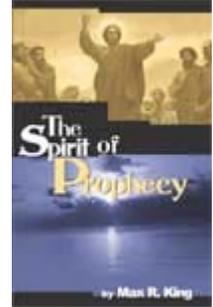


# Abraham Had Two Sons

By Max King

July 30, 1971

*Understanding the way Paul uses Abraham's two wives and two sons as an allegory (Gal. 4:24) can take us a long way toward understanding prophecy. Hagar represents the Old Covenant, and Ishmael the children of the Old Covenant – unbelieving Israel. Sarah represents the New Covenant and Isaac the children of that covenant – the Church. In order for Isaac to receive the inheritance, Ishmael – the firstborn – had to be cast out. Likewise the covenants: in order for the New Covenant to be established in fullness, for the “new heavens and new earth” to be in place, the Old Covenant system had to be put away. The heaven and earth that would pass away were not the space-time universe, but the Old Covenant world of the Law and its typology.*



In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul uses Abraham's two sons as an allegory that will help us a great deal in understanding Bible prophecy. Here we find some important keys, some important ideas and concepts, that will help us make sense of the information we are given. Paul gives us a working demonstration of the new understanding Christ brought to the interpretation of prophecy. Paul himself writes, “For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us” (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus is important not only to our salvation, but to our study of interpretation or hermeneutics.

It is appealing, and seems simple enough, just to take the Bible literally whenever possible, and a great number of Bible teachers advocate just such a method. One well-known rule of thumb is to take a passage literally unless it is obvious that the usage is figurative. This system has a lot to commend it, but it overlooks an important fact: there is a considerable language and cultural barrier between the New Testament and the contemporary reader. Discerning between figurative and literal language is not always so easy. And it really doesn't help our dilemma any: one person may say, Christ has obviously not returned, so we must take the time statements figuratively; another may say, Christ said his return would be signaled by the destruction of Jerusalem, so we can't take the descriptions literally.

The proof of any system of interpretation is in its consistency: can it be consistently applied, and does it make sense? Like a hypothesis in scientific method, we are trying to make sense of all the available data. We have already seen that there is biblical precedent for understanding the descriptive language figuratively. In addition to literal vs. figurative, there is another fault line involving temporal and spiritual. What Paul gives us in Galatians 4 is a picture of how we can understand the difference between these concepts,

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?  
For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman.  
But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise,  
which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—  
for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—  
but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.

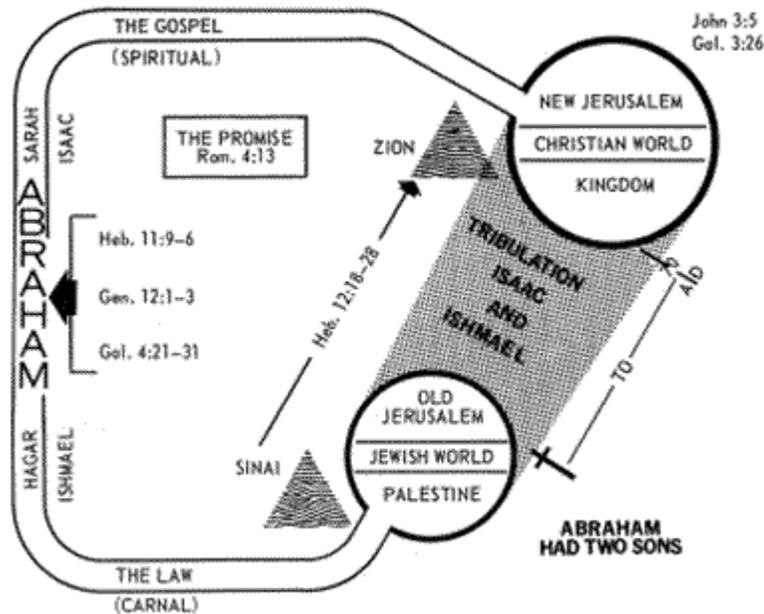
For it is written: “Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband.”

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.

But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now.

Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “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 (Galatians 4:21-31).



In his effort to show the essential difference between the Law and the Gospel, and to keep believers from turning away from their faith, Paul turns to an allegorical argument from the Old Testament. He urges the Galatians to consider a story well known to them from Jewish history. Paul allegorizes this story in order to reach beyond its plain, historical meaning, and draw out a second meaning that God intended for them to have. In other words, he takes a literal story and makes a figurative application of that story.

Paul, writing under the influence of the Holy Spirit, did not simply choose an apt metaphor, but his choice gives us a glimpse into the rich imagery that God invested in the history of Old Testament. We might think of God as an epic poet, using the history of the Hebrew people as His medium. What appears to be simply a story in the life of Abraham turns out to have great spiritual significance in the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan.

First, Paul tells us that Abraham had two sons. They were born into the same household, but of different mothers. Each mother represents a different covenant, and each son represents a different covenant people. Hagar was an Egyptian bondwoman in the household of Abraham, representing the Old Covenant given on Mt. Sinai. The Sinaitic covenant was also represented by the literal Jerusalem that was standing at the time of Paul’s writing. Ishmael represents the people of that covenant, the nation of Israel, who were under the bondage of sin and death (Gal. 5:1).

Sarah, the freewoman, represents the New Covenant that went forth from Mt. Zion, which is also represented by the New Jerusalem, or the heavenly Jerusalem, which is free with her children (Heb. 12:22). Isaac, the son of the freewoman, represents the people of the New Covenant.

The purpose of Paul in this allegory was threefold: First, to show that Abraham had two sons, which existed side by side for a time in the same household. We must not miss this point of the story. These two sons are types of the two Israels of God, one born after the flesh (Old Covenant), and the other born after the Spirit (New Covenant). The spiritual follows the temporal. Ishmael was the first born and, as such, stood to receive the inheritance. Without Ishmael's being disinherited, Isaac could not receive the firstborn's portion. This was the meaning and strength of Sarah's words when she said, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac" (Gen. 21:10).

As long as Ishmael and Isaac coexisted, neither received the inheritance, and in order for Isaac to receive full inheritance, it was necessary to cast out Ishmael. Paul's purpose, therefore, was to motivate all to become and remain children of the freewoman, for the inheritance was not going to be shared by the children of the bondwoman. Fleshly and spiritual Israel coexisted from Pentecost (the time of Isaac's birth) until the destruction of Jerusalem (the time of Ishmael's casting out). Part of Paul's mission was to encourage the children of the freewoman to be faithful while exhorting the children of the bondwoman to repentance.

There was a bitter struggle between fleshly and spiritual Israel while they coexisted, as typified in Ishmael's persecution of Isaac.

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now (Galatians 4:28-29).

Much of the New Testament was written to encourage the Christians to hold fast under Jewish persecution, for deliverance would come soon. Ishmael was going to be cast out, and then Isaac would be delivered from mockery, and be in a position to receive the promised inheritance.

Those who teach that the inheritance of spiritual Israel is yet future have not given careful consideration to this allegory, nor to the time element involved in prophecies and Scriptures that deal with the giving of this inheritance. They have Isaac still waiting (nearly 2,000 years) to receive what would be his when Ishmael was cast out. Either Isaac has received the adoption, or Ishmael has not yet been cast out there is no in-between position for us today.

The persecutors typified by Ishmael were the Judaizers, Jews who were trying to persuade the early church that Gentile converts must be circumcised and follow Jewish law. These were Jews born after the flesh who sought for the inheritance, or blessings of the covenant, through the carnal ordinances of the Old Covenant. Frequent reference is made in New Testament Scripture to the severe persecution directed against first-century Christians by these groups,

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, see also Hebrews 10:32-39; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-10).

It is in view of this persecution that Paul asks the question,

Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. (Gal. 4:30)

Without giving any hint of the nearness of the destruction of Jerusalem, Paul, by adopting these words of Sarah addressed to Abraham, emphasizes the need for the Galatians to stand clear of a system doomed for destruction. Just as there could be no joint inheritance between Ishmael and Isaac, so there could be no fusion or amalgamation of the Old and New Covenants. Temporal Israel could not be combined with spiritual Israel.

The second purpose of Paul was to show the essential difference between Old Covenant and New, and the difference between the temporal and the spiritual, or flesh and spirit. Ishmael was born after the flesh (Gal. 4:23) and Isaac was born after the Spirit (Gal. 4:29). This contrast of flesh and spirit with respect to the birth of these two sons is based upon the manner that each came into being. Ishmael was born after the flesh in that his birth was according to the common course of nature, his parents being of a reasonable age, so there was nothing uncommon or supernatural in his birth. The birth of Isaac was above and beyond the ordinary course of nature, involving the promise of God, and calling forth from Abraham and Sarah an act of faith. In response to this act of faith in the purpose and power of God, God gave them Isaac, miraculously allowing barren Sarah to conceive (Rom. 4:17-21; Heb. 11:11). Both were physically born, but the power by which they were born was different.

The birth of Ishmael of a bondswoman, according to the natural course of nature, became a fitting representation of Abraham's fleshly descendants, and the state of their bondage under the Old Covenant. By contrast, the birth of Isaac to a freewoman was symbolic of Abraham's spiritual seed born of faith through Christ, and their freedom under the New Covenant.

Bondage and death were the states of the nation of Israel under the Law, "Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world" (Gal. 4:3). In contrast to this was freedom and life for those born of Christ, the spiritual seed of Abraham. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free," Paul writes in Galatians 5:1, "and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." Flesh and spirit are, therefore, contrasting terms for the Old and New covenants. It is common for us to apply these terms to the physical and spiritual aspects of humanity, but this is not how Paul uses these terms. An example is Galatians 3:3, "Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit [New Covenant], are you now being made perfect by the flesh [Old Covenant]?" Terms used in a similar way are "letter" and "spirit" – "who also made us sufficient as ministers of the New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6; see also Rom. 7:6).

Leaving the Old Covenant and coming into the new, then, is a matter of rebirth, "**having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever**" (1 Pet. 1:23).

**For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.**

**For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.**

**There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

**And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26-29).**

Another aspect of this story that might have some application to our study is that the barren Sarah would have more children than Hagar. Both Hagar and Sarah were to have a large number of descendants, but according to prophecy, Sarah was to have the larger family. This is implied in the original promise of Genesis 12:3, "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The prophet Isaiah sets forth this fact more explicitly in Isaiah,

“Sing, O barren, you who have not borne! Break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you who have not labored with child! For more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married woman,” says the Lord.

Enlarge the place of your tent, and let them stretch out the curtains of your dwellings; Do not spare; lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes.

For you shall expand to the right and to the left, and your descendants will inherit the nations, and make the desolate cities inhabited” (Isaiah 54:1-3).

The more numerous children of the desolate, the spiritual seed of Abraham, were to include both Jews and Gentiles, a fact that was shrouded in mystery until the coming of Christ. Paul was an apostle of this mystery,

How that by revelation He made known to me the mystery...  
which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets:  
that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel (Ephesians 3:3, 5-6).

As Paul tells the story, we can see that Ishmael is the nation of Israel at the time of Paul’s writing. Isaac was the infant church, now made up of Jews and Gentiles both, waiting to be vindicated. Isaac’s mother would bear the greater fruit, the greater number of descendants. It remained only for Ishmael to be cast out. Ishmael and Isaac could not continue to coexist. The son of the bondwoman could not inherit with the son of the freewoman.

In the same way, the early church awaited the putting away of the Old Covenant system. This was not some macabre joy at the loss of life for their Jewish brothers and sisters, but the sign of the coming of the kingdom was clear: Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed. The center and heart of prophecy is not Pentecost (the birth of Isaac) so much so as the fall of Jerusalem (the casting out of Ishmael).

## **God’s Two Worlds**

We can see from Figure 2, that Abraham gave birth to two worlds. He had two sons, each typifying a world to come. Ishmael typified the Jewish world. Since Hagar, the bondwoman, represented the Sinaitic covenant, her son Ishmael represented the children born of that covenant: the biological descendants of Abraham. It was not uncommon to refer to this people and their culture and their law system in terms of a world.

Isaac typified the early church and the world to come. Since Sarah, the freewoman, represented the New Covenant from Mt. Zion, her son Isaac represented Christians born of this covenant, or the Christian world. This was a new world, a new heavens and new earth. Bible teaching, especially Bible prophecy, spends a lot of time with these two worlds. Neglecting this can lead to all kinds of interpretive problems and it had. Also, a fusion of either of these two worlds with the material heaven and earth can result in mass confusion in the study of God’s scheme of redemption.

According to Paul, a promise was given to Abraham that he and his seed would inherit a world. “For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:13). The question that arises out of this verse is, what world would Abraham and his seed inherit? Some might say the world in question is this present material world, the earth and everything in it. Some might suggest a new material world to come.

From the context, however, we can see that the world Abraham was to inherit was the one typified by Isaac in contrast to the world typified by Ishmael. This promise was not given, nor was it going to be received, through the law. It was not the Old Covenant Jewish world. Since it was a promise declared to come through the righteousness of faith, or the gospel, it seems logical that the world of Romans 4:13 is the Christian world. If this is the case, we might expect to find evidence of it elsewhere in scripture.

There is a twofold promise found in Genesis 12:1-3 that is connected to the allegory of Abraham's two sons:

Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.

I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

There is a temporal and spiritual promise contained in this passage, and, as seen in Paul's allegory, the temporal promise would be developed and fulfilled first. This accounts for the fact that throughout the Old Testament, the fleshly promise overshadows the spiritual promise. While Hagar bears children, Sarah is barren and stands in the background. However, the fact that the temporal promise was first, and received primary consideration throughout the Old Testament, does not mean it has a greater value or standing than the spiritual promise: quite to the contrary. We have already seen that the purpose of the law was to serve as a shadow or pattern of good, or better, things to come.

The temporal promise was not the one on which Abraham set his heart. His hope was in Isaac, not Ishmael. His faith was extended beyond Canaan, the inheritance of his fleshly seed, to the land typified by Canaan that would be inherited by Isaac his spiritual seed. In other words, he did not look for inheritance in the Jewish world, but rather the Christian world, to which the Jewish world pointed. This truth is conveyed in Hebrews 11, where the spiritual promise is brought forth and given preeminence over the temporal promise:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise;

For he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.

Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude-innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland.

And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return.

But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:8-16).

The first thing we want to see in this text is in verse 9. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob dwelt in the Promised Land (Canaan) as in a strange country. Two things tell us that this temporal land was not

the country Abraham was looking for: he regarded it as a strange country, and he and his people continued to dwell in tents, living as nomads. The reason for this is explained in verse 10: “for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” What Abraham really was looking for was not in Canaan or the temporal promise, but the spiritual promise. What he really wanted would not come through Ishmael but Isaac. What did he desire, and see by faith? What made him confess that he was a stranger and a pilgrim in Canaan? Hebrews says, in 11:14, that he was looking for a country, but not Canaan, for he was already in that land. Nor was it his native land of Ur of Chaldea, for he could have “returned to this place” (Heb. 11:15). “But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them” (Heb 11:16).

Abraham was looking for the world that he and his seed should inherit, and this world, says Paul, did not come through the law but rather the gospel. The city he looked for was the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), or the Jerusalem above (Gal. 4:26). This is the new heaven and earth promised to Abraham and his seed, of which the Jewish world (the old heaven and earth) was a forerunner. The New Testament saints, born of Abraham’s spiritual seed, looked for this new world (2 Pet. 3:13) in anticipation of the time Ishmael would be cast out, or the old heaven and earth would pass away. The time was drawing near when the letter to the Hebrews was written, “...Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13).

Hebrews 12 also speaks of this distinction in terms of different mountains,

For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest,

and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore.

(For they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.”)

And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.”)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels,

to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect,

to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.”

Now this, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

For our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:18-29).

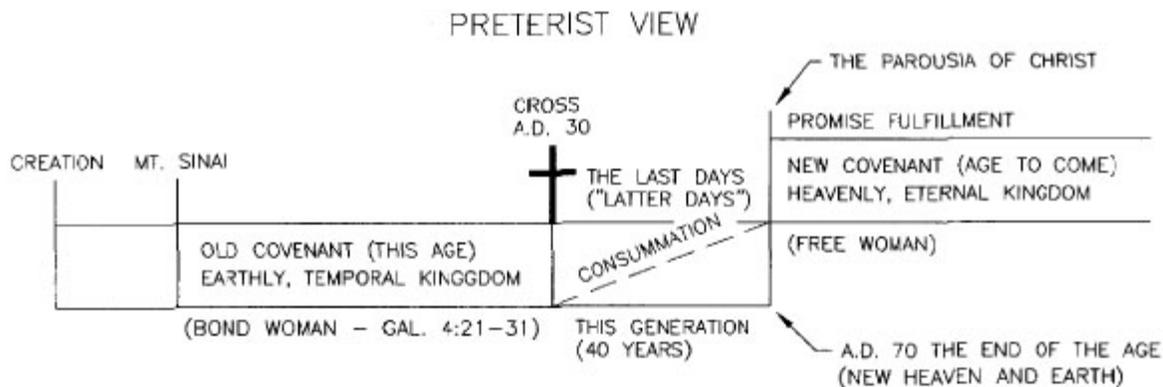
The chart at the beginning of this chapter seeks to illustrate these two mountains. The writer of Hebrews is making use of several contrasts, “For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched...” (Heb. 12:18). This was Mt. Sinai the mountain and covenant of Abraham’s fleshly seed. Those who follow Christ, however, are not children of the bondwoman. As children of the freewoman, we have come to mount Zion, and to the city of the living God (the one Abraham looked for while in Canaan), the heavenly Jerusalem (the one that belongs to the heavenly country mentioned in Hebrews 11:16).

Notice that the writer uses the present tense to describe their status. They were already approaching Mt. Zion, and this new world was something they could participate in. It was not a world in contrast to the material heavens and earth, but rather in contrast to the Jewish world. It is easy to misunderstand this distinction. The world promised to Abraham's spiritual seed stands in contrast to that world promised his fleshly seed, and this is the new heaven and earth that replaces the old heaven and earth. The present material world has nothing to do with either one of the worlds involved in God's scheme of redemption as typified by Ishmael and Isaac. Hebrews 12:25-28 shows the shaking of the first heaven and earth (the Old Covenant system) in order to make way for a new heaven and earth that cannot be shaken. Things that are shaken, as of things that are made refers to the temporal nature of the Jewish system, that was destined for destruction. The things that cannot be shaken refers to the intangible, spiritual nature of the Christian world or system, which cannot be destroyed by earthly foes. Hebrews 12:28 makes it clear that the writer was speaking of the Christian world – "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear."

The destruction of Jerusalem was a crucial point in God's scheme of redemption, for it was the end of one world, and the perfection and beginning of another world that had been born on Pentecost. This was the world promised to Abraham and his seed (Rom. 4:13). Everything promised to Abraham came right on schedule.



MAX KING, author, scholar and Bible teacher, is known for bringing the field of covenant eschatology to the forefront of biblical theology. This excerpt is from chapter 3 of *The Spirit of Prophecy*, first published in 1971. In 2002, a second edition was released.



"ABOUT TO"	"THIS GENERATION" ETC.	"THIS AGE, AGE TO COME, ETC."
MATT. 3:7	HEB. 2:5	MATT. 12:32
MATT. 12:32	HEB. 6:5	MATT. 13:39-40, 49-50
MATT. 16:27-28	HEB. 9:11	MATT. 24:3
MATT. 24:6	HEB. 10:1	MATT. 28:20
MARK 13:4	HEB. 10:27	MARK 10:30
LUKE 3:7	HEB. 13:14	LUKE 20:34-36
LUKE 21:7	1 PET. 5:1	1 COR. 2:6-8
ACTS 17:31	REV. 1:19	1 COR. 10:11
ACTS 24:14-15	REV. 12:5	2 COR. 4:4
ACTS 24:25		EPH. 1:21
ACTS 26:22-23		EPH. 2:7
ROM. 8:18		HEB. 1:1-2
ROM. 8:38-39		HEB. 6:5
1 COR. 3:21-23		HEB. 9:26
EPH. 1:21		
COL. 2:16-17		
2 TIM. 4:1		
HEB. 1:13-14		
	MATT. 11:16	
	MATT. 12:39	
	MATT. 12:41-45	
	MATT. 16:4	
	MATT. 23:36	
	MATT. 24:34	
	MARK 8:38-9:1	
	MARK 13:30	
	LUKE 11:29-32	
	LUKE 11:50-51	
	LUKE 17:5	
	LUKE 21:32	
	ACTS 2:40	
	PHIL. 2:14-16	
	HEB. 3:9-11	