

Sabbath School Lesson #10 – The Two Covenants – 26 August-1 September 2017

Christ has made us free. Paul says, “But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Galatians 4:26). We read Galatians 4:22-31: “For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not; for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son; for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.”

Two Sons – Those false teachers would persuade the brethren that in turning from whole-hearted faith in Christ and trusting to works which they themselves could do, they would become children of Abraham, and so heirs of the promise. They forgot that Abraham had two sons. “They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Romans 9:8). Now of the two sons of Abraham, one was born after the flesh, and the other was by promise, born of the Spirit. “By faith even Sarah herself received power to conceive seed when she was past age, since she counted Him faithful who had promised” (Hebrews 11:11). Hagar was an Egyptian slave. The children of a slave woman are always slaves, even though their father be a freeman; and so Hagar could bring forth children only to bondage. But long before Ishmael was born, the Lord had plainly signified to Abraham, who wished that his servant Eliezer might be his heir, that it was not a bond-servant, even though born in his house, that He had promised him, but a free-born son, – a son born of a freewoman. God has no slaves in His kingdom.

These Are the Two Covenants – What are the two covenants? – The two women, Hagar and Sarah; for we read that Hagar is Mount Sinai, “which gendereth to bondage.” Just as Hagar could not bring forth any other kind of children than slaves, so the law that God spoke from Sinai, cannot beget freemen. It can do nothing but hold them in bondage. “For by the law is the knowledge of sin.” The same is true of the covenant from Sinai, for it consisted merely of the promise of the people to keep that law, and had, therefore, no more power to make them free than the law itself had, – no more power than they already had in their bondage. Nay, rather, it “gendered to bondage,” since their making it was simply a promise to make themselves righteous by their own works, and man in himself is “without strength.”

‘Then did not God Himself lead them into bondage?’ – Not by any means; since He did not induce them to make that covenant at Sinai. Four hundred and thirty years before that time He had made a covenant with Abraham, which was sufficient for all purposes. That covenant was confirmed in Christ, and, therefore, was a covenant from above (John 8:23). It promised righteousness as a free gift of God through faith, and it included all nations. All the miracles that God had wrought in delivering the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage were but demonstrations of His power to deliver them and us from the bondage of sin.

Yes, the deliverance from Egypt was itself a demonstration not only of God’s power, but also of His desire to lead them from the bondage of sin, that bondage in which the covenant from Sinai holds men, because Hagar, who is the covenant from Sinai, was an Egyptian. So when the people came to Sinai, God simply referred them to what He had already done, and then said, “Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine” (Exodus 19:5). To what covenant did He refer? – Evidently to the one already in existence, His covenant with Abraham. If they would simply keep God’s covenant, that is, God’s promise, they would be a peculiar treasure unto God, for God, as the possessor of all the earth, was able to do with them all that He had promised. The fact that they in their self-sufficiency rashly took the whole responsibility upon themselves, does not prove that God led them into making that covenant, but the contrary. He was leading them out of bondage, not into it, and the apostle Paul plainly tells us that the covenant from Sinai was nothing but bondage.

Note the statement which the apostle makes when speaking of the two women, Hagar and Sarah: "These are the two covenants" (Galatians 4:24). So then the two covenants existed in every essential particular in the days of Abraham. Even so they do to-day; for the Scripture says now as well as then, "Cast out the bondwoman and her son" (Genesis 21:10; Galatians 4:30). We see that the two covenants are not matters of *time*, but of *condition*. Let no one flatter himself that he cannot be under the old covenant, because the dispensation for that is passed. The time for that is passed only in the sense that "the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revelings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries" (1 Peter 4:3).

Difference Between the Two – The difference is just the difference between a freewoman and a slave. Hagar's children, no matter how many she might have had, would have been slaves, while those of Sarah would necessarily be free. So the covenant from Sinai holds all who adhere to it in bondage "under the law;" while the covenant from above gives freedom, not freedom from obedience to the law, but freedom from disobedience to it. The freedom is not found away from the law, but in the law. Christ redeems from the curse, which is the transgression of the law. He redeems us from the curse, that the blessing may come on us; and the blessing is obedience to the law. "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord" (Psalm 119:1). This blessedness is freedom. "I will walk at liberty; for I seek Thy precepts" (Psalm 119:45). The difference between the two covenants may be put briefly thus: In the covenant from Sinai we ourselves have to do with the law alone, while in the covenant from above, we have the law in Christ. In the first instance it is death to us, since the law is sharper than any two-edged sword, and we are not able to handle it without fatal results; but in the second instance we have the law "in the hand of a Mediator" – Christ (Galatians 3:19). In the one case it is what we can do; in the other case it is what the Spirit of Christ can do. Bear in mind that there is not the slightest question in the whole Epistle to the Galatians as to whether or not the law should be kept. The only question is, How shall it be done? Is it to be our own doing, so that the reward shall not be of grace but of debt? or is it to be the Lord working in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Philippians 4:13)?

The Freedom of the Spirit – Sarah answers to the covenant which is from above, because she is free. But the freedom which that covenant gives is the freedom of the Spirit, for Isaac was born of the Spirit (see Galatians 4:29). "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17). "If ye be led by the Spirit, ye are not under the law" (Galatians 5:18). It does not mean that the Spirit gives one license to break the law; for "the law is spiritual" (Romans 7:14). There is no liberty in sin; "sin is the transgression of the law." So the liberty of the covenant from above is that perfect liberty that belongs alone to those who are law-abiding. We become law-abiding only by having the law written in our hearts by the Spirit.

Stand Fast, Therefore – Stand where? – "In the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free." What freedom is that? – It is the freedom of Christ Himself, whose delight was in the law of the Lord, because it was in His heart (Psalm 40:8). "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2). We stand only by faith. Let it not be imagined that there is any trace of bondage in this freedom. It is liberty of soul, liberty of thought, as well as liberty of action. It is not that we are simply given the ability to keep the law, but we are given the mind that finds delight in doing it. It is not that we comply with the law because we see no other way of escape from punishment; that would be galling bondage. It is from such bondage that God's covenant releases us. The promise of God, when accepted, puts the mind of Christ into us, so that we find the highest pleasure in obedience to all the precepts of God's Word. The soul is as free as a bird soaring above the mountain-tops. It is the glorious liberty of the children of God, who have the full range of "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of God's universe. It is the liberty of those who do not have to be watched, but who can be trusted anywhere, since their every step is but the movement of God's own holy law. Why be content with bondage, when such limitless freedom is yours? The prison doors are open; walk out of bondage into God's freedom.

Sing this song if you know it: 'Out of my shameful failure and loss, Jesus, I come. Jesus, I come. Into the glorious gain of Thy cross, Jesus, I come to Thee. Out of earth's sorrows, into Thy balm, Out of life's storm, and into Thy calm, Out of distress to jubilant psalm, Jesus, I come to Thee. Out of unrest and arrogant pride. Jesus, I come. Jesus, I come. Into Thy blessed will to abide, Jesus, I come to Thee. Out of myself to dwell in Thy love. Out of despair into raptures above. Upward for aye on wings like a dove, Jesus, I come to Thee.'