

The Gospel in Galatians ***The Two Covenants***

Lesson #10 for December 3, 2011

Scriptures: Galatians 4:21-31; Genesis 1:28; 2:2,3; 3:15; 15:1-6; 17:15-19; Exodus 6:2-8; 19:3-6.

1. This lesson deals with the ideas involved in *covenant*. Covenants are agreements or promises between two people or two groups of people. There are three major covenants mentioned in the Old Testament: 1) The original covenant with Abram/Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-14); 2) The covenant with the children of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:7,8; 24:3,7); and 3) The covenant with the children of Israel at the time of their Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 31:31-34). We usually speak of only two covenants because the renewed covenant to the children of Israel at the time of the Babylonian captivity was largely a repeat of the covenant with Abraham back in the beginning.

Christians who reject the authority of the Old Testament often see the giving of the law on Sinai as being 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. (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, for November 26)

2. What was the essential difference between the Sinai covenant—which is often referred to as the first, or old, covenant—and the “new” covenant given at the time of the Babylonian captivity which is repeated several times in the New Testament? Our Christian friends usually see these two covenants as the representations of how God has related to His people in two different time periods. But, the essential difference between the two covenants is the relationship between the two covenanting parties rather than the time period.
3. Back in the very beginning, Cain represented a kind of old or first covenant relationship with God. He wanted to please God by something that he could do himself, a kind of do-it-yourself religion. By contrast, Abel trusted God and had a new covenant relationship, following God’s instructions and trusting God and God’s grace for their relationship. Cain’s approach was a selfish one: I can do it myself the way I choose. Abel’s approach was a trusting one: He chose to do things God’s way. Didn’t each of them bring his own possession to offer as a sacrifice?
4. Read Galatians 4:21-31. This is a difficult passage. Some consider it to be the most difficult passage in all of Galatians. It involves people doing things which seem very strange to our modern thinking. Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a secondary wife or concubine in order to claim Hagar’s child as her own. Once again, Sarah was trying to work things out for herself. She had stopped having periods, and there was no sign of the promised son.
5. God and Abraham sealed an agreement by passing between animals that had been cut in half. Thus, we have the Old Testament expression “cutting an agreement.” The implication was that just as one killed animals to seal the agreement, he would be subject to death if he broke it.
6. Look at some of the passages in the Old Testament that speak about the covenants God made with His people. (Genesis 12:2,3; 2 Samuel 7:12-17; Isaiah 11; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-28; 37:22-28)
7. The very first agreement that God had with human beings was in the Garden of Eden. (Genesis 1 & 2) It involved several things: 1) Having children to spread out and occupy the earth, 2)

Working during six days of the week, 3) Resting on the Sabbath, and 4) Staying away from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. While they were still in the Garden of Eden, it was natural for Adam and Eve to be obedient and follow God's will in every detail of their lives. But, sin changed all that. Natural obedience to God became impossible. In order to restore a relationship with God, God's grace entered the picture.

8. Read Genesis 3:15. What is implied in this verse? It is often called the first gospel promise. Do you see any hints of the gospel in this verse?
9. Does crushing the serpent's head sound like the gospel? In what sense is war between the serpent and the woman a foretaste of the gospel or good news? These words were addressed to the serpent. So, is it true that the gospel was first preached to the serpent?
10. Why did God give circumcision to Abraham and his family? The most likely reason was so that young "Jewish" males could not hide their true identity if they went to the fertility cult religious services and got involved with those sexual orgies. Did circumcision still serve that role or function in the days of Paul? There was certainly a lot of sexuality, and there were many sexual perversions connected with the worship of the pagan gods in cities like Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and probably Rome. Furthermore, if one went to the gym to exercise, he did it in the nude. So, everyone could see if he was circumcised as a Jew.
11. Does practicing circumcision represent a do-it-yourself religion? Surely, that was not God's original intent. It is interesting to notice that Abraham and Ishmael were the first two men in Abraham's line to be circumcised. This occurred before Isaac was born. (Genesis 17:23) Is that why circumcision is associated with Ishmael's name in our passage for today? Eight-day-old boys certainly do not circumcise themselves! So, in what sense is circumcision connected with do-it-yourself religion? In Paul's day, were the Judaizers and others like them circumcising their children and being circumcised themselves because they believed they were pleasing God? How many other Old Testament experiences and stories would fall into the category of attempting to please God?
12. Were the children of Israel attempting to please God when they promised to do everything He told them to do? (Exodus 19:8; 24:3,7) Did they really have any idea what they were promising? They heard it first from God. Then, they heard it from Moses. Then, Moses wrote it down and read it to them again. Did any of them know how quickly they would fail?
13. Are there any hints in our religion today that might suggest we are trying a do-it-yourself religion? Do we ever get tired of waiting for God? Do we sometimes think that our idea of timing is better than God's? If we choose to wait for God to lead the way, does that help us to grow patience, love, and faith?
14. Look specifically at the promises God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-5. How did Abraham respond? God was making some pretty astounding promises to Abraham. Why do you think Abraham was chosen? Was Abraham just randomly chosen? And why did Abraham choose to go? Would you have gone? Did Abraham recognize in those promises his responsibility to reach out to other families and individuals?
15. Clearly, the central pillar of God's promises to Abraham necessitated the birth of a son and heir. After 10 years with no sign of any heir and Sarah no longer having periods, didn't it seem like God's promises were not reliable? Do you think that Abraham had been praying to God and asking questions? Are questions the same as doubts?
16. Look at the way God sealed this settlement/covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:7-18. Why did God come down and symbolically pass between the cut halves of animals to try to convince Abraham that He was serious about His covenant? What is your understanding of the timing of

Genesis 15:12 and Genesis 15:17? Was this covenant sealed in a vision? In what way did God appear as a smoking oven and a flaming torch and pass between those divided animals? Did anyone other than Abraham see this experience? Or, did Abraham see it only in vision? Why did God choose to represent His presence by a smoking portable fire pot and a flaming torch? Are these examples of the lengths to which God will go to reach out to humans? Were these the usual ways that covenants were sealed in the days of Abraham?

17. Today, if God appeared to you in vision and said that He wanted to make a covenant with you, would you want it to be drawn up by an attorney and signed by God?
18. How often does God ask us to believe things which seem impossible? Didn't the possibility of Sarah having a child seem more and more remote as the years went by? What did the universe think as they watched this series of events? Does God ever ask us to believe things which seem impossible?
19. Why is it so difficult for human beings to be patient and let God work things out according to His schedule? What is the relationship between faith and patience?
20. Read Galatians 5:22,23. Notice that the final word in the *King James Version* in the series of the fruit of the Spirit is *temperance*, but the word really means self-control. Does self-control have anything to do with do-it-yourself religion?
21. When Sarah stopped having periods, Abraham and Sarah become desperate to have a child? Where did Hagar come from? Is it possible that Abraham and Sarah got Hagar when they were in Egypt? Did Pharaoh give Hagar to Sarah because he was hoping to marry Sarah? What led Sarah to suggest to Abraham that he should take Hagar as a concubine or secondary wife? This seems very strange to us. But, in those days, it was very important to have a male heir that could carry on the family name, and this was one of the accepted ways to get an heir.
22. After Ishmael was a teenager, God finally took action. Read Genesis 17:15-19; 18:10-15; and Hebrews 11:11,12. Clearly, Sarah was past the normal time for childbearing. Isaac was a miraculous baby. Notice that both Abraham (Genesis 17:17) and Sarah (Genesis 18:9-15) laughed at God's suggestion that they could have a child of their own! Is that why they named the baby Isaac which means "Laughter"? How often are we tempted to rush ahead with our own fulfillments or plans instead of waiting for God's plan? Do we lack faith?
23. Many people in our day who are in stressful or extreme situations promise God all kinds of things if He will just get them out of trouble. To what kind of religious experience does that lead? Are such people hoping to do something to please God so He will do what they want Him to do? Doesn't that sound like an old covenant kind of arrangement?
24. When Isaac was about 20 years of age, Abraham received that very strange message from God to take him out and sacrifice him. (Genesis 22) Why did God ask Abraham to do such a thing? Did it take a lot of trust (faith) in God to do that?
25. What do you think Satan had to say to the universe after the fiasco with Hagar and Ishmael? What did he say when Abraham on two different occasions lied saying Sarah was his sister? God had called Abraham His friend. Can't you just see Satan laughing and making fun of God and Abraham because of their relationship? But, Abraham finally learned to wait patiently on God and to follow God's instructions. What do we learn about the relationship between Abraham and God from the experience on Mount Moriah? See *Patriarchs and Prophets* 154,155. Would we be able to withstand an experience like that?
26. Notice specifically that God called on Abraham to demonstrate something for the benefit of the onlooking universe. Should that remind us of the story of Job?

27. Paul then went on to compare the experience of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar with the children of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. What is the relationship between these two events?
28. What kind of a relationship was God seeking to establish with His people at Sinai? (Exodus 6:2-8; 19:3-6; Deuteronomy 32:10-12) These verses clearly spell out the idea that God wanted to make the children of Israel His Own special possession.
29. Since Abraham and all of his male descendants and workers were circumcised and later those descendants were called to be God's special possession, don't you suppose that the Judaizers in Paul's day said, "If you want to be a part of God's special people and to be one of His special possessions, you must be circumcised as Abraham and his descendants were"? Wouldn't that seem like a natural argument? In Paul's day, who were the promised possessions of God? See 1 Peter 2:9. Does God want to enter into a relationship with the Christian church similar to the relationship He had with the children of Israel in ancient times? (Compare Exodus 19:6)
30. When God spoke to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, did He suggest that they establish a covenant relationship? What was different about the promises made at Sinai versus the promises made earlier to Abraham? (Exodus 19:8; 24:3,7) While it is true that God gave the children of Israel a lot of instructions about what He wanted them to do and not to do, it was the people who on three separate occasions promised to obey God. They did not wait to see God work out the details. They just promised to do it. Does that sound a little bit like the story of Hagar?
31. What role did Hagar play in the whole story? Was she just a pawn? Was it the attitude of Hagar and Ishmael and their feelings about Isaac that made it necessary for them to leave the camp of Abraham? Clearly, Abraham and Sarah were the ones who caused the problem in the beginning. Hagar and Ishmael reaped the results of Abraham's attempts at do-it-yourself religion. Once again, Satan must have laughed all over the universe.
32. So, what was the application the Judaizers were trying to make? How did Paul counter it? Paul wanted it to be very clear that the Judaizers were trying to please God through a do-it-yourself kind of religion. Thus, the comparison with the story of Hagar. Thus, the Judaizers represented an illegitimate religion—a sort of relying on the flesh.
33. Ishmael and Hagar were finally sent away because Ishmael was making fun of the young Isaac. (Genesis 21:8-10) Of course, it would have been natural for Abraham and Sarah to bestow special favors on Isaac. After all, he was born miraculously as the heir of the promise. How would you expect Ishmael and Hagar to feel about that sudden change in their status? Were Ishmael and Hagar actually hostile to Isaac? There are many examples in ancient times when people who aspired to high positions killed their competitors in order to eliminate them and secure their own position. (Compare Judges 9:1-6; and the story of King Herod the Great who killed many of his own relatives) How can we—without being judgmental or prejudicial—reach out to those who are still caught in a do-it-yourself mode of religion and convince them that God has a better plan for their lives?

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