

THE JOURNEY FROM BARRENNESS TO HOPE

Part V – When Barrenness Persists

Text: Genesis 15:1-21 (NLT)

Here is a story told by a pastor named Greg Laurie:

A couple of years ago, my son Jonathan was taking scuba diving lessons. He had been trained for a few hours on the previous day, and now it was time for the scuba instructor to take him out for an actual dive. I had been certified as a scuba diver for about 10 years, so I decided to go along with them. As we went to get into the boat and go out for the dive, we noticed it was a really rough day. Jonathan was a little nervous about the whole thing. It had been calm the day before, and he had done most of his practicing in the swimming pool. Now we were going into the real ocean, where the waters were rough. The problem was that the waters were so rough that it was a little frightening. I could see the panic in Jonathan's eyes. I didn't know what to do, because I was feeling it a little bit myself.

(http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/ministry_articles/1310259.html)

A barren life looks somewhat similar to this story of Greg's son and scuba diving. When things are going well for us we are on top of the world. I suspect Greg's son was fairly confident as he was being trained in the swimming pool. But, when our circumstances change, we become victims of our circumstances. When Greg and his son witnessed the rough waves of the ocean, it was quite unlike the calmness of a swimming pool. As they focused more and more at the harsh ocean fear began to descend upon them; even for Greg, who was a certified scuba diver for ten years, he felt panic himself.

When barrenness persists we immediately forget about all the blessings and good things of God. All we can do is focus at our negative situations and be captured in fear. No matter how long we have been believers in Christ, no matter how much we have served in ministry, when our empty realities hit us, we tremble. We tremble in fright because we allow the barrenness to consume us. We no longer have hope that all will be well. In fact, when barrenness persists, it could even force us to question the very existence of God and his seemingly absence from our story.

Such is the case of the life of Abram. Here we have a person whose life had a special calling, to become the father of a great nation. And with all of the blessings that came his way, Abram allowed his barren circumstances to dictate how he saw his relationship with God. What happens when despite the calling of the LORD we remain impacted by the persistence of barrenness?

¹Afterward the LORD spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great."

²But Abram replied, "O Sovereign LORD, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since I don't have a son, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. ³You have given me no children, so one of my servants will have to be my heir."

⁴Then the LORD said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own to inherit everything I am giving you." ⁵Then the LORD brought Abram outside beneath the night sky and told him, "Look up into the heavens and count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that--too many to count!" ⁶And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD declared him righteous because of his faith. ⁷Then the LORD told him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land."

⁸But Abram replied, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that you will give it to me?"

⁹Then the LORD told him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰Abram took all these and killed them. He cut each one down the middle and laid the halves side by side. He did not, however, divide the birds in half.

¹¹Some vultures came down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away. ¹²That evening, as the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep. He saw a terrifying vision of darkness and horror.

¹³Then the LORD told Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, and they will be oppressed as slaves for four hundred years. ¹⁴But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. ¹⁵(But you will die in peace, at a ripe old age.) ¹⁶After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, when the sin of the Amorites has run its course."

¹⁷As the sun went down and it became dark, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. ¹⁸So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River-- ¹⁹the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites."

1. Sometimes we live in fear because barrenness **produces no change in life**. (vv. 1, 2-3, 8)

In Genesis 12 we read about God promising Abram that he will become the father of a great nation (Genesis 12:2). We also witnessed God telling Abram that the land will be possessed by Abram's own offspring (Genesis 13:14-17). Besides the promise, Abram himself experienced God's deliverance, from the deceit in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20) to the victory over the four kings and the rescue of Lot (Genesis 14:1-16). All of this should point Abram to trust in God for the fulfillment of the promise; since God liberated Abram through difficult times, Abram can trust in faith that God's promise of offspring will come true.

Unfortunately, this did not happen. The story of Genesis 15 began in a state of barrenness – Abram was living in fear. His life existed in apprehension because he was focusing on his immediate circumstances rather than depending upon a divine promise. Abram allowed his situation, having no son, to conclude that God's promise was not a blessing to him at all. A barren reality, a life without change, confined Abram into a lifeless existence.

An empty reality breeds uncontrolled fear in us. Fear submits us into hopelessness for barrenness produces nothing. Desolateness is unable to generate life-changing blessings. And when we focus intently upon our bare existences, doubt seeps into our souls. The grasp of fear is so overwhelming in us that even the promises of God are not enticing enough to strengthen our faith in him. All we see are empty formless lives – hope for the present and hope for the future are fictional and imaginary.

When we start to accept that barrenness is our identity we are doomed to a life of fear and unbelief. There is nothing in us that will testify to the beauty of the Creator. Divine possibilities are obsolete in a life filled with suspicion. How many of us have asked similar questions as Abram? How many of us have cast blame on God? How many of us have questioned God's provisions? How many of us have asked whether we can trust God? These are the footsteps of a barren existence.

2. But, God never yearns for us to be spiritually infertile. Instead, he desires **productive fruitfulness** in our lives. (vv. 1, 4-7)

Notice how God was proactive in quenching the bleak outlook of Abram's life. His approach was one of care and affirmation. God made sure to point Abram back to him. To be productive in fruitfulness meant that Abram must once again reconnect to the source of his calling, God himself. And God reminded Abram that the calling remained intact: he will protect Abram and Abram's reward will be great. Abram's own offspring will be the heir to the promise, through which many countless descendants will come from. God was not satisfied to see his servant spiritually infertile; he wanted Abram to be an agent of life-changing alteration.

The same is true for us today. The heart of God aches when he sees his children living a hopeless life, a life that does not produce genuine fruits. God understands that a tasteless existence generates nothingness. He knows we live in fear when we are not engaged in spiritual revolution. God craves for his people to release miracles that will heal broken lives and draw people towards his perfect love.

But, living in fear forces us out of a worshipful relationship with God. In order to restore our lives into productive fruitfulness we need to do at least two things. First, we must allow God to speak into our lives. No matter how much Abram was cornered by fear he gave God space to articulate truth to him. We must never allow fear to prevent God from reaching us. We need God to change us through his powerful voice via the Holy Spirit. Let God assure us that all is well for he is in control. Let God establish in us dynamic and bountiful blessings that will touch many souls. Let God remind us that he is our LORD – all of creation will submit under his lordship.

The second thing we must do to engage in a worshipful relationship with God is to believe in faith that his words for us are true and righteous. After God spoke to Abram and revealed his marvelous plan, Abram responded in simple faith – he believed. That was enough for God to declare Abram righteous. And that is enough for God to declare us righteous as well if we approach him in faith. We must receive his truth with open hearts, accepting God's way as the right way and the only way. This is one of the core transactions in worship, when the Divine approaches us in our brokenness and we reciprocate in faith for healing. It is in this vulnerable moment that we experience the transformation from spiritual infertility to productive fruitfulness.

3. This means we have to trust in God's promise of hope and **take active risks** to make that hope come true.

In verse one God spoke to Abram and said:

"Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great."

The word *reward* is normally taken to be something similar to an economic blessing. It seemed like God was offering a gift to Abram. But in this context the word is used quite differently.

- *Reward* – when a faithful servant is recognized for taking dangerous actions on behalf of the king's welfare

The spiritual insight here is that Abram was called to be a beacon of hope in the midst of hopelessness. For Abram to believe in faith meant taking risks to cultivate hope when circumstances around him prevented hope from growing. Yes, Abram had no son. Yes, Abram had no land. Yes, Abram was a foreigner in a foreign land. But, God called him to live a dangerous faith despite the obstacles coming his way.

Experiencing hope means that we live it out in the present moment. Hope is developed through our interaction with barrenness. An empty reality should never stop us from creating true hope for ourselves and for those around us because we are taking these faithful steps for our king, for our God.

- *Faith* acts upon a belief that God does not guess about the future but is the **controller** of the future

We have hope because we have faith in God and we take risks for God. Hope is developed because we know that God has a sure hold of the future; whatever he says will come true. We believe in God because he *said* he would pave the way for us. But, we also believe in God by *actively* taking the steps onto that pavement! Our faith is secured in this all-knowing God. God controls the future; God controls *our* future. This is what we have to believe in when barrenness keeps persisting and keeps destroying. We are called to be creatures of hope in both belief and praxis, regardless of our current situations.

4. **Binding to God in covenant** is key to unlocking hope in the midst of an empty existence. (vv. 7-12, 17-20)

The solidification of Abram's faith in God's promise was through this ancient tradition of worship. Covenant locked Abram's confidence in the God who sees all, who knows all, and who has the best plan for Abram's life. Abram fastened himself to God's spoken word that all the land will be his and his very own offspring will inherit the land.

We must bind ourselves in covenant with God in order to unleash hope for ourselves and for those that surround our lives. We have to hold onto God for in him we find our true purpose. We are not created to be empty hopeless creatures. The very opposite is true. God wants us to live vibrant and fruitful existences where we can showcase his love to those who desperately need it. Hence, when barrenness persists we must continue to pursue after God and his promise. Allow the LORD to change us and receive his work through our belief in him and in action for him. Attach yourself to him in a lifestyle of covenantal worship. Remember, God calls us to take dangerous risks for him. When we reflect such a lifestyle know full well that God will declare you righteous in faith.

Starting today make an effort to make a difference in life by radiating hope in all that you believe in and do. Begin in the small things and gradually work yourself up to the deeper issues of life. Do not feel frustrated at the traffic every morning anymore. Exude joy when you are standing in a long line at the supermarket because the person at the cashier stand is writing a check. Cling tightly to God's peace when you hear rumors of possible layoffs at work. Experience God's amazing purpose for you when your family members keep putting you down and saying negative remarks about your character. Do not allow circumstances to victimize you any longer. In the presence of barrenness we are creatures of hope and God longs for us to plant seeds of hope so that all will be blessed by him.

By the way, what ever happened to Greg's son? Here is the rest of the story:

But his instructor handled it perfectly. He said to Jonathan, "Look at me right now." Jonathan looked at him. He said, "Remember what I taught you? This is what you do." The instructor calmed him down. Jonathan put in his regulator, we went under the water, and immediately it was calm and beautiful and everything was fine.

Look at God right now and he will take you out of your barrenness into a fruitful life of hope.

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