

A Princess to All the World

Genesis 11:27-21:27

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Four thousand years ago, barrenness was the ultimate disgrace; it was a sign of divine disfavor. If you didn't have children, it's was believed that God had something against you.

Then, to add insult to injury, not only was a woman ridiculed by others because they believed her to be shunned by God, a woman who could not bear children was considered disposable by her husband.

Barrenness in the ancient world was ALWAYS the woman's fault and Sarai was barren.

The Bible's full of irony, and the story of Sarai and Abram "fits the bill." God had great plans for Abram. This man was to be the "father" of many nations.

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At the beginning of our story, God tells Abram to leave his homeland and relatives and go to a land that He would show him.

Genesis 12:1, *"The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."*

Following in faith, they uprooted their lives, left behind their families, and ended up settling in Canaan or which would later be called the "Promise Land."

God was making all the necessary preparations for nation-building through Abram and Sarai.

But month after month, Sarai slowly came to believe that there would be no multitude of offspring, no nation building.

We can only imagine how Abram and Sarai felt as they journeyed through this range of emotions not only month after month, but year after year, even decade upon decade.

Besides the added social stigma and pressure on Sarai, the disappointment must have been doubly so. I can't imagine the weight she carried on her shoulders day, after day, after day.

Still, Abram didn't divorce her. He not only continued to believe God's promise, but he believed Sarai would be blessed, too. So it was that Abram and Sarai journeyed through life together.

After settling in Canaan, drought and famine struck the land. Because of this, they were faced with the choice of finding a new place to live or die of starvation.

Weighing their options, they chose to move to Egypt where the Nile river basin promised infinite abundance.

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But there was a problem in this decision. The Pharaoh of Egypt was known to be very promiscuous. He would stop at nothing to have access to a beautiful woman.

Yet, compared to starving, Abram believed the Pharaoh was the lesser of two evils.

So, Abram told Sarai that they would move to Egypt until the famine ended. But... He also told Sarai, who was an exceptionally beautiful woman, that she must claim to be his sister.

He did this so the Pharaoh wouldn't kill him in order to possess her. That's what the Pharaoh did. He killed husbands so he could have their wives.

Genesis 12:11-13, *“As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.”*

Now, in case you don't know what all this means; Abram basically asked Sarai to give herself to the Pharaoh so he wouldn't be killed on her behalf.

For women, who like a *“knight in shining armor”* kind of guy; a man who'll defend them no matter what, this is pretty disappointing.

But Sarai complied. We don't know why. Perhaps she feared Abram would divorce her if she didn't follow his wishes.

And, of course, the only thing worse than a barren woman is a barren, divorced woman. So, she was stuck between a *“rock and a hard place.”*

Nevertheless, she called herself Abram's sister and sure enough, she ended in Pharaoh's harem as expected; at least until God intervened.

Genesis 12:17, *“But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai.”*

God punished Pharaoh and his whole household with a plague because he had taken another man's wife. Perhaps Sarai had a reason to hope, after all.

Because of this, Pharaoh kicked Abram and Sarai, the only ones not affected by the plague, out of Egypt where they returned to their home in Canaan.

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After returning, Abram began to doubt. He despaired that the head of his household will be the only one who will become his heir.

Genesis 15:2-3, "But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Then God speaks to Abram again to reinforce His promise. Genesis 15:4, *"Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir."*

God has other plans. He takes Abram outside and tells him to count the stars; God promises that Abram's very own flesh and blood would be more numerous than the stars.

Genesis 15:5, "He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Abram believed. In fact, even Sarai sensed that something had changed.

As you read through the story, you can almost feel that Sarai has noticed Abram's hopes of having his own children have been refreshed.

So, she decides to take matters into her own hands. Believing that she'll never bear a son for Abram, Sarai gives her slave, Hagar, to him for a wife.

She didn't have to do this, but she is still committed to him and to their marriage. She wants to give him all that he desires.

Now, there are a few things about this offer that are important to note.

First, Abram could have asked for Hagar a long time ago, just as he could have divorced Sarai. But Abram chose not to pursue either of these paths.

Secondly, in the ancient world, when a servant bore a child to her master, that master and his wife had full rights to the child as if it were their very own. In other words, the servant would be like a surrogate.

So, Hagar becomes pregnant and the result is rather predictable. Sarai becomes jealous of Hagar.

Genesis 16:4-5, "He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."

By the way, this might be the best place to mention that the name Sarai means "argumentative."

Sarai begs Abram to fix the problem, which, remember, she created; and Abram gives permission for her to do with her slave as she pleases.

Genesis 16:6, "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her."

The Hebrew seems to indicate that she may have even been overly abusive, and Hagar, who could not handle such treatment, fled.

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At this point, it's been decades that Abram and Sarai have remained childless. Sarai is understandably disheartened.

After mistreating Hagar and forcing her to flee, it almost makes you wonder if the persistent disappointment has driven her to near insanity.

We begin to wonder if Abram and Sarai will just pass the rest of their years in numb compliance; doing only what is necessary to get by—no vitality, no hope, just sadness.

The Bible instructs us that we should “*wait in hope for the Lord.*” But when you've trusted and waited and hoped and trusted and waited and hoped, and God hasn't answered your prayers; it's hard to keep trusting, and even harder to keep waiting, and nearly impossible to keep hoping.

But God wasn't done. He never is, I guess. Because God comes around again. This time he appears to Abram, who is now 99 years old.

Genesis 17:1-5, “*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers. Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.”*”

Again, God tells Abram that he'll be the father of many nations, and even makes a covenant with him to seal the pact. Because of this, God changes Abram's name to *Abraham*.

Then, finishing up the terms of the covenant, Genesis 17:15-16 tell us, *“God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”*

With this subtle name change—only an “h”—her name becomes sacramental, covenantal. Sarai means argumentative, but Sarah means “princess.”

Sarah’s influence will extend far past the boundaries of Canaan. She becomes a “princess” to all the world.

Now, just to reinforce this news, and to make sure Sarah knows she’s blessed just like Abraham, God appears one more time as three visitors.

As they’re conversing with Abraham, Sarah is within earshot and God knows it. Abraham’s told that in a year’s time, Sarah will bear a son. Abraham has heard this news before, but Sarah hasn’t.

Genesis 18:10-12, *“Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”*

And she reacts the same way Abraham did, she laughs. What else can you do when you’ve endured 90 plus years of agonizing disappointment?

What else can you do when your hopes and dreams have been dashed to pieces not just once, but over and over again?

What else can you do when you're far beyond childbearing years and God walks up and casually mentions that, by the way, this time next year you'll have a son? You laugh.

Yet, events transpired exactly as God said they would. One year later, Sarah gave birth to a son. The son was named Isaac, which means laughter.

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Conclusion

After years of tears, Sarah was finally able to feel pure, unreserved joy. After drowning in hopelessness, Sarah was given hope.

After decades of disappointment, Sarah ultimately received what she desired. Isaac was the embodiment of all that desire, all that hope, and all that joy.

He was truly a gift from God, given in God's own way; a reminder that God is never really "through" with us, even when we try and take matters into our own hands, even when we find it hard to summon just one glimmer of hope or faith.

If God could do this impossible thing for Sarah at the age of ninety, what will he do for you and me?

The possibilities are endless. Sometimes we may feel as if things will never go "right." But through all the disappointments of this life, we can always give thanks to God for HOPE.

Genesis 18:14a, *"Is anything too hard for the LORD?..."*