

God's Key Redemption in Your Season of Barrenness

As a pastor, I listen to the hearts of the saints. I hear their hurts, aches, pains, disappointments and fears—and I feel them as my own. These days, from too many people, I hear and feel erosion of hope, much of which comes as a result of delayed promises. God hears and feels this as well, but His good purposes lie behind every delay of promise.

Four women grace the pages of Scripture whose wombs God closed but whose stories come to us laden with lessons about the heart of God and the ways in which He chooses to work. Sarah (Abraham's wife) lived as a barren woman into her old age. Rachel (Jacob's wife) suffered as her less attractive sister bore children while she could not. Hannah (mother of the prophet Samuel) suffered the taunts of her husband's other wife as she lived year to year without a child. Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist in the New Testament) suffered, as did her ancestral mother Sarah. Each of these women lived under a cloud of deep despair and anguish of soul.

In Bible times, a woman who could not bear a child was thought to be cursed. Her whole purpose and value as a person in that culture revolved around her ability to reproduce. If she couldn't conceive and bear a child—especially a son—she would be looked down upon and despised by her community. Even friends and family would believe that something was wrong with her, that there must have been hidden sin somewhere in her life. She would suffer utter devastation of heart and spirit.

Barrenness, the unfruitful womb, makes a fitting metaphor for what a lot of us feel today. It's the sense that you can't seem to reproduce, to bear the fruit that you know God has promised. It seems like you're stuck, blocked somehow, and no matter what you do, you can't seem to move into the fullness

of the Lord that you know is reserved for you.

You began with dreams and hopes for your life and ministry, but somewhere down the road, they started to wane. Maybe it was the end of the marriage you thought would last, on which you pinned so many hopes and dreams.

Perhaps you've been part of a church—maybe even a leader of one—and have seen God pour out His Spirit to heal people and grant visitations of His presence and power. Yet for years on end the church seems stuck and unable to grow past a certain point. Try as you might, you can't figure out why. After all the effort and energy you've expended, it makes no sense.

In all of this your sense of hope has been broken. "Hope deferred makes the heart sick," says Proverbs 13:12a. You wonder if maybe you're cursed. Perhaps God doesn't like you. Where is He, after all?

Two words appear in Scripture to describe how Sarah, Rachel, Hannah and Elizabeth felt: reproach and disgrace. Reproach means "to speak to someone in tones of disappointment or disapproval." Disgrace comes to someone whose moral rectitude or value as a person has come into question.

In each of those four cases of a closed womb, through the barren woman came the child of promise—and that child became the turning point for redemptive history in his day, often after an impossibly long period of waiting. Sarah finally bore Isaac, through whom came the promise to Abraham, father of nations, and the birth of the entire nation of Israel. Rachel gave birth to Joseph, who rose to become second only to Pharaoh over all Egypt, just in time to save his family from famine. Hannah brought the prophet Samuel into the world. Samuel carried enormous authority in Israel and anointed Israel's first two kings. Finally, the fruit of Elizabeth's womb was John the Baptist, the first prophetic voice in 400 years and the forerunner of Jesus Himself.

Repeatedly, God brings key redemption and turning points in the history of salvation through what has appeared to be the barren life. Something about the suffering that results from extended barrenness brings about the kind of character changes that prepare the way for the birth of blessing and destiny.

God calls history-makers out of the barren places and the vastness of the wilderness. Those are the places where godly people get their training.

Wait for it: The promise is coming! {eoa}

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