

An illustration from the story of Abraham's two sons in Genesis

Paul now uses an illustration. He is appealing to his Galatian friends to abandon 'sectarian' Jewish Christianity and continue in the loving freedom of the gospel. It is an illustration taken from the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael. ^{¶1} Paul says, 'Tell me, you who want to be living under the law, are you not aware of what the law really says?'. ^{¶2} 'The law' includes Genesis! Genesis-to-Deuteronomy are the five books of the law. People who want to live by lengthy Jewish legislation do not really see what they are doing. Firstly, they do not consider the law itself. For the tenth commandment always condemns us. But secondly, they have not considered the way of faith (without legislation) that is found in the stories of Genesis. 'Have you really considered the law?' asks Paul.

^{¶1} in Genesis 16
^{¶2} 4:21

• **God's promise**

He uses an illustration. 'For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ^{¶1} But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise'. ^{¶2} There was a time when God gave Abraham a promise of a son, a 'seed'. ^{¶3} But many years went by and the promise was not fulfilled. One day Abraham was desperate. He wondered: would the seed ever be born? In his desperation, and at his wife's suggestion, he tried to get himself a son by taking Hagar, the slave-woman who worked in his house, as a junior wife. A child was born through her, whom they called Ishmael. But God did not want the promised child to be born by Abraham's clever self-confident idea. Ishmael was not the fulfilment of God's promise. God wanted the child to be born miraculously, in his own time.

^{¶1} 4:22
^{¶2} 4:23
^{¶3} Genesis 12:7

• **Fulfilment delayed**

• **Abraham's "clever" self confident idea**

• **Fulfilment – God's way**

Some time later God's promise was fulfilled in God's way, miraculously, at a time when Abraham and Sarah were elderly. Isaac was the child of the promise, the miraculous fulfilment of the promise of God. So Ishmael (the child of Abraham's fleshy self-confidence) and Isaac (the child miraculously born through God's promise) both lived in the same home. Yet this caused problems. The older child persecuted the younger child. Eventually Ishmael and his mother Hagar had to be sent away from the home of Abraham, to live elsewhere.

• **Problems**

• **The illustration applied**

Now, says Paul, 'These things may be applied as an illustration'. ^{¶1} (i) The promise to the Christian is the promise of all of the benefits of salvation including the power of a godly life. (ii) Like Abraham we are to inherit these promises by persistent faith. Something miraculous will happen; we shall be sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit. (iii) But like Abraham we are in danger of trying to take a fleshy, self- confident, short cut. When we turn to Mosaic legislation, we are actually turning to the flesh, just as Abraham turned to his own fleshy power to get the promise fulfilled.

^{¶1} 4:24a

Paul works all of this out in detail. He says, 'These women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ^{¶1} Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children'. ^{¶2}

^{¶1} 4:24
^{¶2} 4:25

Hagar represents legalism

Hagar represents legalism that is to be found among the Judaizers! She was a slave-woman. Abraham turned to a slave-woman because he was desperate to get his promised child. The

• *Abraham's mistake was the result of unbelief*

• *Turning to the law is a fleshly unbelieving mistake*

Sarah represents the power of God's miraculous grace

• *We live on the strength of Christ sent from heaven*

Galatians are doing something rather similar. They are turning to the covenant that was made between God and Israel via Moses on Mount Sinai. They are doing so because they are eager to be holy people and the Judaizers are saying the way to please God is to become Jewish. But actually it is unbelief. Abraham turned to Hagar because for a moment he lapsed from faith. He took a worldly short-cut. When Christians turn away from the Spirit to human or even to Mosaic legislation, they are taking a worldly short-cut that will do them no good. In Galatia the Christians were listening to false-teachers coming from Jerusalem. 'You must have a law-centred, Jerusalem - Christianity,' they said. But Paul says the false teachers are themselves in bondage. The child of a slave is also a slave! Hagar was a slave. No matter how nice Ishmael might be, he was the child of a slave! No matter what he did for Abraham his father, nothing could ever make him the child of a free person. Turning to Hagar did nothing good for Abraham; it was a fleshly unbelieving mistake. Turning to the Mosaic law does nothing good for the Christian; it is a fleshly unbelieving mistake.

Sarah represents the power of God's miraculous grace. 'These women are two covenants,' says Paul. If Hagar represents law, Sarah represents grace. Hagar represents the Judaizers sending their instructions from Jerusalem. Sarah represents God sending His grace from heaven! *'But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.'* ¶¹ The Judaizers want to say that the power of the Christian faith comes from the legalistic instructions sent from Jerusalem. Paul says the power of the Christian faith comes from the leading of the Spirit sent from heaven. In the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Christian's 'Jerusalem' is not any earthly city. It is the heavenly Jerusalem, the dwelling-place of God. Christians have only come to salvation because they have been 'born from above'. 'Heaven' is the 'mother' of all Christians. And the continual power of the Christian comes when heavenly supplies are constantly sent down upon him. We do not live by the flesh or by legislation. We live on the strength of Christ sent from heaven itself.

¶¹ 4:26



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