Barren Beginnings

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Brief Description: This short series explores the topic of barrenness in Scripture. It is not specifically for barren individuals, although I pray it can serve as a comfort and support. The title is explained in the final (3rd) session.

Part 1

Let us pray: **Heavenly Father, You are God of all creation, and all blessings come from You. Give us Your Spirit through Your Word today so we may continue in trust toward you and love toward others. Show us the blessings sometimes hidden by sin in this world. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

In the beginning, God created and blessed. He filled each and every type of space until the waters teemed, the air sung, and the ground held every type of animal. God became so well-known for this expanding life that for many years *blessing* was understood in terms of *fertility.*

In a lot of ways, that makes sense. What were the results of God’s blessings in these passages?

* **Genesis 9:1 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**
* **Genesis 12:1-3 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**
* **Genesis 24:35 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**
* **Deuteronomy 15:6, 10 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Blessed families grew and spread. Blessed cattle and crops grew and sold. Blessed communities abounded with expanding economies. And, the first main female character in Scripture is *the Mother of All Living!*

Then, isn’t it ironic and interesting that the second main female character in Scripture is barren, as are so many important figures to come?

Eve born Cain, perhaps shortly after the fall, but he was not the promised seed who would deliver humanity according to God’s promise. Neither was their second son. How old was Eve when she gave birth to her third son, the son of promise, through whom Christ would eventually come? (See **Genesis 5:3** for help.)

Is this surprising to us? Does this reveal any expectations we may have about God granting children?

Fertility is, indeed, very important. Childbearing is so important that it is stressed over and over again. Fill the earth (Genesis 1:28) and refill the earth (Genesis 9:1). The very covenant with Abraham stressed family and Abraham’s line of descendants as the source of God’s mediation, promising, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

Pregnancy and childbirth was a distinct honor and both a religious and community endeavor. Because of a woman’s body and how common it can be, it was even assumed. Even so, this Bible study can discuss *seven* prominent female characters in Scripture who were barren.

Try to name six or seven barren women in Scripture:

1. Genesis 11:30: Sarai/Sarah, Abraham’s wife
2. Genesis 25:21: Rebekah, Isaac’s wife
3. Genesis 29:31: Rachel, Jacob’s second wife (three generations of initially barren marriages)
4. Judges 13:2: The wife of Manoah, Samson’s mother
5. 1 Samuel 1:5-6: Hannah, Samuel’s mother
6. 2 Samuel 6:21: Michal, David’s first wife, never had children
7. Luke 1:7: Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin

Isn’t it significant that the second main female character—and so many other main characters!—in Scripture is barren?

Who is the second main female character we meet? What stories—and divine promises—do we associate with her?

Can we remember any New Testament texts that speak about her—and us?

(Option discussions about **Galatians 4:21-27**; **Hebrews 11:11**; and **1 Peter 3:5-6**.)

Scripture specifically states Sarah was barren (Genesis 11:30). Further, the passage defines, or parallels, barrenness with having no children. Does that broaden our understanding of barrenness?

There is no question that Isaac’s birth was miraculous and a gift from God. Still, she was barren for a long time! Was this because she should have trusted God or prayed more?

Looking beyond Sarah, as significant as she is, how many *consecutive generations* in the Patriarch bloodline were barren?

Is that a significant number in Scripture?

And, does that shift our understanding about God’s covenantal promise with Abraham and Sarah? Isaac and Rebekah? Jacob and Leah?

Read **Genesis 12:1-3.** How does an ongoing presence of barren women impact how we see the bloodline—and faith—of Abraham and the Scriptures?

Now, look back at your list. Why was it scandalous for each one to have no child? Mark it above, next to their names.

When these women were finally granted children, what offices or rules did their children have? In other words, how significant are the results brought out by God from previous barrenness?

Barrenness plays a larger role in Scripture than describing a few women. It attains something like a thematic use, showing God’s work despite our own human limitations.

You have probably heard of Jesus serving as our Prophet, Priest, and King? Barrenness affected all those offices in the Old Testament, as well as the Davidic kingship, Levitic priesthood (in John the Baptizer), and preachers!

For our sake, our Lord Jesus is prophet, priest, and king. He is a child born to us, “a son *given;* and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Yet He, the greatest among woman's seed, was not born of fertility. Rather, His miraculous birth specifically teaches about the profound intervention of God, in flesh as well as in spirit. He is the Child no married couple could have born, lest His heavenly Father and His Word be doubted.

Let us pray: **Heavenly Father, You sent Your only begotten Son to earth. Thank You for granting us that Child. Thank You for all You have done, and continue to do, for the sake of our salvation and Your mercy. Keep us in Your Word. Amen.**

Part 2

Opening Prayer: **Lord God, Your ways are not like our ways. Guard us from presumptions and misunderstandings. Guide us in Your Word so we may learn from Your love and truth. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.**

As we consider barrenness in the Bible, let’s be careful and reverent. Ruth, for instance, bore no children with her first husband, but she is not called barren. Maybe her husband was; maybe he died very quickly; we don’t know all the details. Or, put more bluntly, Scripture refuses to tell us.

Michal

In our first session, we included Michal in a list of barren women. Her description in 2 Samuel 6:23 includes that she “had no child to the day of her death,”although she is never actually labeled as barren.

Have you learned the story of Michal? Read these verses to review:

* **1 Samuel 14:49**
* **1 Samuel 18:12-19**
* **1 Samuel 18:20-25**
* **1 Samuel 18:26-29**

Without more information about Michal, it is odd to hear her father call her a snare. Perhaps this is in the sense of bait: holding Michal in front of David, David would continue in war. Yet, 1 Samuel 18:28, Saul is even more afraid of David because Michal loves him.

Their love story continues, or ends, with 1 Samuel 19:11-17. David marries Abigail following 1 Samuel 25, during which time we learn Saul gave Michal in marriage to another man (1 Samuel 25:44).

The war between the houses of Saul and David was long. David had many sons, but in **2 Samuel 3:12-16** we see him seek her once more, despite her loving husband and David’s war against her family. 2 Samuel 6:20-23 culminates with David celebrating victory but Michal seeing David “uncovering himself . . . before the eyes of his servants’ female servants, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!” (2 Samuel 6:20).

Michal had no children to the day of her death. She “despised” David “in her heart” (1 Chronicles 15:29). Still, she is not entirely an unsympathetic figure. Used by her father and husband, taken from her home and a devoted husband, re-wed to a man with many wives: her situation and life were complicated, to say the least.

Having no children further complicated her life. Would Saul have taken her away from David if she’d born David a child? Would David have honored her more? Would the Kingdom of David, and the sad estate of David’s children, faired differently? We cannot know. We cannot even know whether God punished her with infertility or whether she was infertile at all!

Note: There is some confusion about 2 Samuel 21:8, which indicates Michal raised five sons; however, the father of those children was her brother-in-law. In that context, it appears she raised her sister's children after her sister died. Some texts name her sister there instead of Michal.

Solving a Problem?

A common tendency regarding barrenness is to focus on what a particular woman (or man) is able to do or not do. When we try to apply Scripture to barrenness in a practical way, even with the best intentions, we may unintentionally continue along those lines.

We could try to write a list right now of things people do to try to solve, or go around, barrenness. However, isn’t there much more to barrenness than action or inaction?

Barrenness is specifically mentioned 21 times in Scripture. Who was barren in **Genesis 20:18**?

Many women suffer the grief and pain of having no children. They are not all permanently barren although some are. Some husbands are barren! A majority of those who suffer in want of children are simply unmarried.

Young or old, those pains are like a problem without solution. Yes, love and serve the young, whether you are a parent or not, but nieces and nephews cannot automatically dispel grief, whether one’s own body results in barrenness or one’s situation.

Again, our call from God to love our neighbors as ourselves includes children, but loving others as oneself, when one is grieving, can still be painful.

Scripture is clear that God incorporated barren women—indeed, the state of barrenness—into His chosen people, His chosen land, and His chosen means of salvation, both in the bloodline of Christ and, as we will see, even in our own lives.

Where do Children Come From

Barrenness, as we know it as unintentionally unable to bear children, was not intended within creation. Generally women have a stage of fertility in their lives; God has blessed us that way biologically, and thanks be to God for that! But where do children ultimately come from? (Read verses as time allows)

* **Psalm 127:3**
* **Psalm 139:13**
* **Genesis 30:2**
* **Genesis 33:5**
* **Isaiah 8:18**

Does barrenness hinder God? Does God promise to heal all barrenness in this fallen word?

If barrenness can be used by God, is it really about *doing* more or *better* in some way?

“As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything” (Ecclesiastes 11:5). Thanks be to God that *He* provides the Child we all need: Jesus Christ, our Lord. *He* grants us family in His Church, where people are reborn, hearts are renewed, and griefs are met with the hope of God’s provision, now and in the world to come!

Let us pray: **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there is so much we neither know nor understand. Thank You for revealing so much to us in Your Word. Keep us in Your gifts, and keep us ever close to You. Amen.**

Part 3

Opening Prayer: **O Lord, You are the Way, the Truth, and the Light. Keep us in Your Word and strengthen us by Your gifts and means of grace. Amen.**

Our God creates and fills. He sends His Son to be the Child we all need, a Savior from every sin and weakness. He speaks with care, offering us clarity while giving us His Spirit, and connects us with the cross through Baptism and the Body and Blood of Christ through the Bread and Wine. He works in history and outside of time. Still, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Romans 11:33).

Read **Isaiah 7:14** (and stay on that page). What connotations do you have with this verse? What have you been taught regarding it?

Most of us are most familiar with its place at Christmas time. We are not so familiar with these warm words of life and assurance being spoken to an evil king!

That beautiful prophecy in Isaiah is spoken amid warnings of the coming Assyrian invasion. People would walk in great darkness, but they would also receive a great light (Isaiah 9:2). God speaks judgment against Israel, as the tribes metaphorically devour one another (Isaiah 9:21).

Let’s read it in context: **Isaiah 7:10-17**. What possible connection lies between this passage and barrenness?

While our Lord will make life abound so much that even a virgin shall be with child, King Ahaz embodies the barrenness of Israel! Yet, God will still provide life and every blessing, fulfilling His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Adam and Eve of old.

Barren Metaphor

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were like a bride (Isaiah 49:18), a wayward bride (Ezekiel 16), and then a mother sacrificing her children to Baal. When the Israelites in the Old Testament turned away from God and the two covenants that kept God’s presence among them, they bore death. They brought judgment upon themselves.

The blessings promised Abraham were unsought, and the presence of God through the conditional covenant in Deuteronomy was broken. Mercy was disregarded as unnecessary and God’s offer to forgive and reconcile was rejected on both individual and collective levels.

In the following verses, how is sin and death barren rather than fertile?

* **Proverbs 30:16**
* **Romans 6:23**

Sin is an unquenchable and destructive hunger. It is selfishness and greed. It stands in stark contrast to God’s merciful betrothal, steadfast commitment, and freely given forgiveness. While God and His righteousness overflow with love and mercy to fill with good things and satisfy, our fallen nature is blind to the value and nature of His gifts!

Still, our Lord is unchanging. He remains faithful to His people, although Israel, which He treated and loved as a Bride, stopped knowing Him and bearing His fruit.

Whether that fruit is understood as faithful fruits of the Spirit or believing children, the Old Testament displays exactly how “good” we are away from God. How does the display of Israel’s pattern of rebellion and repentance mirror our own? What can we do apart from God?

How does the metaphor of barrenness describe humanity in its fallen state of sin?

Did miracles keep the Israelites faithful? Special treatment? Cultural identity? What keeps us alive in Christ?

The Triune God offers new and restored life. And, He offers it with no prior requirements whatsoever. He is not supplementing or adding an extra source of DNA. How does **Isaiah 54:1-3** demonstrate that God continues to give new life and raise up for Himself a faithful people?

Read **John 1:12-14.**

Our Lord is specific. Rebirth, or “birth from above,” is not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man. Birth from above is not from personal sacrifice, predispositions, genetics, physical abilities, or the choice or strength of an individual. It is *entirely* of God. All who receive Him, who believe in His name, receive from God the right to become, and be, children of God.

Barren Perspective

It appears counter-intuitive, but being barren in Scripture allows us to see how God works in this world without success from our own efforts or characteristics. We see how our Lord cares for individuals and families, positions and the very people of God.

In short, there is an *ironic* use. Our Lord’s wisdom is often found ironically in our own foolishness. Death comes to us all, yet He conquers death through death. Our Matriarch in faith was old and barren (1 Peter 3:6), and a virgin gave birth, bringing great light into darkness.

All of us have a tendency to focus on what we do or what we have to offer. Yet, how does God’s work through barren women offer us a different perspective?

How does viewing ourselves as spiritually barren apart from Christ affect how we see ourselves? How we see those with physical barrenness?

Conclusions

The days are coming, “when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’” (Luke 23.29). Crisis came to Jerusalem, and crises can come to us. Only the Lord can carry us through. And, if that includes barrenness, we can remember that in two places, the Bible rephrases Isaiah 54:1 to say, “Blessed are the barren:” Luke 23:29 and Galatians 4:27. The Lord is very clear: blessed are the barren. Not because of themselves. Not because of their circumstances, but rather true blessing is finding favor in the sight of God.

A woman was in the crowd. She yelled out to our Lord, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” and Jesus replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:27-28).

Fertility does not save. Childbearing apart from faith—apart from that one Bethlehem Babe—is an altogether different blessing.

Whether we have children or not, we can join in to say:

**“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the child of her who is married,” says the Lord” (Isaiah 54:1). The Lordhas sent us His own Child and raised up children for Abraham from our own hearts of stone!**

From our own barren spiritual beginnings, where will God take us? Our Creator makes a place for us, and He will fill it with His own children! He sets each of us, barren or not, into a home and credits us with Christ!

Closing Prayer: **Create new hearts and sustain us in our unique positions in this life. Thank You for all You have done for us. Spread Your Word and fill this earth with the glory of Your Son! Amen.**