

THE JOURNEY FROM BARRENNESS TO HOPE

Part I – The Journey Begins with Me

Have you ever read books or watch movies where two people were lost in a desert? Everywhere they trekked all they saw was a vast wasteland of yellow and white sand. The lack of water had sapped every ounce of strength in them; they had been reduced to crawling where shifting sand and dunes made it very difficult to move. Their faces were parched from the rays of the sun beating upon them mercilessly. Oh, how they wished for some water at this point.

Then, they looked up and saw from a distance what appeared to be a body of water. With all of their might they raced towards this golden savior; their hope for surviving was about to be answered. But, as they came closer to the “water” it slowly disappeared right before their very eyes. It was all an illusion, a *mirage*. The story ends with both individuals dying of thirst.

For many of us our lives resemble deserts and mirages. Our hopes and dreams may look real, but when examined carefully, they are just but false impressions that disappear right before our eyes. Our existences may look good, but we cannot say that they are perfect. Failure and imperfection surround us all the time; countless mistakes and crises shape us to become beings that are infertile and unfruitful. We are discouraged by how our lives have turned out. We tend to look back into the past and say to ourselves, “If only I did not choose to go in that direction,” or “What is the true meaning of my life?” We try to find true hope, but right when we think we have grasped it, it fades away. Our journeys in life are barren.

The Bible tells the life story of Abraham, a narrative that begins in barrenness. By all accounts we would have considered Abraham’s life to be useless at this point; a fruitless existence cannot leave any lasting imprints in this world. Yet, somehow, God had other plans for Abraham, plans that will in fact introduce growth in him and his family, and stimulate fruitfulness towards the nations of the world. But, Abraham must go on a journey of faith to discover hope in the midst of barrenness. The story begins in the book of Genesis, chapter eleven, verse 27:

Text: Genesis 11:27—12:9 (NLT)

^{11:27}This is the history of Terah's family. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran had a son named Lot. ²⁸But while Haran was still young, he died in Ur of the Chaldeans, the place of his birth. He was survived by Terah, his father. ²⁹Meanwhile, Abram married Sarai, and his brother Nahor married Milcah, the daughter of their brother Haran. (Milcah had a sister named Iscah.) ³⁰Now Sarai was not able to have any children.

³¹Terah took his son Abram, his daughter-in-law Sarai, and his grandson Lot (his son Haran's child) and left Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan. But they stopped instead at the village of Haran and settled there. ³²Terah lived for 205 years and died while still at Haran.

^{12:1}Then the LORD told Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you. ²I will cause you to become the father of a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and I will make you a blessing to others. ³I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you."

⁴So Abram departed as the LORD had instructed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all his wealth--his livestock and all the people who had joined his household at Haran--and finally arrived in Canaan. ⁶Traveling through Canaan, they came to a place near Shechem and set up camp beside the oak at Moreh. At that time, the area was inhabited by Canaanites.

⁷Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "I am going to give this land to your offspring." And Abram built an altar there to commemorate the LORD's visit. ⁸After that, Abram traveled southward and set up camp in the hill country between Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar and worshiped the LORD. ⁹Then Abram traveled south by stages toward the Negev.

The story of Abram (not yet Abraham) begins like any other ancient narrative with a discussion of his genealogy. Genealogies are important because it signifies the blessing of bearing generations of people. Terah had three sons. Haran, one of Terah's sons, bore a daughter named Milcah and a son named Lot. Milcah, in turn, married Nahor, another son of Terah. And the generations expand when one reads the whole of chapter eleven. So far, life was perfect.

But, a short commentary changes the story dramatically: Sarai (not yet Sarah) was unable to have children. (v. 30) What seemed to be perfect and ideal had turned into discouragement.

1. Our life stories are filled with **imperfection and incompleteness**. (11:27-32)

- We expect life to be full of blessings, but if we look carefully (and if we are honest to ourselves), our lives are fruitless and empty.

Abram's story started off in this manner. No future was to be found in his and Sarai's lives. Their very beings ended even before they began. Hope for them was non-existent.

Our personal stories are very similar to that of Abram and Sarai. We desire so much to have perfect lives, but we know how far we are from flawlessness. We cheat; we steal; we hurt; we get angry. Relationships are shattered because of our addictions and selfishness. Our beings do not testify to anything that bears righteousness and spiritual growth. Our lives are so incomplete and deficient.

- And many times we do not know the reasons behind such barrenness. This brings about a sense of helplessness.

Abram's story never mentioned the reasons behind his barrenness. What is worse than being spiritually unproductive is not knowing why we are unproductive. We have no hypotheses or guesses; silence is all we have. How can we find out the answers if we do not even know what questions to ask? A feeling of helplessness and despair begins to set in.

- There is no future for those who live in spiritual barrenness.

All we are certain of is that spiritual barrenness leads nowhere. We have no direction, no map of life, no guidance. We will always tread upon pathways that we have no clue where it will take us. We move in darkness; our only hope is hopelessness.

Can anything come out of such emptiness? Yes, but only God can cultivate new life from a void.

2. Yet God **generates new life** in the midst of our spiritual barrenness. (12:1)

- God speaks life towards us, which restores and replenishes our soul.

God exemplified this to Abram by giving him a calling. Abram was to go to the land that God was to offer him. God spoke life in an environment filled only with barrenness and sorrow. God provided direction for Abram when no assistance was found anywhere else. The process of restoration was at hand for Abram because God willingly chose him to be part of the divine plan.

All of us need a word from the Lord in our lives now. We cannot find the answers within us anymore. We are like sinking ships being pulled down by the empty depths of the ocean floor. We can no longer fool ourselves to believe that our lives, our dreams, and our passions are perfect and going according to plan. We are living in mirages; we have no future without God's involvement in us.

- God does not depend upon the potential of our circumstances. He will move forward, whether or not we are OK.

Based upon human standards most of us would conclude that Abram's life could not be used at all for anything good. He had nothing to offer; no purpose entailed no transformational power. It is better for Abram to sit on the sidelines until he is fully recuperated from his spiritual injuries. Then he could be used by the community of faith.

But, God does not operate like that. He does not wait for us until we are fully healed before he calls us into his mission. Healing comes as part and parcel of our calling! God looked at Abram and saw brokenness; yet that did not stop God from calling him out. God's motion of righteousness and mercy will always look towards the future and move towards the future, whether or not we are "ready" according to human principles.

- But, recognize that we must step out of our comfortable, safe, and barren existences and move into a journey of faith.

The problem resides within our false view of spiritual healthiness. We may think we are not ready, but that is not what God thinks. You see, every time we excuse ourselves because of our barrenness we become more and more comfortable in that empty setting. But, the road to spiritual recovery must entail a journey of faith with God. The journey must begin with us, with our choice to trust in the divine for direction.

3. Hope and well-being cannot be earned; **it can only be given by God.** (12:2-3)

- Recognize God's power behind his promises. Our future is not dependent upon our accomplishments; everything will be done by God himself.

Notice how God initiated his authority upon Abram's life:

I will cause you to become the father of a great nation...

I will bless you and make you famous...

I will make you a blessing to others...

I will bless those who bless you...

[I will] curse those who curse you...

Abram cannot do anything to earn true hope for himself. No personal accomplishments will lead Abram to find spiritual well-being. Hope begins with God and hope is given by God.

- Real life exists only when God intervenes and we receive his offering of new direction.

God is offering his hope for all people today; but, we must receive it. We will continue to live in barrenness as long as we keep refusing God's gift. We will continue to live without direction if we ignore God's love for us. We have no eternal future so long as we turn our backs against the Lord and his authority.

What should we do?

4. To receive hope **we must go on a journey with God.** (12:4-9)

We must obey God and follow his leading. Without a word of doubt Abram followed God. (v. 4) No comments and no complaints came out of Abram's mouth; he just faithfully obeyed. Our journey with God must start with our personal decision to faithfully obey God every step of the way. But, it will not be an easy journey.

- We will face many risks throughout this journey:
 - a. We will be in the minority. (v. 6)

Once you journey in faith you will soon recognize that you are in the minority. The rest of the "Canaanite" world is choosing not to have the same beliefs in God as you do. That is why a close personal relationship with the Lord and obedience to his will is very important. Experiencing true hope will come as we remain faithful to God.

- b. Yet we will be called to offer new life to the majority. (v. 6)

Recognizing that we are the minority does not mean we must isolate ourselves from the majority. Abram was reminded about the Canaanites because God will use him to play an integral role in drawing the nations back to the Lord. God loves us just as much as he loves those who do not follow him. Part of experiencing true hope involves our interest in the lives of those who do not have a relationship with God. When we journey with God we become his messengers of hope to others. As we discover hope we are also called to share that hope with someone else who is living in brokenness and barrenness. The same risk that God took when we were lost we must now offer to those who are now living in emptiness.

- c. We must constantly turn to God. (vv. 7-9)

The end of this particular story we read of Abram constantly turning to God in worship, putting the divine as his most important priority over everything else. The same is true for us today. God initiates contact with us when no hope is to be found in us. He is the only source for direction and guidance. He creates new life in us as he invests himself in us. His offering of authority is laced with his grace and love. Such unconditional actions deserve the proper response of worship back to God. We turn to him as we begin the search for hope. We look to him as we journey in faith with him. We lift him up as the most important priority in our lives. The journey will begin with us, but it is the Lord who will unravel his mysterious blessings along the way.