

# The Two Covenants



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gal. 4:21–31; Gen. 1:28; 2:2, 3; 3:15; 15:1–6; Exod. 6:2–8; 19:3–6.*

**Memory Text:** “But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother” (*Galatians 4:26, NIV*).

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.

However common that view may be, it is wrong. Salvation was never by obedience to the law. Biblical Judaism, from the start, was always a religion of grace. The legalism that Paul was confronting in Galatia was a perversion, not just of Christianity but of the Old Testament itself. The two covenants are not matters of time; instead, they are reflective of human attitudes. They represent two different ways of trying to relate to God, ways that go back to Cain and Abel. The old covenant represents those who, like Cain, mistakenly rely on their own obedience as a means of pleasing God. In contrast, the new covenant represents the experience of those who, like Abel, rely wholly upon God's grace to do all that He has promised.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 2.

## Covenant Basics

Many regard Paul's interpretation of the history of Israel in Galatians 4:21–31 as the most difficult passage in his letter. That's because it is a highly complex argument that requires a broad knowledge of Old Testament persons and events. The first step in making sense of this passage is to have a basic understanding of an Old Testament concept central to Paul's argument: the concept of the covenant.

The Hebrew word translated as “covenant” is *berit*. It occurs nearly three hundred times in the Old Testament and refers to a binding contract, agreement, or treaty. For thousands of years, covenants played an integral role in defining the relationships between people and nations across the ancient Near East. Covenants often involved the slaughter of animals as part of the process of making (literally “cutting”) a covenant. The killing of animals symbolized what would happen to a party that failed to keep its covenant promises and obligations.

“From Adam to Jesus, God dealt with humanity by means of a series of covenant promises that centered on a coming Redeemer and which culminated in the Davidic covenant (Gen. 12:2, 3; 2 Sam. 7:12–17; Isa. 11). To Israel in Babylonian captivity God promised a more effective ‘new covenant’ (Jer. 31:31–34) in connection with the coming of the Davidic Messiah (Ezek. 36:26–28; 37:22–28).”—Hans K. LaRondelle, *Our Creator Redeemer* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2005), p. 4.

**What** was the basis of God's original covenant with Adam in the Garden of Eden before sin? *Gen. 1:28; 2:2, 3, 15–17.*

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While marriage, physical labor, and the Sabbath were part of the general provisions of the covenant of Creation, its main focal point was God's command not to eat the forbidden fruit. The basic nature of the covenant was “obey and live!” With a nature created in harmony with God, the Lord did not require the impossible. Obedience was humanity's natural inclination. Yet, Adam and Eve chose to do what was not natural, and, in that act, they not only ruptured the covenant of Creation, they made its terms impossible for humans now corrupted by sin. God Himself would restore the relationship that Adam and Eve had lost. He did this by enacting a covenant of grace based on the eternal promise of a Savior (*Gen. 3:15*).

**Read Genesis 3:15, the first gospel promise in the Bible. Where in that verse do you see an inkling of the hope that we have in Christ?**

## The Abrahamic Covenant

**What** covenant promises did God make to Abram in Genesis 12:1–5? What was Abram’s response?

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God’s initial promises to Abram make up one of the more powerful passages in the Old Testament. These verses all are about God’s grace. It is God, not Abram, who makes the promises. Abram has done nothing to earn or merit God’s favor, nor is there any indication that suggests that God and Abram have somehow worked together to come up with this agreement. God does all the promising. Abram, in contrast, is called to have faith in the surety of God’s promise, not some flimsy so-called “faith” but a faith that is manifested by his leaving his extended family (at the age of 75!) and heading to the land God promised.

“With the ‘blessing’ pronounced on Abraham and through him on all human beings, the Creator renewed His redemptive purpose. He had ‘blessed’ Adam and Eve in Paradise (Gen. 1:28, 5:2) and then ‘blessed Noah and his sons’ after the flood (9:1). This way God clarified His earlier promise of a Redeemer who will redeem humanity, destroy evil, and restore Paradise (Gen. 3:15). God confirmed His promise to bless ‘all peoples’ in His universal outreach.”—Hans K. LaRondelle, *Our Creator Redeemer*, pp. 22, 23.

**After** ten years of waiting for the promised son to be born, what questions did Abram have about God’s promise? *Gen. 15:1–6*.

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It often is easy to glorify Abram as the man of faith who never had any questions or doubts. Scripture, however, paints a different picture. Abram believed, but he also had questions along the way. His faith was a growing faith. Like the father in Mark 9:24, Abram basically said to God in Genesis 15:8, “I believe, help my unbelief.” In response, God graciously assured Abram of the certainty of His promise by formally entering into a covenant with him (*Gen. 15:7–18*). What makes this passage so surprising is not the fact that God enters a covenant with Abram but the extent to which God was willing to condescend to do so. Unlike other rulers in the ancient Near East, who balked at the idea of making binding promises with their servants, God not only gave His word, but, by symbolically passing through the pieces of slaughtered animals, He staked His very life on it. Of course, Jesus ultimately gave His life on Calvary to make His promise a reality.

**What are some areas no in which you have to reach out by faith and believe in what seems impossible? How can you learn to keep holding on, no matter what?**

## Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar

**Why** does Paul have such a disparaging view of the incident with Hagar? *Gal. 4:21–31, Genesis 16*. What crucial point about salvation is Paul making through his use of this Old Testament story?

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Hagar's place in the Genesis story directly is related to Abram's failure to believe God's promise. As an Egyptian slave in Abram's household, Hagar likely came into Abram's possession as one of the many gifts Pharaoh gave to him in exchange for Sarai, an event associated with Abram's first act of unbelief in God's promise (*Gen. 12:11–16*).

After waiting ten years for the promised child to be born, Abram and Sarai remained childless. Concluding that God needed their "help," Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a concubine. Although strange to us today, Sarai's plan was quite ingenious. According to ancient customs, a female slave legally could serve as a surrogate mother for her barren mistress. Thus, Sarai could count any child born from her husband and Hagar as her own. While the plan did produce a child, it was not the child God promised.

In this story we have a powerful example of how when faced with daunting circumstances, even a great man of God had a lapse of faith. In Genesis 17:18, 19, Abraham pleaded with God to accept Ishmael as his heir; the Lord, of course, rejected that offer. The only "miraculous" element in the birth of Ishmael was Sarah's willingness to share her husband with another woman! There was nothing out of the ordinary about the birth of a child to this woman, a child born "according to the flesh." Had Abraham trusted in what God had promised him instead of letting the circumstances overcome that trust, none of this would have happened, and a lot of grief would have been avoided.

**In** contrast to the birth of Ishmael, look at the circumstances surrounding Isaac's birth. *Gen. 17:15–19; 18:10–13; Heb. 11:11, 12*. Why did these circumstances require so much faith of Abraham and Sarah?

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**In what ways has your lack of faith in God's promises caused you some pain? How can you learn from these mistakes to take God at His word, no matter what? What choices can you make that can help strengthen your ability to trust God's promises?**

## Hagar and Mount Sinai (*Gal. 4:21–31*)

**What** type of covenant relationship did God want to establish with His people at Sinai? What similarities does it share with God's promise to Abraham? *Exod. 6:2–8, 19:3–6, Deut. 32:10–12.*

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God desired to share the same covenant relationship with the children of Israel at Sinai that He shared with Abraham. In fact, similarities exist between God's words to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 and His words to Moses in Exodus 19. In both cases, God emphasizes what He will do for His people. He does not ask the Israelites to promise to do anything to earn His blessings; instead, they are to obey as a response to those blessings. The Hebrew word translated "to obey" in Exodus 19:5 literally means "to hear." God's words do not imply righteousness by works. On the contrary, He wanted Israel to have the same faith that characterized Abraham's response to His promises (at least most of the time!).

**If** the covenant relationship God offered to Israel on Sinai is similar to the one given to Abraham, why does Paul identify Mount Sinai with the negative experience of Hagar? *Exod. 19:7–25; Heb. 8:6, 7.*

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The covenant at Sinai was intended to point out the sinfulness of humanity and the remedy of God's abundant grace, which was typified in the sanctuary services. The problem with the Sinai covenant was not on God's part but rather on the people's part because of their faulty promises (*Heb. 8:6*). Instead of responding to God's promises in humility and faith, the Israelites responded with self-confidence. " 'All that the Lord hath spoken we will do' " (*Exod. 19:8*). After living as slaves in Egypt for more than four hundred years, they had no true concept of God's majesty nor of the extent of their own sinfulness. In the same way that Abraham and Sarah tried to help God fulfill His promises, the Israelites sought to turn God's covenant of grace into a covenant of works. Hagar symbolizes Sinai in that both reveal human attempts at salvation by works.

Paul is not claiming that the law given at Sinai was evil or abolished. He is concerned with the Galatians' legalistic misapprehension of the law. "Instead of serving to convict them of the absolute impossibility of pleasing God by law-keeping, the law fostered in them a deeply entrenched determination to depend on personal resources in order to please God. Thus the law did not serve the purposes of grace in leading the Judaizers to Christ. Instead, it closed them off from Christ." —O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 181.

## Ishmael and Isaac Today

Paul's brief sketch of Israel's history was designed to counter the arguments made by his opponents who claimed that they were the true descendants of Abraham, and that Jerusalem—the center of Jewish Christianity and the law—was their mother. The Gentiles, they charged, were illegitimate; if they wanted to become true followers of Christ, they must first become sons of Abraham by submitting to the law of circumcision.

The truth, Paul says, is the opposite. These legalists are not the sons of Abraham but illegitimate sons, like Ishmael. By placing their trust in circumcision, they are relying on “the flesh,” as Sarah did with Hagar and as the Israelites did with God's law at Sinai. Gentile believers, however, are the sons of Abraham not by natural descent but, like Isaac, by the supernatural. “Like Isaac they were a fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham . . . ; like Isaac, their birth into freedom was the effect of divine grace; like Isaac, they belong to the column of the covenant of promise.”—James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 256.

**What** will the true descendants of Abraham face in this world? *Gal. 4:28–31, Gen. 21:8–12.*

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Being the promised child brought Isaac not only blessings but also opposition and persecution. In reference to persecution, Paul has in mind the ceremony in Genesis 21:8–10, in which Isaac is being honored and Ishmael appears to make fun of him. The Hebrew word in Genesis 21:9 literally means “to laugh,” but Sarah's reaction suggests Ishmael was mocking or ridiculing Isaac. While Ishmael's behavior might not sound very significant to us today, it reveals the deeper hostilities involved in a situation in which the family birthright is at stake. Many rulers in antiquity tried to secure their position by eliminating potential rivals, including siblings (*Judg. 9:1–6*). However, although Isaac faced opposition, he also enjoyed all the privileges of love, protection, and favor that went along with being his father's heir.

As spiritual descendants of Isaac, we should not be surprised when we suffer hardship and opposition, even from within the church family itself.

**In what ways have you suffered persecution, especially from those closest to you, because of your faith? Or ask yourself this hard question: might you be guilty of persecuting others for *their* faith? Think about it.**

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Law and the Covenants,” pp. 363–373, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“But if the Abrahamic covenant contained the promise of redemption, why was another covenant formed at Sinai? In their bondage the people had to a great extent lost the knowledge of God and of the principles of the Abrahamic covenant. . . .

“God brought them to Sinai; He manifested His glory; He gave them His law, with the promise of great blessings on condition of obedience: ‘If ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then . . . ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.’ Exodus 19:5, 6. The people did not realize the sinfulness of their own hearts, and that without Christ it was impossible for them to keep God’s law; and they readily entered into covenant with God. . . . Yet only a few weeks passed before they broke their covenant with God, and bowed down to worship a graven image. They could not hope for the favor of God through a covenant which they had broken; and now, seeing their sinfulness and their need of pardon, they were brought to feel their need of the Saviour revealed in the Abrahamic covenant and shadowed forth in the sacrificial offerings. Now by faith and love they were bound to God as their deliverer from the bondage of sin. Now they were prepared to appreciate the blessings of the new covenant.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 371, 372.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Is your own walk with the Lord more of an “old covenant” or a “new covenant” type? How can you tell the difference?
- 2 What are some of the issues in your local church that are causing tension within its body? How are they being resolved? Though you might find yourself being the victim of “persecution,” how can you make sure, too, that you aren’t the one doing the persecuting? Where’s the fine line there? (See also *Matt. 18:15–17*.)
- 3 How many times have you made promises to the Lord that you would not do this or that, only to do this or that? How does this sad fact help you understand the meaning of grace?

**Summary:** The stories of Hagar, Ishmael, and the children of Israel at Sinai illustrate the foolishness of trying to rely upon our own efforts to accomplish what God has promised. This method of self-righteousness is referred to as the old covenant. The new covenant is the everlasting covenant of grace first established with Adam and Eve after sin, renewed with Abraham, and ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

## Joy in the Morning: Part 1

Mary sat weeping on the roadside outside her home, rocking her young son in her arms. He had been sick almost since birth. Mary took him to many doctors, but still he suffered from terrible coughing spells. Twice he'd been hospitalized, but even the strongest antibiotic didn't end the cough that plagued him. The last doctor had ordered tests and X-rays, but Mary had no more money.

For three months her husband, a carpenter, hadn't found work. They had borrowed thousands of rupees to pay their rent and buy food. Life seemed hopeless. Her husband was depressed; he felt powerless to provide for his family. He saw no way out except to end their miserable lives. When he had suggested suicide, she became angry; but as trouble mounted, she began to think that it might be their only way out.

As another coughing spell awakened her little boy, Mary saw a neighbor, Madesh, walking toward her. Madesh stopped when she saw Mary crying. "What's wrong?" Madesh asked tenderly.

"It's Daniel," replied Mary. "He's still sick, and I have no money." Madesh knew of Mary's problems; she had visited Mary several times since her son was born and had tried to help. She also had prayed for the family.

"Don't worry," she said. "Our Jesus can help. Come to church with me, and my pastor will pray for you." It was Sabbath morning, and Madesh was on her way to church.

Mary said nothing. She dried her tears and followed Madesh. When they arrived at the church, the pastor welcomed them. When Madesh told the pastor of Mary's problems, he assured her that he would pray for her son after the service.

Mary sat quietly through Sabbath School; she had never seen such a service. Daniel slept in her arms. She listened to the pastor's sermon, wondering if he would give her medicine for her son.

When the service ended, Mary remained in the pew waiting. After the pastor had greeted everyone, he returned to the sanctuary and sat down beside Mary. Placing his hand on Daniel's head, he prayed that God would heal the child and show this family His power. Then the pastor gave Mary an envelope filled with herbs, telling her to mix them with honey or water and give it to the boy.

Madesh encouraged Mary as they walked home. In Mary's house Madesh mixed the herbs with hot water because the family had no honey. They spoon-fed it to little Daniel. Madesh prayed with Mary, then went home.

*To be continued.*

## *The Lesson in Brief*

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► **Key Text:** *Galatians 4:26*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Compare and contrast the old and new covenants with Hagar and Sarah's children and their relationships with Abraham.

**Feel:** Nurture attitudes of appreciation, faith, and love to God for our deliverance from sin.

**Do:** Depend on God's covenant promises.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Ishmael and Isaac**

**A** How did those who insisted on circumcision put themselves in the camp of the natural-born Ishmael rather than the miracle-born Isaac?

**B** What other biblical examples illustrate our attempts at working things out on our own?

**C** How did Abraham in this story illustrate our tendency to rely on the old rather than the new covenant?

**II. Feel: Appreciating the New Covenant**

**A** How did the Israelites' failure to keep their promise at Mount Sinai teach them their need to depend on God's power?

**B** How does feeling our great need for God's help awaken trust and love?

**III. Do: Children of Promise**

**A** How are we tempted to create our own children of promise, as Abraham did, rather than let God work miraculously for us?

**B** What opposition do we face because we are children of the new, rather than the old, covenant?

► **Summary:** Like Abraham, Hagar, and Israel at Mount Sinai, we often are tempted to try to make God's Word come true. But not only do our own efforts not work, they also bring on tragedy. God's grace brings blessings rather than tragedy.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** *The old covenant attitude is one of making things happen, while the new covenant attitude trusts God to bring about His purpose.*

Athletes approach sports differently. There are athletes so intent on *making things happen* that they force the action, even to the point of cheating when and where they can.

Others “let the game come to them.” They are confident about the system or game plan instituted by their coaching staff and concern themselves only with their assigned roles in executing that plan. These athletes encounter success not because they “made things happen” or “forced the actions” but because they relied upon their coaches’ wisdom and experience, accepting their training procedures and assigned roles. This approach demands patiently trusting the coaches’ leading and being prepared to execute the coaches’ plans whenever opportunities present themselves.

God’s followers throughout history have exemplified both approaches. Ancient Israelites self-confidently declared their intention to execute God’s will perfectly. Abraham panicked because he believed that God’s game clock was expiring, and rather than patiently waiting upon the divine *game plan*, he took upon himself the responsibility for producing offspring. This assistance merely complicated things. Fortunately, the spiritually maturing Abraham experienced a dramatic reversal when He surrendered Isaac. This week’s study vividly contrasts these conflicting approaches to spirituality.

**Consider This:** What is the difference between the old covenant attitude and the new covenant attitude? How do we live the new covenant attitude?

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### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** *Abraham makes a compelling example for both*

approaches to covenant keeping. Earlier he exhibited self-dependence when he took upon himself the responsibility of fulfilling God's promise. How many well-intentioned Christians repeat that mistake? Sincerely sorrowful regarding their sinful pasts, they self-confidently declare that they will never again repeat their former behaviors, effectively saying that their willpower is sufficient to fulfill God's promises for changed lives. Abraham's willfulness produced Ishmael and a deeply divided household. Unfortunately, self-dependent believers likewise produce or foster similar results and divide God's household. Later Abraham learned that self-surrender, not self-dependence, unlocks God's storehouse of blessings.

Atop Mount Moriah, Abraham surrendered his son for sacrifice, essentially surrendering himself, regardless of the apparent consequences for his cherished dreams. Completely surrendered, Abraham was now positioned to experience God's extravagant grace. God's Son, prefigured by the entrapped ram, would fulfill the promise, substituting Himself for Isaac and all humanity. Renewing power belongs to Christ, not to humans.

There are *second-phase Abrahams* today: believers who sincerely regret their sinful behaviors, but who recognize that righteousness can never be achieved through human effort to overcome temptation but only through moment-by-moment submission to God's leading and absolute confidence in Christ's sacrifice. The renewed church is any group of believers who have replaced old covenant, self-confident obedience with new covenant, fully trusting obedience. Obedience is never in doubt: we will serve somebody—either self-concocted notions of righteousness or Christ as revealed throughout Scripture.

## Bible Commentary

**I. Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar** (*Review Galatians 4:21–31 and Genesis 16 with the class.*)

Those among us who share modern sensitivities may become consternated with Paul's illustration involving Hagar because it apparently blames her and Ishmael by typing them as the example of legalistic religion. What fairness can there be in castigating the powerless slave woman who had no choice about whether or not to bear her wealthy slave owner's offspring? Making things worse, Paul elevates Abraham's and Sarah's relationship (the people who caused the problem) as the example of genuine righteousness! Paul's purpose here is neither to vilify the forsaken Hagar nor enshrine the conspiring Sarah. Their regrettable

household situation merely illustrates two phases of Abraham’s spiritual journey—the *do-it-yourself religion* phase and the later *completely-trust-God* phase.

Unfortunately, Abraham’s poor choices irrevocably damaged his relationship with his firstborn and introduced unnecessary tensions into his household. Certainly we should remember that it was the relationship that produced Ishmael—not Ishmael himself—that symbolized self-righteousness. It was Abraham’s self-dependence imposed upon the powerless Hagar that epitomizes self-righteousness. Hagar and Ishmael were merely victims of Abraham’s experiment with *do-it-yourself* religion.

**Consider This:** In church conflicts regarding the nature of righteousness, sometimes legalistic persons are attacked. Perhaps those who have experienced Christ’s saving grace should be more graceful to those who haven’t. Rather than castigating them, should not genuine believers exhibit more compassion toward victims of this false, but widespread, religious philosophy? How can genuine Christians *oppose* legalism’s self-dependent *philosophy* while exhibiting compassion toward the legalistic *person*? What can we learn from Abraham’s transformation from self-dependent, *make-it-happen* religion to divine dependency?

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### ►STEP 3—Apply

#### Thought Questions:

❶ What attitudes regarding covenant keeping distinguish the old from the new covenant?

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❷ The ethical requirements of the old covenant remain *unaltered*. Adultery

remains adultery; murder remains murder; sin is still wrong. Scripture nowhere suggests that commandment breaking suddenly has become acceptable. However, covenant *orientation* has shifted. Formerly, Israel viewed God's covenant as a burdensome obligation. Why is keeping the covenant recognized as a joy-filled privilege under the new covenant?

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#### Application Questions:

① How can church divisions be healed without compromising with works-oriented religion?

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② How can self-dependent religionists be led into a faith-oriented relationship?

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#### ►STEP 4—Create

**Activity:** Examine hymns in the church hymnal, looking for expressions of the new covenant relationship with God. Invite members to share their discoveries with others. Have each explain how their selected phrases exemplify the new covenant relationship for them.