

**B**ack in 1990, after the Iraqi army was evicted from Kuwait, Saddam Hussein, then the President of Iraq, told his people to prepare for what he called the “mother of all battles” against the American-led coalition forces.

Though Hussein did not invent the phrase, since that time the phrase “the mother of all...” has spread through the English language and is often used to

They had no children and it didn't look like their bodies would produce one. They had given up hope—they knew their biological clocks had either stopped ticking or at the very least, needed new batteries. Ten more years passed after the initial promise of a child. Now Abram was 85 and Sarai was 75. And still no child.

So Sarai came up with what seemed like a good idea at the

## Double Trouble

Two women sharing one husband. One of them pregnant, the other one desperately wanting to be pregnant but feeling she probably never would be. It was a recipe for disaster. Storm clouds were looming.

Sarai was continually living with the reality that her servant Hagar was pregnant, all the while knowing that God had promised

# The Mother Of Us All

define not only the origin or source of something, but also the significance or the greatest example of something.

## Two Mothers

In Galatians 4:21-31, we read the story of two mothers. The historical background to Paul's lesson is recorded in Genesis 16 and 21. Paul presents an allegory of these facts. *An allegory is a symbolic interpretation of a historical facts or events.* More specifically, in the biblical sense, it is *a spiritual meaning that transcends literal facts or actual historical events.*

To set the stage, let's briefly summarize the historical facts upon which Paul draws his Christ-centered conclusions via an allegory. In Genesis 16 we read that Abram, as he was then called, and his wife Sarai, to whom God had promised a son, became impatient with God.

Back in Genesis 12 and again in Genesis 15, God had promised to make a great nation of their descendants. It was a wonderful promise, but as the clock kept ticking and the pages of the calendar kept turning, the promise became more and more unbelievable.

At the time of the promise, Abram was 75 and Sarai was 65.



time—a good human resolution to the problem. She was too old to get pregnant, too old to give birth, but Abram was a young buck filled with testosterone at the age of 85.

At 85 Abram was apparently still capable of impregnating a woman, so Sarai decided to send him to the tent of Hagar, her servant. Sarai and Abram could have a son, she reasoned, by a surrogate. Abram agreed and Hagar became pregnant.

her that she herself would one day become a mother. Sarai no doubt concluded this entire mess was God's fault. Hagar was prancing around, displaying her obvious pregnancy. Sarai started to despise her because Hagar was everything Sarai wasn't: younger, and beautifully with child.

Sarai started to mistreat Hagar, so much so that Hagar—now conspicuously pregnant—ran away. The angel of the Lord had to rescue her and bring her back

home. In due time Hagar gave birth to a son named Ishmael.

Homelife in Abram's tents became even more complicated when God finally did fulfill his promise.

Abraham, who had been renamed by God through all of this, was 100 years old and Sarah, his wife, was age 90 when finally Sarah gave birth to their son Isaac. Isaac was truly the child of promise.

There's no way on God's green earth for a 99-year-old man and an 89-year-old woman to become pregnant. *Isaac's birth obviously happened by God's grace.* No human effort could produce this child of promise, and it was for that very reason that God waited so long to give Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. God wanted to make sure there was no way that Abraham and Sarah could claim their own aged bodies had produced this child naturally.

slave woman" (Genesis 21:10).

Sarah's demand, born of envy and jealousy, filled with a good degree of animosity, was nonetheless correct in the definition she gave to Hagar. Indeed, Hagar was a slave woman.

So Abraham, to keep peace with his wife, expelled Ishmael his son, and Ishmael's mother, "that slave woman."

Before considering Paul's allegory of this historical account from Genesis, we should pause to remember the book of Galatians is Paul's "Magna Carta" of Christian freedom. He's dealing with people who have been convinced they need to please God via legalism and religious deeds. Paul is making a devastatingly true and accurate case for grace:

*"Tell me, you who want to be under the law,"* [who believe they prove their worth to God by obedience to

*woman than of her who has a husband. Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.' Therefore brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman but of the free woman"* (Galatians 4:21-31, my comment).

The purpose of this allegory, a spiritual interpretation of a factual historical event, is to demonstrate the glory of the new covenant in Christ.

- This allegory is about two women, Sarah and Hagar; two sons, Ishmael and Isaac; and two covenants.
- Sarah represents the covenant of grace.
- Sarah's son, Isaac, represents the children of the promise who are spiritually transformed and reborn by the power of God's grace.
- Hagar represents the covenant of human performance, the covenant of religion.
- Hagar's son, Ishmael, represents all those who attempt to build a relationship with God on the basis of their own righteousness rather than on the divinely given righteousness of Christ.

## **You Want to be Under the Law?**

One of the key verses in this passage is the first one: *"Tell me, you who want to be under the law* [who believe that you need to prove your worth to God by your obedience to the law] *are you not aware of what the law says?"* (Galatians 4:21, my comment). Taking the liberty to paraphrase Paul, it's as if he is saying, "So, you want to prove your obedience to God, you want to earn his favor, you want to please and appease him by keeping religious rules and regulations? You do, do you? Well now let's just take a look at the story of two women."

## **No two forces ... are more absolutely opposed than law and grace.**

It was a supernatural birth, it was a miracle of God's grace. As we'll read in Galatians, *Ishmael was born the natural way while Isaac was born as a result of God's promise.* But miracles do not always produce human happiness, do they?

### **Two Women, Two Sons**

The plot continued to thicken and the relationship between Sarah and Hagar worsened. Not only did sparks fly between Sarah and Hagar, but we read in Genesis 21 that Ishmael, the older brother of Isaac, persecuted and made fun of Isaac. The two women and the two sons could not coexist under the same roof...that is, under the same tent.

Sarah demanded that Abraham get rid of what she called, "that

the law] *"are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These things are being taken figuratively:*

*The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free: she is our mother. For it is written: Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate*

In the book of Galatians, Paul keeps reiterating the central theme of salvation: *eternal relationship with God is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone*. The purpose of the book of Galatians is to demonstrate and teach that all who trust in Christ and receive him by grace are free from the law.

The background of Galatians is that Paul is writing to a group of Christians who once fully embraced God's grace, who once fully accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ, but then, after Paul left them and continued to travel to other places, false teachers came and called God's grace into question. These false teachers insisted that God's grace, grace alone, was a pipe dream. These false teachers claimed that God expects (in fact he stipulates and demands) obedience to laws as requirements we must fulfill for salvation.

Let's pause a moment. Let me underline the importance of the central theme of Galatians. *No two forces or dynamics or philosophies are more absolutely opposed to one another than law and grace*. It is a religious heresy to suggest or demand that God loves and accepts us on the basis of his grace as well as the basis of our obedience to laws. *Any mixture, any intermingling of grace with law is a complete dilution and devaluation of God's grace*.

Spiritually speaking, such a teaching is toxic and deadly.

## Two Ways

In this allegory Paul is clearly, without equivocation, explaining there are two and only two ways to approach God.

There is the way of law and rules and requirements, of legalism and performance-based religion, of works-based righteousness. You can attempt to become holy on the basis of all the things you do.

On the other hand, God can make you holy, by his grace.

*One is the way of slavery, Paul says. The other is the way of freedom*. In this passage, Paul consistently draws the contrast to these two diametrically opposed views: on the one hand, the way of Christ-less religion, and on the other, God's grace, religion-less Christianity.

- Two contrasts.
- Two mothers, Sarah and Hagar.
- Two sons, Isaac and Ishmael.
- Two covenants, works and grace.

- Two cities, the earthly Jerusalem and religious center of the world (when Paul wrote Galatians), as over against the heavenly Jerusalem.

- Two relationships, bondage and freedom.

## The Days of Our Lives

The story that Paul relates, put in simple terms, reads almost like a soap opera, doesn't it?

One father, two mothers, two sons.

One son who was born the ordinary way, and one son born by God's intervention.

One son born by human effort, the other son born to two individuals so old and so incapable of having children that this child could only be known as a miracle baby.

One son was born by human scheming to "help" God, a child produced based on the belief that God's grace needs human help. The other son born according to God's promise.

Ishmael, the son of a slave woman, was born into slavery as the result of human attempts to solve





problems by human efforts. Isaac, the son of a free woman, born free because of God's promise, born by grace, not by works.

To make sure his point is crystal clear, Paul says that Hagar stands for Mount Sinai. Some of his readers might well have read Paul's words and asked, "Mount Sinai? Isn't that where the Ten Commandments were given?" You might be asking the same question. And Paul says, "yes, exactly."

Hagar stands for the old covenant—those who try to mix the old covenant with the new covenant. *Hagar stands for those who attempt to earn God's favor by keeping the Ten Commandments, and any of the other statutes and stipulations of the old covenant.*

Hagar, Paul says, is like the present city of Jerusalem, then and now, mired in slavery and sin for all of its religion.

In spite of all the deeds done by which the city and system of Jerusalem attempts to make itself more holy and more pleasing to God and to man, all of its religious efforts will fail!

### Our Divine Mother

Paul says Jerusalem above, heavenly Jerusalem, is free and she is our mother.

*Sarah represents grace, and Hagar represents law. Sarah stands for trusting in God to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. Hagar stands for trying to please and appease God through human efforts.*

And the sons born to them represent two ways of relating to God, on the basis of law or on the basis of grace. *There is no third way.* There is no other option!

Mount Sinai is a clear reference to the law given to Moses.

The earthly Jerusalem is a clear reference to the religion at that time, headquartered in the city of Jerusalem, a religion that depended on law-keeping as a means of salvation.

Sarah stands for the gospel, for the promise of God given to us by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sarah stands for God's grace giving us his favor, his mercy, his forgiveness and his love freely.

*Here's the fundamental difference between Christ-less*

*religion and authentic Christ-centered relationship with God.*

One man had two sons by two mothers. The two mothers represent two ways of relating to God, two covenants; one old, one new. The two mothers represent law and grace. Law produces slavery and bondage. Grace produces freedom in Christ.

*There is no equivocation, there is no other option.*

Just as Sarah realized that she and Hagar could not live in the same household, just as Ishmael, the slave child of law could not abide God's grace as exemplified by Isaac and thus he persecuted him, we too must not be under any illusions. We may not choose to live our lives both ways. It will be one or the other. *Choose law or choose grace—Mount Sinai or the cross of Christ.*

Do not allow yourself to be deceived by some religiously fabricated compromise that would dilute the purity and beauty and holiness of God's grace by adding old covenant, law-based, ritualistic, law-keeping elements. *God does not recognize any third way.*

And realize this—the chief opposition and objections to God's grace do not come from those who do not claim to be Christians at all, like Buddhists or Muslims. The chief objections to God's grace come from those who call themselves Christians, but they are trapped by legalism and are in the swamps of Christ-less religion.

*No one hates God's grace so much as those who work hard to convince God that their efforts are holy and righteous.* It was religion that hated Jesus.

We must not compromise with God's grace, my friends. We must not allow God's grace to be watered down. Each of us will either be children of faith, grace and of the promise, and thus free in Christ, or we will be slaves of law in bondage to religion. □