

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

Vol. XXV

February 15, 2015

No. 7

Spiritual Israel

(Jerry Fite)

Paul wrote a letter to the churches of Galatia in 54 A.D. These churches were comprised of people who had become sons of God by faith by being baptized into Christ (*Galatians 3:26-27*). God’s people of old, the Israelites, did not become children of God through baptism, but through the physical lineage of Jacob, with Abraham and Isaac as their forefathers (*cf. Genesis 32:28, Deuteronomy 4:1*). Now we sense a change. Were the children of God no longer physical Israel?

Becoming sons of God by faith opened the door for all, including Jew and Gentile, to be God’s people. “*There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus*” (*Galatians 3:28*). Physical descent, social status or sexual identity were not determinate factors in being a child of God. Through the word of the Gospel and one’s baptism in water, one was born from above into God’s spiritual family (*Jn. 3:3-5, Titus 3:5, Ephesians 5:26, Acts 2:41, 47*).

Being a son of God by faith connected a person to God’s

promise to the forefather of Israel, Abraham. God promised Abraham that not only would He make of him a great nation, but that in him would all the nations of the earth be blessed (*Genesis 12:2-3*). Israel did become that great nation and dwelt in the land that God showed Abraham. Now in Christ, the seed of Abraham, all nations can be blessed. “*And if ye are Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise*” (*Galatians 3:29, cf. 3:8, 16*).

Using the figure of speech called an “allegory”, where a story is told conveying a moral truth, Paul distinguishes between the physical descendants of Abraham and the spiritual people of promise (*Galatians 4:21-31*). Paul ties Abraham’s son (Ishmael) and Ishmael’s mother (Hagar, the handmaid) to the old covenant given to Israel at Mount Sinai. “*...for these women are two covenants; one from Mount Sinai, bearing children unto bondage, which is Hagar*” (v. 24). Wait a minute! Was not the covenant at Mount Sinai given to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and not Ishmael and Esau? Yes, but notice how the inspired Paul uses Isaac.

In the allegory, Hagar represents “*Jerusalem that now is: for she is in bondage with her children*”. Paul now makes the contrast with the second mother, the “*free woman*”: “*but the Jerusalem that is above is free, which is our mother*” (v.26). Christians are connected with Isaac and the free woman by being children of promise: “*Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise*” (v. 28). Abraham and Sarah, the freewoman in the story, were promised a child when he and Sarah were old and past the time for childbearing. Abraham was instructed to name him Isaac (*Genesis 17:17-19*). God fulfilled that promise, and now an everlasting covenant is being established with Christians through Christ.

Paul drives home the moral truth from the allegory in recounting the Scripture that Hagar and her son would not share the inheritance with the son of the freewoman (*Genesis 21: 10,12*). Paul concludes, “*Wherefore, brethren, we are not children of the handmaid, but of the free woman*” (*Galatians 4:31*). Christians who have been made free from sin by God’s mercy are “*the Israel of God*” (*Galatians 6:16, Romans 9:6-7, 24-26*).