

A New Covenant

Bible Readings = Hebrews 12:18-29; Galatians 4:21-31

Introduction:

- (1) Before Easter we were considering the theme of a new exodus, which lies behind Paul's understanding of what has happened to us in Christ.
- (2) We saw that the promise of the exodus was embedded in God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 15:12-16), and that the promises to the nations therefore have within them the prophetic witness to a Passover through which their blessing would come.
- (3) In the cutting of the covenant in Genesis 15 we saw that the security for the promises lay in the action of God himself, who guaranteed them at the cost of his own blood.

This week's passage (Gal. 4:21-31) follows on directly from this. Paul speaks of two mountains, two women, two offspring, and two cities, but all of this hinges on their being two covenants. The burden of his message is that in Christ we belong to a New Covenant, which is, in fact, the covenant of Promise given to Abraham.

1. The Structure of the Allegory

- (1) Paul makes it clear that he is speaking allegorically (Gal. 4:24).
 - It is possible that this was in response to the argument of the troublesome teachers among the Galatian churches, who may have used the fact that there were two sons born of Abraham to suggest that Paul was inferior (i.e. he was like Ishmael... See F F Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 218f.).
 - In rabbinical interpretation, the message would have been Isaac = Jews; Ishmael = Gentiles; Jews = child of free woman and Gentiles = child of slave woman; Jews = liberated by knowledge of Torah and Gentiles = in bondage to sin; Jews = people of covenant and Gentiles receive mercies (like Ishmael) but stand in no covenant relation to God. Paul turns this entirely on its head.
 - This curious passage, then, may in fact be the heart of the matter from Paul's opponents' point of view.
 - Allegory is a technique for conveying meaning, using stories or figures to convey truth beyond themselves. An allegory = 'a story, play, poem, picture, etc in which the characters represent moral or spiritual ideas or messages' (Chambers Dictionary).
 - Rob often reads part of an extended allegory to us: Pilgrim's Progress!
 - We see Jesus using allegory in some of his parables, and this becomes clear particularly where we see the parable interpreted by Jesus himself (e.g. the sower and the seed).
- (2) Behind the entire allegory in this passage (in all its various parts) is this: there is a fundamental and irreconcilable difference between that which comes by promise and that which comes by works of the law (i.e. through the flesh).

- There is an irreconcilable difference between these two positions, and this point has been made in various ways throughout the letter, and will be again (e.g. Fruit of the Spirit vs Deeds of the Flesh).
- This ties in with the dualities that appear in many places in Paul's thinking (e.g. Flesh and Spirit; Darkness and Light; Adam and Christ; Law and Grace; Sin and Grace; Condemnation and Justification; etc.)
- In Particular, the hinge here is that there are two **covenants**. Paul speaks of two mountains, two women, two offspring, and two cities, but all of this hinges on their being *two covenants*. One is therefore linked to Promise, and the other to the Flesh.
 - Return the content of the covenant(s) later.
- (3) Here, Paul's allegory is based on real persons, places and events.
 - Hagar and Sarah (Sarai); Ishmael and Isaac; Mt. Sinai (Mosaic covenant) = Jerusalem of Paul's day compared to Jerusalem above (free).
- (4) The story may be familiar to us, but needs to be recounted (at least briefly) for us to understand the connections
 - The story of Abraham and Hagar's union and the birth of Ishmael, is found in Genesis 16. At a later point, Ishmael and Hagar are sent out of the household, after the birth of Isaac, the record of which can be found in Genesis 21.
 - The plan to generate an heir through Hagar had come from Sarai (as she was then called) and similar such arrangements have been attested to in the ANE (see Walton, *Genesis*, p. 445f.)
 - This arrangement was only possible because of Hagar's status as a handmaid to Sarai (i.e. a female slave; albeit she was treated as a 'wife' after this according to Gen. 16:3).

Paul passes no judgement on the arrangement, nor on Sarai's actions (she treated her harshly, see Gen. 16:5; but for her part, Hagar despised Sarah, see Gen. 16:4 cf. 21:9), but simply reports the events, so well known to the people of Israel.
 - Paul's logic is that because the son from through her womb came from a slave, the son was also a slave. By contrast, the son born of Sarai (Sarah) would be free, since she was free.
 - The Genesis narrative makes it clear that Ishmael received promises from God and certain prophecies were made about him and his descendants (e.g. Gen. 16:10-13; 21:13, 18, 20), but he was not the promised child through whom the covenant would be fulfilled (Gen 21:12 cf. 17:19, 21; Rom. 9:7; Heb. 11:18).
 - Indeed, the Promised son would not simply promised in the face of Abraham's age, but Sarah's barrenness (see Gen. 17:15-22). At every turn the circumstances would confirm that the covenant promises would be fulfilled by the Lord, not by any human efforts.
- (5) But also here, in the allegory, Paul uses another set of relationships: the mountains of Sinai and Jerusalem (the city set on a on a hill therefore always envisaged a mountain = Mt. Zion)
 - We have seen the repeated emphasis on the enslavement of the Law earlier in the letter (e.g. Gal. 3:22, 23, 24; 4:1, 3, 7 etc. cf. 5:1), and here Paul equates the

existing Jerusalem of his day, with Mt Sinai, which is the equivalent of being from Hagar's line, as children of slavery, born according to the flesh.

- At each point the converse is implied with the children of Promise. These have no earthly city, and therefore belong to "Jerusalem above". They are pilgrims and wanderers on the earth.
- However, what is of central importance is that this whole mass of images is actually describing *two covenants*.

2. The New Covenant Supersedes the Old

(1) The very structure of our Bibles tells us that there is a New Covenant.

- The New was prepared for by the Old, and comes out of it, but is not identical with it.
- Both readings (from Galatians and Hebrews) emphasise the newness and finality of the New Covenant.
 - Both situations were dealing with *reversionism* (though in different ways).
 - Both emphasise the finality of the work of Christ for the establishment of a new situation (in Hebrews, see, for example Heb. 7:22; 8:6ff.; 9:15ff.; 10:15ff.; 12:24; etc.)
 - Both situations see the outcome of the New Covenant as love, and any reversionist tendency will not issue in love (see, for example, Heb. 13:1 cf. Gal. 5:1 in their contexts).

(2) The old covenant (i.e. that formed with the people of Israel, with Moses as the mediator on Mt Sinai) served its purpose (this is the argument of Gal. 3), but did not replace the covenant with Abraham, i.e. the covenant based on Promise.

- The New Covenant is the final revelation of the character of the God of Promise, and the promises of God bound up in the covenant with Abraham are all explicated and confirmed in the New Covenant,
 - Not least, the self-rendering of God the covenant maker (who himself passed through the cut animals in Gen. 15).
 - In the New Covenant the promises to the nations are fulfilled especially as seen in the giving of the Holy Spirit to the nations who believe (as in Gal. 3:14).

(3) The Old Covenant is mostly shown to be insufficient by what it could not do, such as the final cleansing of sin, the opening up of the promises to all the nations, the gift of the Spirit etc. Most of all, it was insufficient because it had not been inaugurated by the Son in his own blood.

- This **is** the new covenant in my blood Luke 22:20:. Covenant of freedom from sin and the knowledge of God (the following chapter is going to tell us more about that freedom), as in Jer. 31:31ff.
- But now that the New Covenant **had** been inaugurated and the nations were the object of the covenant grace.
 - Now the covenant had been opened up to the ends of the earth (as had been promised to Abraham). The national covenant with Israel, under Moses, was necessary, as the husk to the kernel of the seed, but now it had served its purpose.

- In Christ we have come to a new mountain, where God the consuming fire, has consumed our sin!
 - The outcome of that process is the gift of the Spirit for all mankind (cf. Gal. 3:14 and 3:26-29) that we may live in the love that we have received (Heb. 13:1ff. cf. Gal. 5:1ff.)