

Galatians 4:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh;
but he of the freewoman was by promise.

Analysis

But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Paul contrasts the two births' nature. "He who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh" (αλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐκ τῆς παιδίσκης κατὰ σάρκα γεγέννηται)—Ishmael was born "according to flesh" (κατὰ σarka, κατὰ σάρκα), that is, through natural human procreative ability, human planning, human effort. Nothing miraculous about his conception and birth. He represented the principle of human achievement.

"But he of the freewoman was by promise" (ὁ δὲ ἐκ τῆς ελεύθερας δι' ἐπαγγελίας)—Isaac was born "through promise" (di' epangelias, δι' ἐπαγγελίας), that is, by supernatural divine intervention fulfilling God's word. Abraham and Sarah were physically incapable of producing children (Genesis 18:11-14, Romans 4:19-21). Isaac's existence depended entirely on God's promise and power, not human ability. This perfectly illustrates faith versus works: Ishmael = human effort producing results; Isaac = divine promise received by faith producing supernatural results. Which birth-principle defines your Christianity?

Historical Context

Jewish tradition generally honored Ishmael as father of Arab peoples and acknowledged God's blessing on him (Genesis 17:20, 21:13). However, Genesis clearly distinguishes him from Isaac, the child of promise through whom covenant

blessing flows (Genesis 17:18-21). Paul's allegorical reading doesn't deny the historical reality but finds in it prophetic illustration of law versus gospel. Rabbinic interpretation sometimes used similar allegorical methods, though Paul's specific application (Sinai covenant = Hagar) would have shocked Jewish readers.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. Are you relating to God primarily through 'flesh' (human effort, religious performance) or through 'promise' (trusting God's word and power)?
2. What contemporary 'Ishmaels' do Christians produce—good things achieved through human effort but outside God's promised means?
3. How does the Isaac-birth paradigm (humanly impossible, divinely accomplished through faith in God's promise) apply to your spiritual life and growth?

Interlinear Text

ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐκ τῆς παιδίσκης κατὰ σάρκα
But G3588 he G3303 he of G3588 the bondwoman G3814 after G2596 the flesh G4561

γεγέννηται ὁ δὲ ἐκ τῆς ἐλευθέρας διὰ τῆς
was born G3588 but G1161 he of G3588 the freewoman G1658 was by G1223 G3588

ἐπαγγελίας

promise
G1860

Additional Cross-References

Hebrews 11:11 (Covenant): Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.

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