

The Gospel In Galatians: Lesson 10

# The Two Covenants

**Memory Text:** “But the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.”  
(Galatians 4:26)

**Setting The Stage:** (Bible Dispensations – The Cloud Church – God had different methods of saving people at different times in history)

While God did work in different ways with people of different time periods, God did not have varying ways of saving people. When we studied Galatians 3:15-19, we clearly saw that God has only had one way of saving people, and that is by grace through faith. No one ever has or ever will be justified by keeping the Ten Commandments. Justification only comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Sadly, the same proponents of dispensationalism believe that the law of God was done away with. Specifically though, they really say that the fourth commandment was nailed to Jesus cross when He died for the sins of the world. Their concern is not really with the other nine commandments, but this one. The rationale they use to justify their belief is that when the new covenant was ratified at the cross, the old covenant faded away. While this is right, their definition for what constitutes the old covenant is wrong. To dispensationalists, the old covenant is the law of God.

## Covenant Basics

**Galatians 4:21-31.** Paul points to the law (in this case the law of Moses, or the Pentateuch), to which the Galatians desired to be under by their insistence that one could only be saved by the works of the law (namely circumcision), to help them see their folly. That same “law” which they pointed to as justification for their own beliefs was in fact the same “law” that, if they had properly studied, would have shown them that justification comes by faith in God’s promise not in the law God gave them.

In the “law”, or the writings of Moses, was written the true account of the births of Ishmael and Isaac. Paul takes this story and shows that the boys, both sons of Abraham, represented the two covenants. Because the one covenant came from Mount Sinai where God issued the Ten Commandments (v. 24) and was to be replaced with the other, or new covenant (vv. 30, 31), then (as is said by dispensationalist proponents), there is no need now for the Ten Commandments.

We’ll come back to this story in a moment, but let’s step back for a moment to understand something about the covenants. To understand Paul’s allegory we have to go back to the Old Testament.

**What is a covenant?** It's simply a term that refers to a binding contract or agreement. "For thousands of years covenants played an integral role in defining the relationships between people and nations across the Near East."

### **The Everlasting Covenant**

*The Bible presents two basic covenants, the everlasting covenant (which later came to be known as the new) and the old. A failure to properly distinguish between the new and old covenants has given rise to strange and fanciful teaching.*

**Ezekiel 16:60:** "Nevertheless I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you."

The everlasting covenant is simply God's arrangement for our salvation. We could say that this term is synonymous with "the plan of redemption". This covenant was made with Adam in the Garden of Eden and then later renewed to Abraham.

### **Adamic Covenant**

Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Obedience was the condition for eternal life. Because Adam's nature was inclined toward obedience, God didn't ask for the impossible. But then Adam and Eve did what was unnatural and ate the fruit of the tree they doomed humanity to death and a nature bent toward disobedience. From that point on no person could render obedience in and of themselves. But before the foundation of the world, God had a plan in place that, based solely on grace, would provide freedom from death and divine aid to obey God's law once again.

**Genesis 3:15:** "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

This verse gives us the first promise of a coming Savior who would restore humanity to their lost position. What did humanity need? 1) They needed forgiveness, which could only be offered through the Son of God's life, death, and resurrection. 2) They also needed their characters brought back into harmony with the divine image. Through Jesus, divine power would be granted, which if received by faith, would expel sin from the life, and incorporate the righteousness of Jesus into the heart.

### **Abrahamic Covenant**

God renewed the everlasting covenant to Abraham as its truth was at risk of becoming lost and therefore unheard of.

**Galatians 3:8:** "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed."

**The gospel in the OT?** I thought the gospel could only be found in the NT! Apparently not. Abraham had it preached to him. And who preached it to him? It came to him from God. So would there be anything wrong with this gospel? Absolutely not! When did God preach the gospel to Abraham. He did so in relation to the covenant He made with Abraham.

**Genesis 12:3:** “I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

**Galatians 3:16:** “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ.” (cf. Gen. 12:7; see also Isa. 53; Ps. 31:1-5; Zech. 3:1-4, etc.)

In the NT this covenant came to be known as the new covenant, and the reason for that was because the ratification of this covenant (by the death of Jesus on the cross), occurred after the ratification of the old covenant, which occurred at Mt. Sinai.

### **The Old Covenant**

The old covenant was made at Sinai. A natural question to ask at this point would be, **why was another arrangement made if the everlasting covenant was adequate?** The old covenant was never intended to take the place of the everlasting covenant; nether was it intended to be another means of salvation.

Because God’s people had to a large extent lost their knowledge of God and His requirements, their reeducation would require time. Spiritual truth is only gradually comprehended. So God began His instruction at Sinai and it was stated objectively. They were to obey Him and in obeying they would be God’s special people (Ex. 19:5). But they didn’t fully understand all that was involved yet they agreed to the terms and conditions (v. 8).

Through the sanctuary and its services God sought to teach His people how obedience could be acquired (through the everlasting covenant – the promise of the coming of the Messiah). Unfortunately, His people never made it beyond the initial instruction, and so generally speaking, they sought to comply to externals to earn favor with God. God tried to steer them in the right direction, but in the most part they would not listen or learn.

### **What The Old Covenant Is Not**

Those who say that the Ten Commandments are the old covenant quote from both Galatians (which we have read already) and Hebrews. Because the old covenant originated at Sinai where the Ten Commandments were issued and because the Ten Commandments is referred to as a covenant, it is said that there is no need for the Ten Commandments anymore.

It is true that the Ten Commandments are called a “covenant” (Deut. 4:13; 9:9-11; 1 Kings 8:21, 9). However, this is not the covenant that was “passed away” with the coming of the new covenant. It is impossible to apply Paul’s description of the old covenant to the Ten Commandments.

**Hebrews 8:6, 7, 13:** “But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second...In that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”

*There were several things wrong with the old covenant:* 1) There was something wrong with the promises. Are there poor promises in the Ten Commandments? There are no poor promises in the Ten Commandments (cf. Eph. 6:1-3). 2) The old covenant was also faulty. Is there any fault with the Ten Commandments? There is no fault with the Ten Commandments. The Bible says the law of the Lord is perfect and they are holy, just, and good (Ps. 19:7; Rom. 7:12). 3) Time made the covenant void, but has the Ten Commandments been made void? Paul (the same man who wrote Hebrews) actually wrote that faith established the law (Rom. 3:31).

### **What The Old Covenant Is**

**Exodus 19:2-8.** The old covenant, in which the people did the promising, was repeated twice more (Ex. 24:3-8), and it was ratified with the blood of animal sacrifices. This is the same covenant that Paul referred to in Hebrews, which was said to be faulty, based on poor promises, gendered to bondage and vanished away, because, as we will see, the people never kept their promises. They failed to live up to their part of the covenant, thereby forfeiting the promises God made to them.

### **What Is The New Covenant?**

**Jeremiah 31:31-33:** “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

This is the covenant based on better promises. Who is doing the promising? God promises. He said, “I will.” But the people’s promises were faulty and resulted in bondage. Let’s look at the differences between old and new covenants:

**Hebrews 8:6-10:** “But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant [made in Ex. 19 & 24] had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them [the people who had broken their promises to obey], He says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, says

the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah..." And then he quotes Jer. 31:31-33. God promises, and we can trust Him to come through on His promises.

**What is the fundamental difference between the old and new covenants?** The people sought to perform the spiritual duties through their own effort. They said, "We will do." But no one could do it then and we can't do it now.

**Romans 7:14:** "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin."

**Romans 8:1-4:** "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

God's new covenant people are made spiritual through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit Who writes the spiritual law on our hearts, thus making obedience possible.

**Hebrews 13:20, 21:** "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

The old covenant of "we will do" brings nothing but failure, but the proposition of God "working in you...through Jesus Christ" brings victory. There is no other way the law can be lived out in the life.

**If this is true (which it is), what becomes of the arguments claiming God's law was done away with?** Would God write the principles of his abrogated law on our hearts and minds? Would God include obedience to an abolished law in the new covenant? New covenant people are those who are not in rebellion against God's law.

### **Ishmael & Isaac**

The truth that the old covenant is based on the principle of what man attempts to do alone and fails (as contrasted with the new covenant, which is based on what God does with man) is shown in Paul's illustration of the two wives of Abraham: Hagar, the wife of bondage with her son Ishmael, and Sarah, the wife of freedom, with her son Isaac.

**Galatians 4:21-25.** God told Abraham that Sarah, his wife, would bear him a son (Gen. 17:19). Abraham's body was "dead" (Rom. 4:19) and Sarah was not only barren but she was "past age" (Heb. 11:11). These facts notwithstanding, Sarah conceived a son in her old age (Gen. 21:1, 2). Was that a miracle? Absolutely! It required a supernatural act of God to bring this son into being. Paul calls him the child of promise. He was not born after the "flesh" but after the "Spirit" (Gal. 4:29).

The flesh is weak and cannot obey the law. For obedience to occur there must be the supernatural working of the power of God as in the case of Isaac. All attempts go it alone will not work but produce children of bondage. So instead of Paul's allegory teaching that the law is done away with, it in fact teaches that through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit provision is made for obedience to the law.

Ishmael represents those who are "born after the flesh" and are not "subject to the law of God neither indeed can be." (Rom. 8:7) Isaac represents those "born after the Spirit" in whom "the righteousness of the law" is being fulfilled (Rom. 8:4). So commandment breakers are children of bondage while commandment keepers (through Christ) are the children of the free.

**John 8:34, 35:** "Jesus answered them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever [reminiscent of Gal. 4:30]. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.'

**Who is the servant of sin?** He who commits sin. And what is sin? "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4) Then who are the Ishmaelites of the old covenant? They are those who live in transgression to God's holy law.

In Paul's allegory Ishmael persecuted Isaac. Revelation 12:17 reminds us that "The dragon was wroth with the women and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." There is a last day parallel to this allegory.

**Summary:** God promised Abraham a son. After a long time waiting there was no son. Instead of waiting longer and trusting God to solve the problem, Sarah told Abraham to have a child with her servant Hagar (Gen. 16:1, 2, 15) Because Abraham saw that Sarah was barren and that God would have to work a miracle, he did as Sarah told him to do and undertook the impossible on the basis of "we will do" through Hagar. The result was a child of bondage whom God cast out and could not accept.

Here we see the principle of the old covenant and Israel's response to Moses at the foot of Sinai. Instead of saying, "Lord we will do it," they should have said, "Lord we want to do it, but in our strength we cannot. Will you help us? Will you work out your own obedience in us?" Are you a child of the bondwoman or the child of the free?