

# Galations 4:21-31

By John K. McKee

“Tell me, you that desire to be under the law, don't you listen to the law? For it is written that Avraham had two sons, one by the handmaid, and one by the free woman. However, the son by the handmaid was born according to the flesh, but the son by the free woman was born through promise. These things contain an allegory, for these are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children to bondage, which is Hagar. For this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answers to the Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) that exists now, for she is in bondage with her children. But the Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) that is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, "Rejoice, you barren who don't bear. Break forth and shout, you that don't travail. For more are the children of the desolate than of her who has a husband." Now we, brothers, as Yitzchak was, are children of promise. But as then, he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. However what does the Scripture say? "Throw out the handmaid and her son, for the son of the handmaid will not inherit with the son of the free woman." So then, brothers, we are not children of a handmaid, but of the free woman."

This passage is a midrash developed by Sha'ul (Paul) in order to illustrate the difference between those who trust Messiah for their righteousness and those who are relying on a legalistic observance of the Torah or any set of laws for their salvation.

In our opinion, the key to understanding this midrash is to remember that context in which it is found. The immediate context begins in chapter 3 where Sha'ul begins to compare the two covenants—the covenant with Abraham and the covenant of Sinai. In this midrash, Sha'ul relates what happens when people reverse the proper theological order of the covenants. In other words, theologically, as well as historically, God made the Abrahamic covenant before he enacted the covenant of Sinai. It had to be that way because in the Abrahamic covenant, the promises of God were to be received by faith, while the second covenant was basically one in which those promises would only be full enjoyed with the fruitfulness through obedience.

Abraham's relationship to Hagar and the subsequent fruit of that bond (Ishmael) is compared to those who put the covenant of Sinai first before the covenant of promises concerning Sarah. Thus it is with those who try to earn their righteousness from God by obeying the Torah. Faith always must precede obedience. In addition, saving faith always results in obedience.

The midrash illustrates what it is like when people place obedience before faith. We can write this all in a “formula” where **G** = Grace, **F** = Faith, **W** = Works/Obedience, and **S** = Salvation.

Man's way, the way of “Hagar” is:  $S = W + F$

God's way, the way of “Sarah” is:  $S = G$  through  $F \rightarrow W$