POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND

In this and the next five lessons, we will examine six major New Testament passages on the old and new covenants. These passages cumulatively contain all of the negative characterizations describing the old covenant and law listed in the Introduction to this series. Here are four key concepts to keep in mind as we progress:

1. When the New Testament discusses the old and new covenants together, it does so by presenting a series of contrasts that distinguish them from each other. We will, in each case, identify those contrasts and note the significance of the most vital components among them.

2. The “code” to unlock the meaning of the New Testament’s discussion of the old and new covenants is the recognition of both their historical and experiential dimensions. There are historical old and new covenants, and there are old and new covenant experiences based on people’s responses to the covenant.

3. The best model in any academic pursuit is the most coherent one, the one that contains the least inconsistencies and most correspondences among the data available. In theological circles that is often referred to as “the weight of evidence”—the preponderance and coherence of the evidence by which a particular matter is “established.”

4. We must do our prayerful best to refrain from foisting an interpretation upon a text, but rather to allow each text and passage, within its own and wider context, to interpret itself.

Take a deep breath. Put on your thinking cap. Adopt a humble and prayerful spirit. Let’s proceed!
Write out Galatians 4:21–5:1 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Galatians 4:28–5:1. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
WEIGHING THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

In Galatians 4:24 Paul uses a phrase that occurs only here in the entire Bible: “two covenants.” All scholars agree that our passage for this lesson is a seminal presentation on the old and new covenants. By his specific and unique reference here to “the two covenants,” Paul alerts us to his intention to explain his understanding of the essential nature of the old and new covenants. In his typical manner, he presents the two covenants by a series of contrasting characterizations. (Scan the QR code for the graphic)

Is Paul conceiving of “the two covenants” here as historical covenants—the old covenant being the Sinai covenant, the new covenant being the covenant after Jesus came in history? Or is he thinking of “the two covenants” in experiential terms, with the old covenant referring to an old-covenant experience and the new covenant designating a new-covenant experience?

What phrases might lead us to conclude that he has in mind an exclusively historical perspective—the Sinai covenant on the one hand, and on the other, the updated new covenant when Jesus came? Well, verse 25 mentions “Mount Sinai” flat out, does it not? It also mentions “present . . . Jerusalem” (Gal. 4:25, NIV), which isn’t an exact match with the Sinai covenant but bears a logical association. However, several other historical references help us better understand his reference to Sinai, namely, his references to Abraham, Hagar (the “bondwoman”), Sarah (the “freewoman”), and Abraham’s sons by Hagar and Sarah (4:23, 25, 28, 30). What makes this reference to Abraham so significant is that scholars do not believe Abraham has any historical association whatever with the old (Sinai) covenant. Scholars actually consider Abraham a prototype of the historical new covenant in that he was declared righteous on the basis of his faith (Gen. 15:6), whereas the view of some covenant theologians is that the Sinai covenant required righteousness by works (Deut. 6:24, 25; but compare 1 John 3:7, where John uses similar language about New Testament believers). To characterize the Sinai covenant as promoting works-righteousness, one must ignore the emphasis on faith throughout the Old Testament. Jesus Himself affirmed that “faith” was one of “the weightier matters of the law” (Matt. 23:23, NKJV)! When Paul wrote elsewhere that “the law is not of faith” (Gal. 3:12, NKJV), he was not contradicting Jesus but confessing that the law, not as God intended it, but as he and many of his colleagues had related to it legalistically (Phil. 3:1–6), was not of faith.

But in Galatians 4:22 Abraham is used as an example of both the old covenant and the new covenant! How so? Did Abraham and the Sinai community share anything in common that might inform us? Indeed! Abraham's experience with Hagar exhibited an old-covenant-experience response to God’s covenant promise concerning Abraham siring a son, and his subsequent experience with Sarah exhibited a new-covenant-experience response (Rom. 4:16–22). At the giving of the law at Sinai, Israel confidently responded, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8), and then summarily erected a golden calf and praised it for delivering the people from Egypt!—classic old-covenant-experience responses. Furthermore, Paul admitted that he was using Hagar “symbolically” (NKJV), (“allegorically” most translations, from Greek allegoreo) as a reference to Sinai (Gal. 4:24). It appears that Paul used his historical references in this passage as symbols, allegories, examples of an experiential point he was making.

We will now consider evidence that Paul may be using this presentation on “the two covenants” to highlight their experiential dimensions.

Memorize your favorite verse in Galatians 4:21–5:1. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.

If “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant” were replaced with “Old Covenant Experience” and “New Covenant Experience,” what questions, problems, or clarifications would that create?

Read more at www.inversebible.org/cov06-3
WEIGHING THE EXPERIENTIAL EVIDENCE

Many who teach the historical new covenant claim that it releases New Testament believers from condemnation and continuing bondage to the old covenant law of the Ten Commandments, setting them free to live in the glorious liberty of life in the Spirit. They believe this largely on the basis of Paul’s teaching on the old and new covenants in Gal. 4:21–5:1. Indeed, depending on your translation, the passage uses terms and phrases such as “slave,” “bondwoman,” “bondage,” “burden,” and “yoke of slavery”/“bondage” six times to characterize the old covenant, in contrast to “free”/“freedom,” “freewoman,” and “liberty” to characterize the new covenant.

But think about it. If these characterizations refer to the historical old and new covenants, then God would have delivered Israel from physical slavery in Egypt only to put them under an even more devastating and hopeless system of spiritual slavery at Sinai! Furthermore, spiritual freedom would not have been available to anyone until Jesus came in history! What does that do to the gospel of Moses (Psalm 103)? One searches in vain for a single Old Testament reference that characterizes the Sinai covenant as a system of slavery.

The second most emphasized contrast between the old and new covenants noted in our passage concerns “the flesh” (old covenant, vv. 23, 29) and “the Spirit” (new covenant, v. 29). Based on Paul’s own characterizations of the war between “the flesh” and “the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4–14), these designations could not possibly represent the historical covenants. If the Sinai covenant were truly a covenant of “the flesh,” God would have required that His people live according to “the flesh” and therefore “not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:19, 21). Furthermore, if Galatians 4’s new covenant is historical, then not until Jesus came in history could anyone be “born according to the Spirit” (Gal. 4:29, NKJV) and to live by “the Spirit.”

But perhaps Paul’s most significant contrast in his Galatians 4 list distinguishing the two covenants is his categorical assertion that members of the old covenant “will never share in the inheritance [Greek. klēronomeo, ‘heir,’ ‘inherit,’ ‘inheritor,’ ‘inheritance’]” that belongs exclusively to the new covenant (4:30). Almost without exception, that Greek term is used in the New Testament to refer to eternal life, the inheritance prepared for the saved (Matt. 5:5; 19:29; 25:34; 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 3:29; 5:21; 4:6, 7). If the old covenant Paul describes in our passage is the Sinai covenant, then no member of the Sinai community or any of their descendants for generations until Jesus came in history will inherit the kingdom prepared for God’s people from the creation of the world, no matter how faithfully they lived to the covenant God gave them and asked them to live by, or how great was their faith in Yahweh! Furthermore, everyone living before Jesus came in history “will never share in the inheritance” (Gal. 4:30; but see Hebrews 11).

Paul seems to have gone out of his way to assure his readers that when he thinks of “the two covenants” he often, if not at times exclusively, thinks of the human responses and experiential issues involved, rather than referencing the historical covenants per se. The historical covenants shared the same spiritual DNA and made the same everlasting gospel appeals to whoever looked to them for divine guidance. The eternal destinies of those who heard their invitation depended on how they responded to those appeals, not to when they lived in history or to what historical covenant they lives under.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Isaiah 58:6
Philippians 3:4, 6–10
John 8:34–36
Romans 6:16–22
James 1:25–2:12
2 Peter 2:18–21

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Galatians 4:21–5:1?

Jesus emerges from our passage as the Architect and Champion of freedom. The passage opens by addressing those “who desire to be under the law” (Gal. 4:21, NKJV, emphasis added), biblical code words in this context for legalism, the ultimate spiritual bondage—attempting to gain a right standing and eternal security before God by scrupulous living, something Paul understood from personal experience (Phil. 3:3, 6–9). The slavery of legalism is that one never knows if they are being good enough to satisfy God.

The passage closes with the invitation to “stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and . . . not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1, NKJV, emphasis supplied). Jesus did not wait until He came to live among us before He picked up the mantle of championing freedom. In His Old Testament role as Yahweh, He defined true religion by emphasizing personal and social commitment “to undo the heavy burdens [and] let the oppressed go free” (Isa. 58:6, NKJV). The psalmist extolled God’s law for prescribing a life of liberty (Ps. 119:45); James would later capitalize on that theme, citing both from the Ten Commandments and the OT law to love one’s neighbor, labeling God’s law as “the law of liberty” (James 1:25).

When Yahweh came to earth as Jesus, He adopted as His own the prophesied messianic mission statement to “proclaim liberty to the captives . . . [and] set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18, emphasis supplied; cf. Isa. 61:1, 2). He defined slavery at its deepest level: “Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (John 8:34, NKJV); He identified freedom at its highest level: “If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). It is possible to be free from physical oppression but lost in spiritual bondage. Peter spoke of those who promise others “freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved” (2 Peter 2:19, NASB).

The slavery of sin is induced by deception and maintained by brute force. It attracts by offering “freedom” from divine restrictions and the “benefits” of self-dependence and self-realization. But it ultimately leads to enslaving addictions. Some addictions aren’t “evil” or apparently harmful; they’re just interesting, entertaining, informative, keeping us abreast of what’s happening out there. But they also sponge up our time and keep getting in the way of better things we want to accomplish. Worse, they shield us from Him who alone is the Architect and Champion of freedom and can help us become “free indeed.”

The freedom Jesus offers contains a beautiful irony. In contrast to the slavery induced and maintained by power over others, there is a “slavery” won by altruistic love and chosen by free will in a voluntary commitment to love and serve the other, the kind of commitment one makes in marriage to love and serve the other “in good times and bad . . . until death do us part.” The two slaveries are universes apart. When Jesus sets us free indeed, a love-awakened desire longs to be bound to Him who set us free! Paul wrote affirmingly, “Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:18, NKJV, emphasis supplied). One of the most cherished designations New Testament authors gave themselves was “bondservant”/“slave” (Greek, doulos) of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Rev. 1:1).

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1, NKJV, emphasis supplied).
THE SAME

“The ‘new covenant’ was established upon ‘better promises’—the promise of forgiveness of sins and of the grace of God to renew the heart and bring it into harmony with the principles of God’s law. ‘This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts. . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and will remember their sin no more.’ Jeremiah 31:33, 34.

“The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart. Instead of going about to establish our own righteousness we accept the righteousness of Christ. His blood atones for our sins. His obedience is accepted for us. Then the heart renewed by the Holy Spirit will bring forth ‘the fruits of the Spirit.’ Through the grace of Christ we shall live in obedience to the law of God written upon our hearts. Having the Spirit of Christ, we shall walk even as He walked. Through the prophet He declared of Himself, ‘I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart.’ Psalm 40:8. And when among men He said, ‘The Father hath not left Me alone; for I do always those things that please Him.’ John 8:29. . . .

“God’s work is the same in all time, although there are different degrees of development and different manifestations of His power, to meet the wants of men in the different ages. Beginning with the first gospel promise, and coming down through the patriarchal and Jewish ages, and even to the present time, there has been a gradual unfolding of the purposes of God in the plan of redemption. The Saviour typified in the rites and ceremonies of the Jewish law is the very same that is revealed in the gospel. The clouds that enveloped His divine form have rolled back; the mists and shades have disappeared; and Jesus, the world’s Redeemer, stands revealed. He who proclaimed the law from Sinai, and delivered to Moses the precepts of the ritual law, is the same that spoke the Sermon on the Mount. The great principles of love to God, which He set forth as the foundation of the law and the prophets, are only a reiteration of what He had spoken through Moses to the Hebrew people: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.’ Deuteronomy 6:4, 5. ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ Leviticus 19:18. The teacher is the same in both dispensations. God’s claims are the same. The principles of His government are the same. For all proceed from Him ‘with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. James 1:17.’ ”

( Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets. 372, 373.)
**inQuire**

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

In your own words, describe the two slaveries.

How does understanding the old and new covenants as “reactions” help understand the tension between the two?

What are some of the obvious problems that emerge if the old and new covenants were two contradictory systems of salvation?

How does one explain this to someone who is a self-professed “new covenant” Christian?

How would you respond to someone who used some text in Galatians 4:21–5:1 to prove to you that sharing the Sabbath teaching with someone threatens putting them in spiritual bondage?

Do you see the thread of freedom, healing, and hope in Jesus throughout the Bible?