

Lesson 10 - WORKS VS. GRACE *Genesis 21:1-13*

We know that the Lord God had made a covenant with Abraham which depended upon Abraham and his wife Sarah having a child. We know that Sarah was barren, so the fulfillment of this covenant could not have been conditioned on Abraham and Sarah. It was conditioned upon God alone. We know the promise of a child to Abraham and Sarah was for the purpose of God bringing the Messiah into the world according to the flesh to establish salvation for God's elect (Jew and Gentile) by His grace through the righteousness of God established by the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord said, "*In Isaac shall thy seed be called*" (*Gen. 17:12; Rom. 9:7; Heb. 11:18; cf. Gen. 21:12*). We know that in a moment of weakness and unbelief that Sarah became discouraged because God had not yet given her and Abraham a child, and she gave her handmaid, Hagar, an Egyptian, to be joined to Abraham and conceive a child. Hagar conceived a son and called him "*Ishmael*," ("God will hear"). She began to despise Sarah, and Sarah treated her harshly. Hagar, then, ran away. The Lord told her to return and submit to Sarah. This is all recorded in *Genesis 16*.

(*Gen. 21:1-7*) - Later, here in *Genesis 21*, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 99 years old, the Lord gave him and Sarah a son named "*Isaac*," which means "laughter." This was due to the happiness of the fulfillment of the promise. This was different from Abraham and Sarah's laughter of disbelief before (*Gen. 17:17; 18:10-15*).

(*Gen. 21:8-10*) - When Isaac grew up, Ishmael, the son of Hagar the bondwoman, began to mock (laugh at and scorn) him. When Sarah saw this, she told Abraham, "*Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac*" (*Gen. 21:10*).

(*Gen. 21:11-13*) - This grieved Abraham because Ishmael was still his son. God told Abraham to listen to Sarah. Isaac was the child of promise, and "*in Isaac shall thy seed be called*" (*Gen. 21:12*). But God assured Abraham that He would take care of Hagar and Ishmael (*Gen. 21:13*). All of this may seem strange, and even cruel, to us, but in these events we can see the Lord God working His predestinated purpose in His wisdom and power to glorify Himself in the salvation of His chosen people by His grace through the Lord Jesus Christ. First, it was through Isaac that Christ would come in the flesh to do His great work as the Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer of all whom the Father had given Him before the world began (*Gal. 4:4-6*). Secondly, in these historical events, we have a great spiritual lesson that illustrates the impossibility of salvation for sinners by works of the law and the only way of salvation for sinners by God's grace based on the righteousness of Christ freely imputed and received by God-given faith. The Apostle Paul wrote of this in the New Testament. Let's turn to ***GALATIANS 4:21-31***.

(*Gal. 4:21*) - Paul wrote this to sinners who sought salvation, righteousness, and life by their works of the law. To be "*under the law*" is to be bound to keep its precepts and satisfy its justice by our efforts to keep the law. Paul had written that to be under the law is to be under a curse because it is impossible for sinners to be justified (forgiven of all our sins and declared righteous in God's sight) by works of the law (*Gal. 3:10-11*). The law can only condemn sinners based on their works.

(*Gal. 4:22-23*) - "*For it is written*" refers back to the Scriptures in the Old Testament to which we have referred above. Ishmael was born by a "*bondmaid*" (a servant or slave). Isaac was born by a "*freewoman*" (Sarah, Abraham's wife). Ishmael was born "*after the flesh*,"

which means through the physical means of man and woman. Isaac “*was by promise,*” meaning by a miracle of God’s power apart from natural means as Abraham and Sarah were both old and past the age of child-bearing. Isaac was born according to the promise God had given to Abraham.

(Gal. 4:24) - An “*allegory*” is a story, poem, picture, or even an historical event used to illustrate and teach a deeper, spiritual meaning. In this case, the two women, Hagar and Sarah, represent “*two covenants.*” Hagar represents the Old Covenant made between God and the nation Israel through Moses on “*Mount Sinai.*” This covenant “*gendereth (generated, born, brought forth) to bondage*” because it was a covenant of works. Its blessings were conditioned on the obedience of the people who were, like all people by nature, sinful and depraved and who could not keep the law because of sin. This covenant was not in existence when Hagar and Ishmael were alive, but this shows that it was God’s purpose all along to make this covenant with the natural descendants of Abraham. As we will see, Sarah represents the everlasting covenant of grace which is the one covenant of salvation conditioned on the Lord Jesus Christ. Hagar was never free, and Sarah was never in bondage. None of those under the covenant of works are free. All who live by the law are under the curse (*Gal. 3:10-13*). But the seed of Abraham by faith are free, for if the Son “*shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed*” (*John 8:36*).

(Gal. 4:25) - This is the Old Covenant law from Sinai that corresponds and describes “*Jerusalem which now is,*” i.e. Jerusalem as it was in Paul’s day. The unbelieving Israelites (the Jewish nation), represented here by the city of Jerusalem, were all “*in bondage with her children,*” i.e. all who followed her false religion of works-salvation, salvation conditioned on sinners. As Paul wrote in *Romans 9:31–10:3*, they were all lost because they sought righteousness by their works of the law, and they rejected the only way of righteousness which is the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ Who is God manifest in the flesh (*Rom. 1:16-17; 10:4*). Israel’s life under the Old Covenant law was a testimony to the sin and depravity of all people by nature and the impossibility of salvation, righteousness, and eternal life being attained by our works of the law (*Rom. 3:10-20*). It was a testimony of our need of salvation, righteousness, and eternal life by God’s free and sovereign grace, all conditioned on Christ Who was prophesied and typified in the ceremonial laws of priesthood and sacrifice.

(Gal. 4:26) - “*Jerusalem which is above*” is the heavenly Jerusalem described in its perfected glory in *Revelation 21:9-27*. This is the SPIRITUAL city and kingdom of God manifested in the true church of the Lord Jesus Christ and where the true Gospel is preached, heard, and believed under the New Covenant as established and ratified by Christ in His obedience unto death for His people. Unlike the earthly Jerusalem, this Jerusalem is not in bondage but set free from the law and from sin by Christ as the Surety, Substitute, and Redeemer of His church (*John 8:31-36; Rom. 6:1-7; 17-18; 7:4-6; Gal. 6:1*). The blood of Christ cleanses His people from all sin so that there is no condemnation for them in Him. Their debt to God’s justice has been fully paid and they are debt-free. Christ’s righteousness has been imputed to them so that they owe no debt to God’s law, and when they are brought to faith in Christ, they are liberated from the bondage of the law and set free to serve the Lord in “*newness of spirit,*” as willing, loving bondservants of Christ. God is the only Father of His people, and the church is the “*mother of us all*” in the sense that it is through the ministry of the Gospel from the church that the Holy Spirit applies the new birth to all of God’s elect, Jew and Gentile. Through her God-empowered ministry souls are brought by God to Christ, nursed up and nourished by the ministry of truth.

(Gal. 4:27) - Paul quotes *Isaiah 44:1* to show that the heavenly Jerusalem, or Gospel church state, is the mother of us all, and has been used of God to bring forth many souls to Christ, which was not the case for the Jewish nation under the Old Covenant. Even though the Lord was an “*Husband*” to them in a temporal and ceremonial way (*Jer. 31:32*), there were very few (a remnant) in each generation for 1500 years that were brought to a saving knowledge of Christ. But through the true church of the living God, spiritual Israel, God will give life to many, many children (all of His elect) and bring them to faith in Christ and repentance of dead works and idolatry. Unlike the Old Covenant where very few of the Israelites came to know the Lord spiritually, under the New Covenant, as Jeremiah prophesied, “*FOR THEY SHALL ALL KNOW ME, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more*” (*Jer. 31:34*).

(Gal. 4:28) - Just as Isaac was conceived and born by the promise of God and not by the works and power of man, we who are born again by the Holy Spirit are conceived and born again according to the power and promise of God to save all His chosen people by His grace in and by the Lord Jesus Christ (*John 1:11-13*). This promise is the promise of the Gospel wherein the righteousness of God is revealed.

(Gal. 4:29-31) - The allegory to which Paul referred shows how that when it comes to salvation and religious fellowship, works and grace CANNOT mix and cannot exist together in harmony and fellowship (*Rom. 11:5-7; Gal. 5:1-5; Eph. 2:8-9*). Just as Ishmael mocked and persecuted Isaac, those who believe in works-based religion will always hate and persecute those who believe the true Gospel of God’s grace (*John 3:19-20; 15:18–16:3*). Casting out the bondwoman and her son is the equivalent of the Lord bringing His true heirs, children of the freewoman, first, to faith in Christ and repentance of dead works. True believers are brought by God to count all but Christ and His righteousness as dead works and loss (*Php. 3:7-9*). The very things that children of the bondwoman hold dear and in which they have confidence are the things of which true believers repent and count but “*dung*” that we “*may win Christ.*” Secondly, it is the equivalent of being separated from the world and its false works-based religion. Having been brought by God to faith in Christ and true repentance of dead works, we as believers cannot speak peace or enter into fellowship with those who believe and promote their works-based religion. Ishmael’s attitude toward Isaac is the same attitude that legalists have toward the sons of grace today. You will never find a free-will legalist to be tolerant toward the Gospel of grace. The Gospel of grace destroys his very foundation and hope, which is merit, not mercy.

So, the spiritual lesson is that all notions of salvation by the works or wills of man must be cast out just as Hagar must be cast out as well as her son. The Old Covenant law from Mt. Sinai, which was a covenant of works, has ceased, having been fulfilled by Christ (*Rom. 10:4; Heb. 8; 10:1-10*). It cannot have a place in the redemption and reign of Christ Jesus, because “*if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain*” (*Gal. 2:21*). As the two women are types of the two covenants, so the two sons are types of those who live under each covenant. Ishmael represents the man who trusts his works and seeks righteousness before God by his deeds. Isaac represents the man justified by God’s grace based on Christ’s righteousness imputed and born supernaturally by the Spirit of God (*John 1:13*), brought to faith in Christ, and walks in the spirit, not the flesh. Isaac represents all whose wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption is Christ (*1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:9-10*). We are all born flesh first, then born again and will live forever. Ishmael is the son of the flesh; Isaac is the son of promise by divine power.