

# Do You Not Hear the Law?

*Galatians 4:21-31*

*With Study Questions*

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# Do You Not Hear the Law?

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Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? <sup>22</sup> For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. <sup>23</sup> But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, <sup>24</sup> which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar — <sup>25</sup> for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children — <sup>26</sup> but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. <sup>27</sup> For it is written: *“Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband.”* <sup>28</sup> Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. <sup>29</sup> But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, even so *it is now*. <sup>30</sup> Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? *“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 (Galatians 4:21-31).

## A Common Thread

When I came to faith in Christ in the early seventies, it was the tail end of the Jesus movement. Many different sects of Christianity were aggressively vying for my membership. Some were clearly outside the realm of Christian orthodoxy, e.g. Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Others seemed much more legitimate. What I did find, however, as a common thread to all these brands of Christianity (and even cults) was a verbal assent to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. I figured this is what must be studied.

On this side of glory we all must recognize there is no pure church or denomination. Any church claiming to have unearthed the absolute perfect doctrines taught in Scripture would be beyond arrogant. There are, however, glaring difficulties we see in some very accepted forms of the faith.

One can hardly ignore, in the text of Galatians, the stark contrasts between Paul’s teaching and the very prominent themes found in Roman Catholicism, Dispensationalism, and Arminianism (salvation by an act of autonomous human volition).

## Rome

Contrary to Rome, we are not saved by faith *and* our association with the church and its rituals. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches,

**Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are *efficacious* because in them Christ himself is at work.<sup>1</sup>**

**The means of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opera operato* (literally: "by the very fact of the action's being performed")<sup>2</sup>**

**From the moment that a sacrament is being celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it...<sup>3</sup>**

All these lead to the astonishingly unbiblical declaration that

**The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the new Covenant are *necessary for salvation*.<sup>4</sup>**

Certainly Rome requires faith for salvation; but not the *faith alone* which Paul teaches in nearly every passage in Galatians.

## Dispensationalism

Contrary to Dispensationalism, there is no cleaver separating God's people by virtue of their ethnicity. God's promises are received by faith. In the story we will examine this morning it should be a fatal blow to Dispensationalism to see that the "**Jerusalem which now is**" (a clear reference to ethnic Israel) is associated, not with Isaac (the recipient of the Abrahamic Covenant) but with Hagar who is "cast out." It would have been staggering to the ethnic Jew to realize that Paul associated them, not with Abraham and the promise, but with Ishmael. All the conflict in the Middle East is a conflict between the sons of Ishmael – at least according to the apostle Paul.

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), p. 292.

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), p. 292.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), p. 292.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), p. 292.

## Arminians

And finally, contrary to Arminians, the power of salvation is not a combination of God's promise and man's response. Salvation has one source and one source only – the promise and power of God through Christ **“to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Galatians 1:5)**. Man's favorable response to the gospel is a result of God's power, not a complement to it.

## Paul's Point

In these eleven verses Paul is going to use a story found in Genesis to make a point. His simple point is one he's been making throughout the entire epistle; man cannot find favor in the eyes of God apart from the promise of God which is found in Christ alone by faith alone.

Paul is not comparing the non-churched to the churched. He is addressing those within the church. Paul is not so concerned with the books of Barnes and Nobles as much as the books found at Christian Book Distributors where there is some good and some awful.

## Do You Not Hear the Law?

Paul begins this portion of his letter with a gentle chide.

**Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law (Galatians 4:21)?**

These people did not entirely ignore the Scriptures. As Stephen taught, they **“received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it” (Acts 7:53)**. But they misunderstood the Scriptures. They had been poorly taught. Again, we see the importance of guarding the office of the teacher. Paul is telling them they did not understand their own texts.

In our day doctrine is often viewed as secondary to love and good works. But unsound doctrine is the source of the problem; they didn't understand the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup> Paul will now make his point via the story of Isaac and Ishmael.

## Helping God

God had made a promise to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed. Yet Abraham and Sarah were old and without child. Sarah thought it would be a good idea to help God keep His promise by taking matters into her own hands. She had Abraham go into her handmaiden, Hagar. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, Abraham's first born – problem solved.

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<sup>5</sup> When doctrine is ignored, genuine love and good works will most assuredly disappear as well.

Yet God didn't need help. Sarah, though ninety, would have a child – a miraculous birth according to the promise of God rather than the innovative efforts of man. Sarah gave birth to Isaac. The promise of blessings to the world would proceed through Isaac not Ishmael. Ishmael was man's effort and Isaac was God's effort.

**For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman.<sup>23</sup> But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise (Galatians 4:22, 23).**

Paul teaches the two sons are symbolic of the two covenants.

**...which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar –<sup>25</sup> for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children –<sup>26</sup> but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all (Galatians 4:24-26)**

## **Ishmaelite Jews**

Ishmael corresponds to a covenant of works (saved by men's efforts), Isaac to a covenant of grace (saved by God's promise<sup>6</sup>). It is very difficult for us to grasp how insulting it would be for the Jew to be associated with Ishmael rather than Isaac, but such is the case. Hagar (mother of Ishmael) was Mount Sinai, corresponding to Jerusalem (ethnic Israel), which was in bondage under a covenant of works (the need to live up to a standard of righteousness in order to be justified before God).

## **Mount Sinai?**

But wasn't Mount Sinai the place where God, through Moses, spoke to His own covenant people whom He had delivered from bondage? Herein lays the tragedy. If Mount Sinai (the place where the Law was given) is only associated with law and not redemption,<sup>7</sup> those hearing this law remain in bondage and are sons of Ishmael. This, again, is not merely a death blow to Dispensationalism; it is also a death blow to all brands of theology that approach the law (or anything inherently found in man) as if it were designed to save souls.

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<sup>6</sup> When I write "promise" I mean everything accomplished by the fulfilling of the promise, i.e. the cross of Christ.

<sup>7</sup> Let us remember how the law begins, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2).

## Jerusalem Above

The "**Jerusalem above**<sup>8</sup>" on the other hand, "**is free.**" This Jerusalem is inhabited by faith. And quite frankly, it seems to be Paul's point that it always was inhabited by faith. They (old covenant saints) desired a heavenly country – the city of God (Hebrews 11:16). It was not Ishmael (flesh) but Isaac (promise); it was not Esau (flesh) but Jacob (promise).

A question for us to consider: Is the ground of our hope found in the efforts of men or the promise of God?

## When Nothing is Everything

**For it is written: "Rejoice, O barren, you who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband" (Galatians 4:27).**

This paradoxical testimonial poetically reveals how God, from nothing, makes everything, while men who think they have everything produce nothing.

**Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ...Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Corinthians 1:20, 25).**

## Cast Them Out

Unlike many modern high profile prophecy gurus, Paul does not say, let us put aside our theological differences and live together in peace. He, rather, draws a line in the sand. Let us be very clear as to who we are.

**Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise (Galatians 4:28).**

He also instructs the church on how they are to respond to those who teach a doctrine which places man's hope in the resourcefulness of humanity (though veiled in a false sense of grace).

**But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now.**

<sup>30</sup> **Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the**

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<sup>8</sup> Jerusalem above does not mean it is not found anywhere on earth, but rather that it proceeds from the power of heaven rather than earth.

***bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman” (Galatians 4:29, 30).***

## **Mixing the Blood**

It may seem that Paul would use Ishmael’s mocking of Isaac as symbolic of the persecution of the church. It seemed so petty. Calvin makes an interesting observation.

**No persecution ought to distress us so much as to see our calling attempted to be undermined by the reproaches of wicked men. Neither blows, nor scourging, nor nails, nor thorns, occasioned to our Lord such intense suffering as that blasphemy:<sup>9</sup>**

There was, and are now (as in Dave Hunt’s attack on Reformed theology) attacks on the graciousness of God’s grace. Mixing the defiled blood of man with the holy blood of Christ should be viewed as an astonishingly vile concept. Such was the case (in a more literal sense) with circumcision. It is no less the case with the popular synergistic gospels which flood modern Christendom.

## **Blessing or Curse?**

These people are to be cast from the bosom of the church. They do not share in the blessing of Christ – that corridor to heaven – any more than the Egyptians shared in the blessing of the open corridor of the Red Sea. The cup of Christ’s blood, like the Red Sea, rather becomes a source of judgment.

Paul finishes with a word of emphasis and encouragement.

**So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free (Galatians 4:31).**

If by faith alone you trust in Christ alone, you are a child of promise. And the freedom which comes from His victory over death is yours. To Christ be the glory.

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin’s Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin’s Commentaries (Ga 4:29). Ages Software: Albany, OR

## Questions for Study

1. What seems to be a common thread in all “Christian” religions (page 1)?
2. How is Paul’s teaching contrary to prominent themes found in Roman Catholicism, Dispensationalism, and Arminianism (pages 1, 2)?
3. Why does Paul question whether they “hear the law” (page 3)?
4. How did Sarah seek to help God (page 3)?
5. In what way can Mount Sinai be good/bad (page 4)?
6. Discuss the difference between the Jerusalem “which now is” versus the “Jerusalem above” (page 5).
7. How are Christians to respond to Ishmaelites in the church (page 5)?
8. How should we avoid mixing our blood with the blood of Christ (page 6)?
9. Discuss the blessing or curse of the Red Sea/Lord’s Supper (page 6).