

The Two Contracts



SABBATH—AUGUST 26

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 4:21–31; Genesis 1:28; Genesis 2:2, 3; Genesis 3:15.

MEMORY VERSE: “But the Jerusalem that is above is free. She [the heavenly Jerusalem] is our mother” (Galatians 4:26, NIV).

SOME CHRISTIANS reject the power of the Old Testament. They do not allow it to have any say in their lives. They feel the giving of the law at Sinai does not agree with the gospel. So, they think that the contract given by God to His people at Sinai is outdated. They believe it was for a time when salvation was based on obeying the law. But the Bible shows that the people of that time failed to obey. As a result, some Christians say God made a new contract. They say this new contract is based on Jesus' mercy, just as the old contract is based on obeying the law.

But salvation never came from obeying the law. From the start, the religion of the Jews was always one of mercy and forgiveness. In Galatia, Paul fought against the belief in salvation by works. This false belief turned people away from the truth and from the Old Testament. The old and new contracts are not symbols of the times when they were given. Instead, they show two different ways of being saved. These ways go back to Cain and Abel. The old contract is a symbol of people who trust in their own works to please God, just as Cain trusted in his own goodness. But the new contract shows the experience of people who trust in God to do all He has promised. In the same way, Abel trusted in God to forgive his sins.



Abel trusted in God to forgive his sins.

THE ABC'S OF THE FIRST CONTRACT (Genesis 2:2, 3, 15–17)

In Galatians 4:21–31, Paul writes about the history of Israel. Many people feel that these verses are the most difficult part of his letter to understand. The first step in understanding them is to know what he means by the word “covenant.” The covenant is a contract or agreement between God and His people.

The Hebrew word for “covenant” is *berit*. *Berit* is a legal contract. Covenants were used for thousands of years across the Near East in Bible times. These covenants helped to explain relationships between people and nations. Part of making a covenant involved killing animals. Death showed what would happen to the person who broke the covenant.

“God used covenants to show His plan to the human family. He did this from the time of Adam to Jesus. The promises of the covenant pointed to a coming Savior. And those same promises reached their highest point in the covenant God made with David. (Read Genesis 12:2, 3; 2 Samuel 7:12–17; Isaiah 11.) Then Israel became slaves in Babylon. During that time, God promised Israel a better contract. This contract was the “new covenant” (Jeremiah 31:31–34). It told about the coming Messiah (Ezekiel 36:26–28; Ezekiel 37:22–28). [The Messiah was God’s Chosen One. He would save God’s people from their sins.] God promised the Messiah would come through David’s royal line.”—Adapted, Hans K. LaRondelle, *Our Creator Redeemer [Savior]* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005), page 4.



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Read Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 2:2, 3, 15–17. God made a covenant with Adam in the Garden of Eden before sin. What was this covenant based on?

The covenant was based on God’s command not to eat the fruit from one tree. This command was not impossible to obey. Humans were created to obey. But Adam and Eve chose to disobey. They broke the covenant given to them at Creation. And sin made it impossible for fallen humans to obey. But God would heal the broken relationship that Adam and Eve lost. God made this relationship new by the promise of a Savior. This promise became a new covenant of mercy.

Read Genesis 3:15. This verse contains the first gospel promise in the Bible. How does this verse show the hope that we have in Christ?

GOD’S CONTRACT WITH ABRAM (Genesis 12:1–5)

What promises does God make to Abram in Genesis 12:1–5? What is Abram’s answer?

God’s first promises to Abram are some of the most powerful verses in the Old Testament. These verses are all about God’s mercy. God makes the promises, not Abram. Abram does nothing to earn God’s approval. Nor is there anything in these verses to show that God and Abram somehow worked together to come up with this agreement. Instead, God promises everything. Abram is asked only to have faith in God’s promises. Yet, this faith is not just a weak belief. Instead, Abram shows his faith by leaving his family and going to the land of promise. And he is 75 years old at the time!

Read Genesis 15:1–6. God promises Abram a son. Abram waits 10 years for the son to be born. During this time, what questions does Abram have about God’s promise?

It is easy to think of Abram as a man of faith who never had any questions or doubts. But the Bible tells us a different story. Abram believed. He also had questions along the way. But his faith grew. In some ways, Abram is the same as the father in Mark 9:24. What Abram really says, in Genesis 15:8, to God is: “I believe, but help me not to doubt!”

God tells Abram His promise of a son is sure and true. He makes a legal contract with Abram to show Abram that he can trust Him. This agreement is so amazing and special. But it is not surprising at all that God makes a contract with Abram. What is amazing is how far God is willing to go and what He is willing to do. In Abram’s day, rulers did not like the idea of making legal agreements with their servants. But this is just what God does! He gives Abram His word. But God does not stop there. Then He does something even more amazing. He walks through the animal pieces that have been killed. This act is a sign. It shows Abram that God is willing to give His life to keep His promise. And that is just what happened on the cross. Jesus gave up His life on Calvary. His death made His promise real.

In what parts of your life do you need to reach out by faith to believe in what seems impossible? How can you learn to keep holding on in faith, no matter what happens?



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ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND HAGAR (Galatians 4:21–31)

Read Galatians 4:21–31 and Genesis 16. Why does Paul, in Galatians 4:21–31, not think very well of what happened with Hagar? What important point about salvation is Paul making by using this Old Testament story?

Hagar was an Egyptian slave in Abram's household. Hagar's part in the Genesis story is connected to Abram's failure to believe God's promise (Genesis 16).

God promised Abram and Sarai a son. They waited 10 years for the promised child to be born. But they did not have a child during that time. So, they decided God needed their "help." Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a concubine. A concubine is just a little lower in rank than a wife. Sarai's plan might seem strange to us today. But it was quite a clever idea. In those days, a female slave could become the mother for a childless woman. So, Sarai could count any child born from her husband and Hagar as her own. The plan worked. But Ishmael was not the child God promised.

This story is a powerful example of what happens when even a great man of God loses faith for a moment. In Genesis 17:18, 19, Abram, now Abraham, begs God to accept Ishmael as his heir. But the Lord rejects that offer. There was nothing out of the ordinary about the birth of Ishmael—except for the fact that Sarai was willing to share her husband with another woman! Ishmael is a child born "in the usual way" (Galatians 4:29, NIV). This wording means that no special help from God was needed to create Ishmael and give birth to him. And so, Abram and Sarai did not need to show faith in order for Ishmael to be born. Suppose Abram had trusted what God promised him instead of giving in to doubt. Then the situation with Hagar never would have happened. And a lot of grief could have been avoided.



Hagar is a symbol of Abram's failure to believe God's promise.

Read Genesis 17:15–19; Genesis 18:10–13; and Hebrews 11:11, 12. Notice what these verses say about the birth of Isaac. His birth required so much faith of Abraham and Sarah. Why?

In what ways has your lack of faith in God's promises caused you pain? How can you learn from these mistakes to trust God's promises to you?

HAGAR AND MOUNT SINAI (Exodus 6:2–8)

Read Exodus 6:2–8; Exodus 19:3–6; and Deuteronomy 32:10–12. What kind of relationship does God want to set up with His people at Sinai? How is God’s promise to them the same as His promise to Abraham?

God wants to share the same relationship with the children of Israel that He shared with Abraham. Many things about God’s words to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 are the same as His words, in Exodus 19, to Moses. In both covenants, God announces 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 because of those blessings. The Hebrew word translated as “to obey,” in Exodus 19:5, means “to hear.” So, God’s words do not mean we are saved by our works. Just the opposite is true. God wants Israel to have the same faith Abraham had in answer to the promises God made (Genesis 15:6).

The purpose of the covenant at Sinai was to point out how God’s mercy is the cure for sin. The problem with the Sinai covenant is not on God’s part. The problem is with the promises of the people (Hebrews 8:6). The Israelites do not answer God’s promises with faith and with hearts emptied of pride. Instead, they answer with trust in themselves. “‘We will do everything the LORD has said’ ” (Exodus 19:8, NIV). The Israelites had lived as slaves in Egypt for more than 400 years. So, they have no real idea of God’s true majesty. Nor do they know how sinful they truly are. The Israelites try to turn God’s contract of mercy and forgiveness into a contract of works. This mistake is the same one Abram and Sarai made when they tried to “help” God make His promise of a son come true through Hagar. Hagar is a symbol of Israel’s mistake at Sinai. She shows that humans cannot earn salvation by their own efforts.

Paul does not mean the law given at Sinai was evil or destroyed. Instead, he worries about the Galatians’ misunderstanding of the law. “The law should have shown the Galatians that it was impossible to please God by keeping it. Instead, the law caused them to depend on their own efforts to please God. So, the law did not help to lead the Jewish teachers to Christ. Instead, it closed them off from Christ.”—Adapted, O. Palmer Roberston, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), page 181.



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ISHMAEL AND ISAAC TODAY (Galatians 4:28–31)

Paul's short history of Israel is meant to overturn the arguments made by his attackers. They claim to be the true sons of Abraham. And they say Jerusalem is their mother. They also say the Gentiles, or non-Jews, are not true sons. And they say all Gentiles need to be circumcised. To be circumcised means that the skin at the end of the sex organ of a man or a boy is cut off. Paul's attackers claim that only circumcised Gentiles could become true sons of Abraham and followers of Christ.

Paul says just the opposite is true. His attackers are not the true sons of Abraham. Instead, they are the same as Ishmael. Paul's attackers placed their trust in being circumcised. They trusted in their own works. This mistake is the same one that Sarai made with Hagar and that Israel made with God's law at Sinai. But Gentile believers were the sons of Abraham. True, they were not related to Abraham by birth. Instead, they were the sons of Abraham in the same way Isaac was. They were sons by a divine miracle. "God promised Abraham that there would be non-Jewish believers who would believe in Him. In the same way, God promised Isaac to Abraham. God would set the Gentiles free from sin through the new birth. This birth into freedom was the same as Isaac's birth. Both were a miracle of God's mercy."—Adapted, James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle [Letter] to the Galatians* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), page 266.



We are the spiritual sons and daughters of Isaac. So we should not be surprised when we suffer hard times and attacks, even from church members.

Read Galatians 4:28–31. What will the true children of Abraham face in this world?

In Genesis 21:8–10, Isaac is being shown honor. And it seems Ishmael makes fun of him. The meaning of the Hebrew word in Genesis 21:9 for what Ishmael does is "to laugh." Ishmael's laughter upsets Sarah. Her anger shows that Ishmael was making fun of Isaac. Ishmael's laughter might not seem very wrong to us today. But it shows the deep hatred that split the family over who the true heir was.

We are the spiritual sons and daughters of Isaac. So, we should not be surprised when we suffer hard times and are attacked, even by church members.

In what ways have you been attacked for your faith by the people closest to you? Or worse, how might you be guilty of attacking others for their faith?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law and the Covenants,” pages 363–373, in *Patriarchs [Forefathers and Leaders]* and *Prophets [Special Messengers]*.

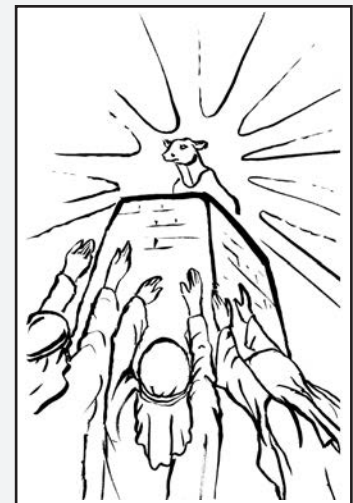
“God’s covenant with Abraham contained the promise of salvation. So, why was another covenant made at Sinai? It was made because the people had lost much of the knowledge of God during their time as slaves in Egypt. They no longer realized the importance of the covenant with Abraham. . . .

“God brought the Israelites to Sinai. He showed them His glory. He gave them His law. He promised them great blessings if they obeyed. Exodus 19:5, 6. But the people did not realize how sinful their hearts were. They did not understand that it was impossible for them to follow God’s law without Christ’s help. They agreed very quickly to the covenant with God. But only a few weeks passed before they broke it. They bowed down to an idol. They could not hope to win God’s acceptance through a broken agreement. Now they saw their sin. They felt their need for forgiveness and the Savior. . . . Now by faith and love they were tied to God as their Deliverer from sin. And they could appreciate the blessings of the new covenant.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pages 371, 372.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Is your own walk with the Lord more of an “old covenant” walk or a “new covenant” walk? How can you tell the difference?
- 2 What are some of the problems that cause suffering in your local church? How are they being solved? How can you make sure you are not causing the suffering? (Read also Matthew 18:15–17 to help guide you in the right way.)
- 3 Have you ever promised God something and then broken your promise? How does this sad fact help you to understand what God’s mercy truly means?

SUMMARY: The stories of Hagar, Ishmael, and the children of Israel at Sinai show us how foolish it is to trust in our own efforts to make God’s promises come true. The new covenant of mercy and forgiveness was made with Adam and Eve after sin. Then it was made new with Abraham. And at last, it came true in Christ.



Only a few weeks passed before the people broke the covenant. They bowed down to an idol.