

The Gospel in Galatians

The Two Covenants

Lesson #10 for September 2, 2017

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 or more people or two or more 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 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 Sabbath, August 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 and repeated several times in the New Testament? The real difference between the two was who was making the promises. 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 involved 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 expression from the Old Testament “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 that agreement. Was this whole sequence real? Or, did Abraham just see it in vision? It must have been real because Abraham had to protect those cut pieces

of meat from the vultures.

6. Look at some of the passages in the Old Testament that speak about the covenants God made with His people. See Genesis 12:2-3; 2 Samuel 7:12-17; Isaiah 11; Jeremiah 31:31-34; and Ezekiel 36:26-28; 37:22-28.
7. The very first agreement that God had with human beings was in the Garden of Eden. (See 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? God had said that "sin leads to death." (Genesis 2:17) Satan responded by saying: "No it doesn't. God is lying to you." (Genesis 3:1-4) The essence of the gospel is the good news about Who is telling us the truth.
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? Abraham and Ishmael were the do-it-yourself pair that thought they were going to be God's appointed people. 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? Why were male babies circumcised on the eighth day? Because of the way the liver works when a baby is born, the blood clotting is usually best on that day.
12. Were the children of Israel attempting to please God when they promised to do everything He had 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 idea of timing? 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 as recorded in Genesis 12:1-5.

How did Abraham respond? God was making some 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? Was another selected before Abraham and declined to follow God? Did—and does—God reach out to everyone?

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 with 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 as recorded 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 that 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? Or, would a verbal agreement be adequate?
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 that series of events? Does it seem likely right now that the United States will join with the Catholic Church to lead the world in opposing God's true people? Does that seem possible right now?
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? What do you think Abraham and Sarah said to each other when they realized that Sarah was not having periods any more? 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" or "He laughs"? 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? Or, does God want us to do what we can, and then, He will help us with what we cannot do for ourselves?

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? Think of the children of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. When God shook the mountain and there was a black cloud at the top spitting out lightning, don't you think that you would have promised almost anything?
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? (Genesis 16) What did Satan say when Abraham on two different occasions lied, saying Sarah was his sister? (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18) 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?

Abraham's great act of faith stands like a pillar of light, illuminating the pathway of God's servants in all succeeding ages. Abraham did not seek to excuse himself from doing the will of God. During that three days' journey he had sufficient time to reason, and to doubt God, if he was disposed to doubt. He might have reasoned that the slaying of his son would cause him to be looked upon as a murderer, a second Cain; that it would cause his teaching to be rejected and despised; and thus destroy his power to do good to his fellow men....

The sacrifice required of Abraham was not alone for his own good, nor solely for the benefit of succeeding generations; but it was also for the instruction of the sinless intelligences of heaven and of other worlds. The field of the controversy between Christ and Satan—the field on which the plan of redemption is wrought out—is the lesson book of the universe. Because Abraham had [155] shown a lack of faith in God's promises, Satan had accused him before the angels and before God of having failed to comply with the conditions of the covenant, and as unworthy of its blessings. **God desired to prove the loyalty of His servant before all heaven, to demonstrate that nothing less than perfect obedience can be accepted, and to open more fully before them the plan of salvation.**

Heavenly beings were witnesses of the scene as the faith of Abraham and the submission of Isaac were tested. The trial was far more severe than that which had been brought upon Adam. Compliance with the prohibition laid upon our first parents involved no suffering, but the command to Abraham demanded the most agonizing sacrifice. **All heaven beheld with wonder and admiration Abraham's unflinching obedience. All heaven applauded his fidelity. Satan's accusations were shown to be false.** God declared to His servant, "Now I know that thou fearest God [notwithstanding Satan's charges], seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me."

[Genesis 22:12] God's covenant, confirmed to Abraham by an oath before the intelligences of other worlds, testified that obedience will be rewarded.

It had been difficult even for the angels to grasp the mystery of redemption—to comprehend that the Commander of heaven, the Son of God, must die for guilty man. When the command was given to Abraham to offer up his son, the interest of all heavenly beings was enlisted. With intense earnestness they watched each step in the fulfillment of this command. When to Isaac's question, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham made answer, "God will provide Himself a lamb;" [Genesis 22:7-8] and when the father's hand was stayed as he was about to slay his son, and the ram which God had provided was offered in the place of **Isaac—then light was shed upon the mystery of redemption, and even the angels understood more clearly the wonderful provision that God had made for man's salvation.** 1 Peter 1:12.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 153.3-155.2. [Bold type and Bible references in brackets are added; other words in brackets are in the original.]

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? How did Moses understand these two stories? Remember that Moses wrote Genesis and Job while tending sheep in Midian before returning to Egypt? How well did Abraham and Moses understand the great controversy?

The long years amid desert solitudes were not lost. Not only was Moses gaining a preparation for the great work before him, but during this time, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, **he wrote the book of Genesis and also the book of Job**, which would be read with the deepest interest by the people of God until the close of time.—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*,* February 19, 1880, par. 14; *3SDABC** 1140.3. [Bold type is added.]

27. Paul then went on to compare the experience of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar with the experience of the children of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. What is the relationship between those 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. Peter was using the words God had used to describe His chosen people at the foot of Mount Sinai and applying those words to the Christians of his day. 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.) Or, does God want to be our Friend?
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? (Genesis 12:1-3; 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? “We can do whatever You ask us to do by ourselves!”

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 throughout 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. 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 do you think people responded when Sarah suddenly started saying, “I think I am pregnant”? 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 up in a do-it-yourself mode of religion and convince them that God has a better plan for their lives?

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