

THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S GRACE IS CONTAINED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Galatians 4:21-31

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

A. Paul begins this final section of his main argument by asking a question of "those who want to be under law." In light of what we have seen in the rest of the letter, how would Paul define or describe a person who "wants to be under the law?" What does that phrase mean in this letter?

A person who wants to be under the law is a person who believes that in order for God to accept me as righteous in his sight I must obey the laws he gave to Israel as recorded in the OT. In order for me to be loved by God, to please God, to be warmly welcomed by God into heaven at the resurrection I must keep the laws of the OT. The false teachers in Galatia and those who were beginning to follow them were convinced that God would only accept those who followed the laws regarding clean and unclean food, circumcision, Sabbath regulations and other laws regarding the various holy days and feasts. Paul has mentioned the adherence of these false teachers to these specific laws but has generalized beyond just these. Anyone who believes that God's acceptance of them and his including them among his people is determined by their obedience or lack of obedience to the variety of laws contained in the OT is a person who wants to be under the law.

B. What might be some of the characteristics, attitudes, thoughts, actions of people who want to be "under the law" in our day, in a more general sense than the historical sense Paul is describing?

Most of us are not tempted to believe that God will love us and take us to heaven based upon whether or not we are eating kosher food or observing the three annual feasts of the Jewish calendar. However, as we saw when we studied the verses preceding this morning's text, Paul understands that all humans and all human religious systems, whether based on the OT or the Koran or the Hindu Sanskrit have this in common: a belief that humans by their observing religious laws and rituals can gain the favor of God. Therefore, the temptation to be "under law" is not reserved for just Jewish

people or people who know the OT. Here are some signs that you may be a person who "wants to be under the law." You are more impressed with what you do than with what Christ has done. You cannot believe that God can ever love you or forgive you because of what you've done. You can't understand how anyone could ever be addicted to drugs or sex or overeating or TV watching. You feel contempt in your heart for homosexuals, divorced people, liberals, conservatives, abortionists or criminals. You feel more acceptable to God after reading the Bible or going to church than you do before doing these things. You have a hard time praying when you haven't read your bible for a week. You say things (or think them) like, "I don't deserve to be treated like this. Can you believe that anyone would act like that? I would never say that/do that." You can't think of any reason why God would be angry with you or send you to hell. You don't believe you've ever hated God. You believe that God prefers a certain race of people. You are convinced that God loves you more when you do certain things and that he loves you less when you don't do these things. You're afraid God will send you to hell because you haven't been a "good enough" Christian.

The people Paul is dealing with are in danger of believing God's love for them is conditioned upon their obedience to the OT laws. We also live under that danger. As Paul concludes his main argument in this letter to the Galatians we are going to see that obedience to OT law (or any other law) cannot be the ground of our acceptance with God.

STUDY

1. What is the implied accusation in Paul's question in v. 21? Compare to John 3:10, 5:39-40 & 45-46.

He is doing exactly what Jesus did in his many arguments with the Jewish religious leaders. He is accusing them of a selective reading of the OT. He, by this question is saying that they, just like the religious leaders that Jesus confronted, are not paying attention to the whole law but only to the parts to which they want to pay attention. God cannot contradict himself. The OT does not teach two ways to be made right with God, one by law keeping and the other by grace. Paul says what the OT teaches is that no one is made right with God by obeying the law. People are only made right with God by an act of his grace, in accordance with his promise. Paul's argument is that the false teachers are making God contradict himself by claiming that obedience to the OT laws are the grounds of acceptance with

God. Paul shows the correct way to read the OT and demonstrates that the gospel of God's grace given through his only Son is not just a NT message but is what the entire OT teaches as well. Salvation has always been by grace through faith in Christ. It has never been by works of the law.

2. What OT story does Paul refer to in order to make his point?

Summarize the basic outline of the story (Genesis 15:1-6, 16:1-5, 15-16, 17:1-2, 15-19, 18:1-15, 21:1-12).

Paul aims to prove his point by going back to the story of Abraham for the third time in this letter. He reminds them that Abraham had two sons born of two mothers. Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah his wife was 65 when God chose Abraham and told him that he was going to make him into a great nation and bless all the nations of the world through him. At that time God told him to leave Haran, the place he was living and to go to the place that God would show him. God led him to the land of Canaan and told him that he was going to give this land to his Seed. So Abraham and Sarah lived in the land of Canaan in tents, as in a foreign land. Sometime during those first 10 years of living there Abraham complained to God that God had not done what he promised. How could he become a great nation when he did not have even one son? He had no son and therefore his name would end when he died and all of his property would go to one of his servants. It was at that time that God told Abraham that he was going to have a son, from his own body and that his descendants, through this son, would be as many as the stars in the heavens. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

After God made this promise to Abraham, when he was 85 years old and Sarah, his wife, was 75 years old, Sarah came to Abraham and told him, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave girl, Hagar, perhaps I can have a son through her." Abraham listened to his wife and had sexual relations with Sarah's Egyptian slave girl and she conceived and gave birth to a son whom Abraham named Ishmael. Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, when Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah was 89 years old, the Lord visited Abraham and Sarah personally. At that time he promised that in one year Sarah would bear a son to Abraham. Just as God promised, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 years old, both well past the age of bearing children, Isaac was born.

3. What are the two points that Paul makes about these two sons and their births in vv. 22 & 23?

There are two things about Ishmael to which Paul calls our attention. First, he was born of a slave woman and therefore, he is a slave. The second thing is that Ishmael was born "according to the flesh." While this obviously means that there was nothing out of the ordinary about Ishmael's birth, i.e. he was born as the result of a man and woman having sexual intercourse, that isn't the main thing that Paul is pointing towards. Rather, the emphasis is that Sarah and Abraham aimed to obtain the promises of God by a plan of their own devising and through their effort. Ishmael's birth was a purely human event. It was the result of human thinking and human work. Abraham and Sarah were trusting in their word, not God's word for God had said nothing about taking a second wife or that he would give Abraham a son through the slave girl.

Paul makes two points about Isaac's birth. First, as he is born of a free woman, then he is a freeborn son and not a slave. He is Abraham's heir and thus the heir of God's promises because his mother is not a slave but a free woman. Second, Isaac's birth was the result of God's promise and God's work. There was no human way for Isaac to come into existence. God spoke and then God acted through Abraham and Sarah to produce a son who would be the heir. The birth of Isaac therefore stands as an example of the way that God's salvation comes to humans. It is through a promise, by his work. Salvation is always a work of grace and never the result of human effort. Abraham and Sarah could never have had a child except by the promise and power of God. He didn't make this promise or perform this miracle in response to anything in them. They were powerless and they were sinners, as evidenced by the episode with Hagar. God brings Isaac into existence when there was no possible way for Isaac to come into existence.

4. What conclusion does Paul draw from the mothers who gave birth to these sons in v. 24? How does this strike you as a method for reading the OT stories?

The birth of these two sons and their status illustrate two covenants. In other words, when we read the story of these births as historical events, they are not merely historical events. God was acting in these lives and then having these events recorded in Scripture in order that the Jewish people first but then all people might understand how it is that God saves

human beings. *The OT is a record and an illustration of God's saving work in and through Christ. It teaches us how not to be saved and how to be saved.*

5. What is a covenant? How would you define or describe it in general?

A covenant is an arrangement that a greater person or nation makes with a lesser nation or person to govern their relationship with one another. In a covenant the greater person promises to do something for the lesser person who, in turn, fulfills certain obligations towards the greater person. The U.S. made an agreement with Japan after WWII. We told Japan that we would provide military security for them if they would agree to never build an army and if they would allow us to put a huge military base on Okinawa. They receive benefits from us for fulfilling certain obligations that we required of them.

6. To what is Hagar compared? What are the conclusions we are to draw based upon these comparisons? (See Deut 4:1-14, especially vv. 1-2 & 13, 5:1-33, especially vv. 1-2 & 33-34)

Paul says that Hagar and the means by which her son Ishmael was born represent the covenant God made with the nation Israel at Mt. Sinai when he gave them the 10 commandments. In addition, she represents all Jewish people who lived under the rules of the covenant that at the time Paul wrote this letter had its center in Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem that the temple worship and the teaching of the Old Covenant had its fullest expression. Just like the birth of Ishmael was the result of human effort, so the fulfillment of the obligations of the covenant God made with Israel on Mt. Sinai depends upon human effort. God does say to Israel, through Moses, that if you obey I will bless and if you disobey I will curse. The Law of Moses depends upon human ability just like the birth of Ishmael depended entirely upon human work. All those who live under that covenant are slaves and not heirs, just like Ishmael was a slave and not an heir. He was born of a slave and therefore there was nothing he could do to change his status. The Old Covenant is a covenant that is "according to the flesh", that is dependent upon human ability and it only produces slavery. The Old Covenant cannot create divine life. It cannot make free born sons, because it is based upon human work. Everyone who approaches God on the basis of law keeping, like all those "obedient" Jews living in Jerusalem in Paul's day are slaves and not sons, despite all claims to the contrary.

7. Based upon Galatians 3:19-25 & 4:1-11, what is the nature of the slavery that Hagar/Mt. Sinai/present Jerusalem is under and promotes?

The law does not set men free from sin it only reveals to us that we are sinners. In addition, the law does not decrease sin, it provokes sin. Thus the law does not deliver us from our slavery to sin but merely convicts us and sentences us to wait on death row until the day of God's judgment when he will punish us for breaking his law. Everyone who seeks to live under the stipulations of the law is a slave to sin and death and not a son because human beings can never obey the law, as it requires. The law requires perfect obedience, not partial obedience. As Paul said earlier, quoting the law, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to everything written in the law." It was given to prepare us for the coming of the Messiah who would set us free from our slavery to sin and law and death. In addition, like slavery, all of your work in obedience to the law will gain you nothing. Slaves are not rewarded or paid for their labor and thus obedience to the law will gain you nothing but condemnation. You will get nothing for your labor.

8. How is Sarah's plan to get a son through Hagar like "those who want to be under law" planning to inherit eternal life?

Those who plan to go to heaven by obeying some law are just like Sarah dreaming that she was going to obtain a son through telling her husband to have sex with her slave girl. It doesn't matter how much she wanted it or how convinced she was that this was the way to get what God promised, she could not get the blessing of God through her own plans and efforts. The only way that Sarah and Abraham could obtain the blessing of God was for God to promise and then for God to fulfill his promise apart from their work.

9. To what does Paul compare Sarah and the birth of Isaac? How is the comparison different from the one he made with Hagar?

He compares Sarah to "the Jerusalem that is above." There is no mention of a covenant that corresponds to the "covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai" as in the Hagar comparison.

10. Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1 as the reason for saying that "the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother." Turn to Isaiah 54 in order to identify "the Jerusalem that is above." To whom is the "barren woman"

metaphor of v. 1 referring according to 54:11 (compare with 51:17-23)? What is the historical reality to which this is pointing (2 Kings 24:1-4 & v. 20)?

In v. 11 we find out that the metaphor refers to the city of Jerusalem. Isaiah is describing the condition of Jerusalem after it is destroyed by God through the Babylonians in about 500 B.C. As vv. 4-6 God says, Jerusalem after its destruction is like a widow or like a divorced woman with no husband or children. There is no hope for her and no way for her to have children. She is desolate and barren, like Sarah at age 89 with a husband who is 99. The reason that Jerusalem is in this condition is because she did not obey the law as God commanded. This destruction is the slavery in which all efforts at law keeping are destined to end. Jerusalem is under God's judgment and, like a widowed, divorced woman with no children there is no human way for her to become an inhabited city again.

11. According to vv. 2-8 what is going to happen to Jerusalem?

God says that he will become her husband and he will make sure that she has more children than the woman who has a husband. Look at v. 2. "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities." Here is Jerusalem, a pile of rubble with no one living in her and yet God says that by his promise and through his work that the descendants of Jerusalem will take over the world. This widowed woman who has no husband will have more children than the woman who has a husband. The future of Jerusalem as a city that is inhabited and which rules the world will come into existence, not "according to the flesh" but rather according to God's promise, by his Holy Spirit. This restored Jerusalem is the "Jerusalem that is above."

12. What is the connection between Isaiah 54:1-3 and 53?

Isaiah 53 shows the Servant of the Lord struck down, desolate, barren, without descendants, bearing the wrath of God against the sins of his people. But then "seeing the light of life" and seeing his offspring and justifying many by his atoning death. In other words, Isaiah 53 tells us how God is going to bring into existence this new Jerusalem from the ashes of the rejected and desolate Jerusalem. It is by the atoning sacrifice of Christ that this new Jerusalem is created.

13. To what then does the "Jerusalem that is above" refer? What are the characteristics of this new Jerusalem in light of Galatians 4:26-28 and Isaiah 54?

Desolate, rejected, destroyed, barren Jerusalem made into flourishing Jerusalem is the church. We are weak and flawed and have no ability to impart divine life to anyone else. We appear to be very ordinary and flawed people. We are sinners. Yet, our existence, indeed the existence of every Christian congregation in the world is a miracle, like the miracle of Isaac's birth. We exist by God's promise and his work through Christ to fulfill that promise. We are not in the church because we have obeyed the law but because God, for the sake of Christ, gave us new hearts that believe the promise that we are forgiven through the life and death of Christ. Christ has fulfilled the obligations of the covenant for us and so we are counted righteous for his sake. This new covenant is based upon his obedience, not our obedience. We are not a place where the law is preached and men and women are commanded to obey the law in order to obtain the blessing of God. We are a place that exalts the promise of God and the power of God and the grace of God. We talk about his work, not our work. We worship him, not the work of our own hands. We trust in him, not our own efforts. As we live in and proclaim this free promise and the futility of humans trying to obey the law, more sons of God will be born through us. It is inevitable that where the powerlessness and sinfulness of men and the free grace of God given through Christ is lived and preached that God will add more children, just as it was inevitable that Sarah would bear Isaac nine months after the promise was made. The birth of more sons of God is not due to our competence or our effort but it is due to the promise of God and the power of God through the gospel of Christ.

14. How does this vision of the church impact you?

15. How are you planning on obtaining eternal life?

16. What part of the Hagar/Sarah story does refer to next in v. 29 and how does he apply it?

When Isaac was probably about three years old and was weaned from his mother's milk, Abraham and Sarah, according to ancient custom, threw a party for their growing son. At that party Ishmael, the thirteen-year-old son of Hagar, mocked the toddler Isaac. It would not be hard to imagine

the human drama going on in Abraham's house after the birth of Isaac. Both Hagar and her son would have known that Isaac was going to be Abraham's heir. Ishmael lived for at least a decade believing he would be the heir. Therefore, he would not be happy about Isaac's birth and any reminder of his favored status would be a bitter potion in Ishmael's mouth. He expressed his jealousy and his anger and his contempt by mocking the toddler in some way. Paul views this hostility of the son of the slave woman as a precursor and type of the persecution that was going to be perpetrated by those who believe God accepts people based upon religious and moral performance against those who know that God accepts only on the basis of faith in his promise in Christ.

In particular Paul sees Ishmael's persecution of Isaac as an example of the persecution of the Jewish people of Jesus and the church. The amazing thing to consider here is that Paul would have thought of himself, prior to his conversion, as being represented by Ishmael. His persecution of the church was driven by the same jealous rage that motivated Ishmael. At that time he knew there was no way that God would accept his people on the basis of a crucified Messiah apart from observing the law. Thus he approved of Stephen's death and made it his goal to destroy the church. Paul also sees the animosity of the false teachers against himself and their aim to destroy the faith of the Galatian Christians in Christ as being of the same sort of persecution. Throughout the history of the church the most violent and aggressive persecution has come from religious people, from Jews, to pagan Romans, to the apostate Roman church, to apostate protestant denominations to Moslems, to Hindus, to dogmatic Marxists.

17. What is the point of quoting Genesis 21:10 in Gal. 4:30?

The point Paul is making here is that while in this life the sons of the slave woman will persecute God's people, yet there is a day coming when they will be thrown out, into the outer darkness. Those who trust in their own goodness or performance of religious rituals to gain acceptance with God will not be welcomed by God into heaven but will be cast into hell. This is the same thing that Jesus says in at least a dozen parables where law keeping Jewish people are shut out of God's eternal kingdom while law breaking sinners are welcomed in by grace. This is the language of the OT prophets and of the Revelation where those who oppose God are thrown into the lake of fire, where what you have done will be done to you. Paul says it this way in 2 Thess. 1, "God is just, he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled..." God is

eternally opposed to all who believe they can be made right with him by their own efforts because he opposes the proud and only gives grace to the humble.

18. How does knowing that God will throw out those who want to live under the law affect you?