 16*. What crucial point about salvation is Paul making through his use of this Old Testament story?

Hagar's place in the Genesis story is directly related to Abram's failure to believe God's promise. As an Egyptian slave in Abram's household, Hagar likely came into Abram's possession as one of the many gifts Pharaoh gave to him in exchange for Sarai, an event associated with Abram's first act of unbelief in God's promise (*Gen. 12:11–16*).

After waiting ten years for the promised child to be born, Abram and Sarai remained childless. Concluding that God needed their help, Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a concubine. Although strange to us today, Sarai's plan was quite ingenious. According to ancient customs, a female slave legally could serve as a surrogate mother for her barren mistress. Thus Sarai could count any child born from her husband and Hagar as her own. While the plan did produce a child, it was not the child God promised.

In this story we have a powerful example of how when faced with daunting circumstances, even a great man of God had a lapse of faith. In Genesis 17:18, 19, Abraham pleaded with God to accept Ishmael as his heir; the Lord, of course, rejected that offer. The only "miraculous" element in the birth of Ishmael was Sarah's willingness to share her husband with another woman! There was nothing out of the ordinary about the birth of a child to this woman, a child born "according to the flesh." Had Abraham trusted in what God had promised him instead of letting the circumstances overcome that trust, none of this would have happened, and a lot of grief would have been avoided.

In contrast to the birth of Ishmael, look at the circumstances surrounding Isaac's birth. *Gen. 17:15–19; 18:10–13; Heb. 11:11, 12*. Why did these circumstances require so much faith of Abraham and Sarah?

In what ways has your lack of faith in God's promises caused you some pain? How can you learn from these mistakes to take God at His word, no matter what? What choices can you make that can help strengthen your ability to trust God's promises?

Hagar and Mount Sinai (*Gal. 4:21–31*)

What type of covenant relationship did God want to establish with His people at Sinai? What similarities does it share with God's promise to Abraham? *Exod. 6:2–8, 19:3–6, Deut. 32:10–12.*

God desired to share the same covenant relationship with the children of Israel at Sinai that He shared with Abraham. In fact, similarities exist between God's words to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 and His words to Moses in Exodus 19. In both cases, God emphasizes what He will do for His people. He does not ask the Israelites to promise to do anything to earn His blessings; instead, they are to obey as a response to those blessings. The Hebrew word translated "to obey" in Exodus 19:5 literally means "to hear." God's words do not imply righteousness by works. On the contrary, He wanted Israel to have the same faith that characterized Abraham's response to His promises (at least most of the time!).

If the covenant relationship God offered to Israel on Sinai is similar to the one given to Abraham, why does Paul identify Mount Sinai with the negative experience of Hagar? *Exod. 19:7–25; Heb. 8:6, 7.*

The covenant at Sinai was intended to point out the sinfulness of humanity and the remedy of God's abundant grace, which was typified in the sanctuary services. The problem with the Sinai covenant was not on God's part but rather on the people's part because of their faulty promises (*Heb. 8:6*). Instead of responding to God's promises in humility and faith, the Israelites responded with self-confidence. " 'All that the Lord hath spoken we will do' " (*Exod. 19:8*). After living as slaves in Egypt for more than four hundred years, they had no true concept of God's majesty nor of the extent of their own sinfulness. In the same way that Abraham and Sarah tried to help God fulfill His promises, the Israelites sought to turn God's covenant of grace into a covenant of works. Hagar symbolizes Sinai in that both reveal human attempts at salvation by works.

Paul is not claiming that the law given at Sinai was evil or abolished. He is concerned with the Galatians' legalistic misapprehension of the law. "Instead of serving to convict them of the absolute impossibility of pleasing God by law-keeping, the law fostered in them a deeply entrenched determination to depend on personal resources in order to please God. Thus the law did not serve the purposes of grace in leading the Judaizers to Christ. Instead, it closed them off from Christ." —O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 181.

Ishmael and Isaac Today

Paul's brief sketch of Israel's history was designed to counter the arguments made by his opponents who claimed that they were the true descendants of Abraham, and that Jerusalem—the center of Jewish Christianity and the law—was their mother. The Gentiles, they charged, were illegitimate; if they wanted to become true followers of Christ, they must first become sons of Abraham by submitting to the law of circumcision.

The truth, Paul says, is the opposite. These legalists are not the sons of Abraham but illegitimate sons, like Ishmael. By placing their trust in circumcision, they are relying on “the flesh,” as Sarah did with Hagar and as the Israelites did with God's law at Sinai. Gentile believers, however, are the sons of Abraham not by natural descent but, like Isaac, by the supernatural. “Like Isaac they were a fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham . . . ; like Isaac, their birth into freedom was the effect of divine grace; like Isaac, they belong to the column of the covenant of promise.”—James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 256.

What will the true descendants of Abraham face in this world? *Gal. 4:28–31, Gen. 21:8–12.*

Being the promised child brought Isaac not only blessings but also opposition and persecution. In reference to persecution, Paul has in mind the ceremony in Genesis 21:8–10, in which Isaac is being honored and Ishmael appears to make fun of him. The Hebrew word in Genesis 21:9 literally means “to laugh,” but Sarah's reaction suggests Ishmael was mocking or ridiculing Isaac. While Ishmael's behavior might not sound very significant to us today, it reveals the deeper hostilities involved in a situation in which the family birthright is at stake. Many rulers in antiquity tried to secure their position by eliminating potential rivals, including siblings (*Judg. 9:1–6*). However, although Isaac faced opposition, he also enjoyed all the privileges of love, protection, and favor that went along with being his father's heir.

As spiritual descendants of Isaac, we should not be surprised when we suffer hardship and opposition, even from within the church family itself.

In what ways have you suffered persecution, especially from those closest to you, because of your faith? Or ask yourself this hard question: might you be guilty of persecuting others for *their* faith? Think about it.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law and the Covenants,” pp. 363–373, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“But if the Abrahamic covenant contained the promise of redemption, why was another covenant formed at Sinai? In their bondage the people had to a great extent lost the knowledge of God and of the principles of the Abrahamic covenant. . . .

“God brought them to Sinai; He manifested His glory; He gave them His law, with the promise of great blessings on condition of obedience: ‘If ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then . . . ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.’ Exodus 19:5, 6. The people did not realize the sinfulness of their own hearts, and that without Christ it was impossible for them to keep God’s law; and they readily entered into covenant with God. . . . Yet only a few weeks passed before they broke their covenant with God, and bowed down to worship a graven image. They could not hope for the favor of God through a covenant which they had broken; and now, seeing their sinfulness and their need of pardon, they were brought to feel their need of the Saviour revealed in the Abrahamic covenant and shadowed forth in the sacrificial offerings. Now by faith and love they were bound to God as their deliverer from the bondage of sin. Now they were prepared to appreciate the blessings of the new covenant.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 371, 372.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Is your own walk with the Lord more of an “old covenant” or a “new covenant” type? How can you tell the difference?
- 2 What are some of the issues in your local church that are causing tension within its body? How are they being resolved? Though you might find yourself being the victim of “persecution,” how can you make sure, too, that you aren’t the one doing the persecuting? Where’s the fine line there? (See also *Matt. 18:15–17*.)
- 3 How many times have you made promises to the Lord that you would not do this or that, only to do this or that? How does this sad fact help you understand the meaning of grace?

Summary: The stories of Hagar, Ishmael, and the children of Israel at Sinai illustrate the foolishness of trying to rely upon our own efforts to accomplish what God has promised. This method of self-righteousness is referred to as the old covenant. The new covenant is the everlasting covenant of grace first established with Adam and Eve after sin, renewed with Abraham, and ultimately fulfilled in Christ.