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Galatians

For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. Galatians 4:22

"For it is written." Paul goes directly to Scripture to make his case concerning justification by faith instead of justification by works of the law. The word "For" shows that Scripture actually has an example that speaks out concerning this issue which has brought such contention to the church at Galatia. Therefore, the word "For" is in response to the question of verse 21, "Do you not hear the law?"

In going to Scripture, he cites an example from a time long before the giving of the law; to the time of the great father of the Hebrew faith, Abraham. In Genesis it is recorded "that Abraham had two sons." These two sons were Ishmael first and then Isaac. The fact that Abraham had other sons later is completely ignored because it is irrelevant to what he is going to say. The Bible focuses specifically on these two sons, both in Genesis and now, in order to demonstrate spiritual truths for us to consider and learn from.

Of these two sons, one was by "a bondwoman." This was Ishmael. He was born to Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant of Sarah, Abraham's wife. She was not free, but rather a slave. In contrast to this was Isaac who was born to "a freewoman." Isaac was born to Sarah, the wife of Abraham. She was not a slave, but the wife of the owner of the estate.

Life application: The Old Testament stories are often curious. We can ask ourselves, "Why does the Bible focus on this odd story? Is this all that God wants us to hear... stories about love affairs, intrigue, life and death, and the like?" The answer is that these stories are always intended to point to other spiritual truths. This doesn't mean that we can just make up an allegorical meaning to them that suit our desires. Instead, we are to evaluate them through the lens of Jesus and His work. In so doing, the reason for their inclusion will become clear.

But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, Galatians 4:23

Paul is making his analogy between the law and grace by using Isaac and Ishmael as examples of the two. The word "But" is given to show that there is a notable difference in the two sons. He had just said, "For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman." From this sentence, one could not really discern any difference in the boys, just in who they were born to, "But..."

Now to show the contrast, he continues with "he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh." This was Ishmael. He is the son of the union between Abraham and Hagar. Abraham went into her, she conceived, and then she bore the child. There was nothing unusual about this. It was how things have always been. Further, there was nothing in advance to suggest that there was anything special or important about the coming child.

On the contrary, Isaac came in a completely different manner. Paul says that "...he of the freewoman [came] through promise." Before Isaac was conceived, the Lord had made a promise to Abraham that he would have an heir. This is recorded in Genesis 15 -

"Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

⁴And behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” Genesis 15:2-4

Eventually, Abraham had Ishmael. Abraham had no reason to assume that this wasn't the son of promise. A child had been born to him, and so he raised him thinking that this was the promised child. However, some years after Ishmael's birth, Abraham was told something new -

“As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. ¹⁶And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother of nations*; kings of peoples shall be from her.” Genesis 17:15, 16

Some time after that, the promise was further refined. During a visit from the Lord, Abraham was given this specific promise -

“I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.” Genesis 18:10

From these verses, we can see that there is a difference between how Isaac and Ishmael came to be. Ishmael came according to the flesh; Isaac came according to a promise. In fact, the timing of Isaac's birth was specifically given. The Lord knew, in advance, what was to occur and it demonstrates that He had a plan concerning the future of the two boys.

What will occur a short time later in their lives will be used as a comparison between what should occur between adherence to the law and trusting in the grace of Christ. Paul is making this as simple as possible for the Galatians (and thus us!) to understand. And yet, his words are not listened to by Judaizers and legalists to this day. How sad it is!

Life application: What good is adherence to the law if the law has been fulfilled in Christ? Think it through and give up on your legalism. It can only end badly for you when you stand before the Lord.

...which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— Galatians 4:24

Paul now shows that his evaluation of the story of Abraham, his two children, and the status of the children's mothers, are given to us as for a specific reason. They are to be taken symbolically. In other words, God included this story for a specific reason that goes beyond a literal, historical account of what actually transpired in redemptive history. In that story, and in countless other such Old Testament stories, details which seemingly have no bearing on the main narrative are given.

As God doesn't waste words, there is a reason for these details. Further, in these same stories, information is often left out which seems necessary to understand the story. Again, this is done for several reasons, such as requiring us to refer to other accounts to fill in the missing information. Thus a panorama of other points in redemptive history can be derived by properly combining the various accounts.

Some scholars see this as Paul being excessive in his evaluation of such passages and that we should not attempt to follow him in looking for the symbolic meaning of things God is presenting to us in His word. This is utter nonsense. Every story in the Old Testament can be, and should be, viewed with four separate categories in mind. These categories are the literal/historical; the moral; the allegorical/symbolic; and the anagogical/prophetic. Having said this, extreme care needs to be taken in attempting to determine the symbolic and prophetic meaning. Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture and wild speculation is to be wholly disregarded.

Understanding these things, Paul now shows us the symbolic meaning of the story he has introduced. The birth of Ishmael to the slave Hagar, and the birth of Isaac to the freewoman Sarah, is symbolic of the two covenants. The birth of Ishmael is

equated by Paul directly to the covenant which God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. It is a covenant which leads to bondage, not freedom. It captures all who are under it and binds them under sin. It shows how sinful sin is, but it can not free anyone from bondage.

As Paul is under the influence of the Holy Spirit, his words are those specifically chosen by God to show us exactly what He intended for us to see concerning these two examples which have been provided. We need go no further with the symbolism. Paul will continue to explain the symbolic meaning of this ancient account through the rest of chapter 4.

Life example: When reading the Bible, we should continuously remind ourselves that the ancient passages which seem to have no relevance to anything at all - either in the Bible or to us specifically, do in fact have great significance. If we can continuously remind ourselves that everything points to Christ Jesus and His plan of redemption, these seemingly quaint passages will come alive to us in ways never imagined before.

...for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— Galatians 4:25

Paul continues with his use of Old Testament pictures to reveal New Testament truths. He just showed in the previous verse that the things he is speaking about are symbolic. He noted that Hagar and Ishmael stood in contrast to Sarah and Isaac. Continuing on with this allegorical interpretation, he said that "...these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar."

Hagar, the bondswoman, represents the old covenant. Therefore, "...this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia." Paul has already said that these things are symbolic. Therefore, he is making a picture for us to see. The reason why it is important to remember this is because far too many scholars try to convert the name "Hagar" into an Arabic word which means "stone." From there, they make the leap that

Paul is literally equating her with Mount Sinai - a big pile of stones. This is nonsense. He has already said that these things are symbolic.

Hagar is simply being used to indicate the place of the giving of the law. That place then corresponds to the law itself; a law of bondage. This is fully explained in the next words which say that it "corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children." The law does not provide freedom. Instead, the law only highlights the bondage to sin that all men are confined under. Anyone who is under the law is in bondage.

"Jerusalem which is now" then continues to correspond to the law. It was given at Sinai, but the temple which continued in the service of the law was in Jerusalem. The sacrifices were there, the feasts were held there, and the high priest - who was only a type of Christ to come - ministered there. These things simply continued on with the bondage which was introduced at the giving of the law.

Paul's reason for following this line of thought is the exact same reason as every other point in this epistle. Judaizers had come into the church and turned the Galatians away from the freedom which is found in the grace of Christ. Instead, they had been brought into the bondage of the law. He is simply trying to get them to realize that they were not moving forward, but backward.

God's plan of redemption slowly unveils itself. Each step is intended to move us closer to Christ and ever-closer to the freedom of heaven's wide expanses. The Galatians had been on the right path, but by the lies of the false teachers, they were exchanging freedom for confinement. His symbolic use of Hagar/Sinai/Jerusalem was intended to get them to see this.

As a technical point, the term, "Mount Sinai in Arabia" does not mean that Mount Sinai is actually in the land known as the modern Saudi Arabia. This is incorrect, but this interpretation has led to many fanciful claims by supposed Christian archeologists concerning the place where the Red Sea crossing occurred. These claims both lack proper biblical scholarship and are untrue. Rather, the Sinai

Peninsula was, at the time of Paul, known as Arabia Petraea. Thus, the words "Mount Sinai in Arabia" fully support the traditional location of Mount Sinai.

Life application: Paul's continued use of literal/historical accounts in the Old Testament, in order to show symbolic truths, explains why so many unusual passages are found in the Old Testament. They are literal and true, but they are included in order for us to search out how they point to Christ and His redemptive work in history. Be sure to always look for Christ as you read these wonderful accounts which may seem disconnected to everything else. In the end, they are not only connected, but they are vital to the overall message of the Bible.