

Barrenness Is Fruitlessness

by G.W. North

The sermon emphasizes the importance of fruitfulness and the desire of God's heart to have children and bring forth fruit.

Scripture: Genesis 1:28, Genesis 30:1, 1 Samuel 1:10, 2 Kings 4:14, Luke 1:25, Luke 13:6-9, John 15:5, Romans 7:4, Galatians 5:22-23, Hebrews 2:13

Topics: "Spiritual Fruitfulness", "Union with Christ"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of spiritual fruitfulness in the life of believers, drawing parallels between marriage and the union with Christ as essential for producing fruit unto God. He highlights that just as childlessness was seen as a reproach in ancient times, a lack of spiritual fruit is a serious concern for the Church, which is called to be united with Christ and fulfill God's desire for many children in faith. North illustrates this through the stories of barren women in the Bible, such as Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, who exemplified deep longing for fruitfulness, reflecting God's heart for His people. Ultimately, he asserts that true life in Christ is marked by the bearing of spiritual fruit, which is the evidence of a vibrant relationship with God.

Transcript

In Romans chapter 7 verses 1-4 Paul uses the figure of marriage to point many truths relating to our union with Christ, not the least of which is stated thus, 'that we should bring forth fruit unto God.' There is no doubt in Paul's mind that God is looking for what He has ordained as the normal result of marriage between Him who is risen from the dead and those who are 'dead to the law through the body of Christ,' viz., born-again ones. We may note also that Paul makes the thought of resurrection a very important one: 'married to Him who is raised from the dead.' Resurrection, marriage, fruit, is the order. No resurrection and marriage, no bringing forth of fruit.

Marriage in spirit by the Spirit to the risen Lord Jesus Christ is here set forth as the privilege of all the regenerate saints. It is taken as a foregone conclusion to being buried with Him by baptism into His death. For this is in order that we may be raised from the dead with Him, be of His resurrection and really live unto God by bringing forth fruit unto Him. The Church's great function in this context is to be so united to her Lord and His desires that as a result God's children may come forth.

In ancient Jewry a childless marriage was reckoned to be a thing of reproach. So much so indeed, that Elisabeth the mother of John Baptist, in her joy at the knowledge of impending motherhood, bursts forth,

'Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men' (Luke 1: 25). So natural is the expectation of children within the marriage bond, that it was felt something was wrong with the marriage if children did not follow as the normal fruit of the union. In the beginning God, creating man in His own image, made them male and female; together they were man. Following this He blessed them, telling them to be fruitful and multiply; and He concluded His activities that day by saying, 'It was very good.' Therefore, from the time that Moses by inspiration of God wrote the history of creation, fruitful marriages were considered blessed of the Lord.

To be married and childless then was to be either unblessed or disobedient, or perhaps both; and very little difference would be adjudged between the two. Therefore, reproach lay upon any married woman who had no children. It was felt that somehow Elisabeth had incurred God's displeasure -- hence her statement. Childless couples were an enigma or a stigma.

Other women in scripture beside Elisabeth had felt the reproach of barrenness. In searching the Old Testament records, four outstanding examples of tragic barrenness and broken-heartedness are to be found in the persons of Sarah, Rachel, Hannah and the great woman of Shunem. By these women the Holy Spirit has given us an insight into the sorrow and heartache which lay behind childlessness of old, and also reveals what lies in His own heart regarding the matter.

Sarah we know was chosen of God to become the 'mother' of Israel, even as Abraham was the 'father'. Although these two knew nothing of the story of creation, yet the desires of God written deep in their nature set Sarah's heart longing for the ultimate consummation of marriage -- a child of her own. She had never read those beatific, commanding words concerning fruit in Genesis 1, for they had not then been written. The world awaited the coming and calling, the commissioning and commanding of Moses ere the history of creation should be committed to men. When it came, the writing but confirmed the works of God; for Sarah, all natural, found within her as a law of her very being the human counterpart of divine longings.

The story of the great unsatisfied desire of both Abraham and Sarah is conveyed to us in chapters 15 and 16 of Genesis. In the former chapter we find the Lord comforting faithful Abraham's heart with the certainty of His promise that he should indeed have a son of his own. But such news seemed only to mock all the maternal longings of Sarah for, despite the promise, she still as yet bore him no child. It was this unfulfilled longing that led her finally to suggest to Abraham that he take Hagar to be his wife. If only she could obtain children by her handmaid. The suggestion was distasteful enough, but to Sarah who knew nothing of the saving power of Christ, the end justified the means; she wanted children.

That it was a reproach even in those days to be a childless wife is fully revealed in Hagar's attitude to her mistress, for when the Egyptian maid discovered that she was to be a mother she absolutely despised Sarah, with dire results. The bitterness of the reproach that she had not borne children so rose in her heart, that in her jealousy Sarah persecuted Hagar until she could stand it no longer and fled into the wilderness to escape the undeserved punishment. The story of God's gracious dealings with each of those erring souls is fully told in the subsequent verses, but in the midst of all this one thing stands out clearly: Sarah's natural longing and disappointment found no consolation in anything or anyone until one day God gave her the child she desired.

As it was in the beginning, with Sarah the 'mother' of God's chosen race, so also was it the same later with Rachel and Hannah and the Shunamite, her 'daughters'. In each of them the identical aching heart-cry was there. Expressed in different ways according to the differing temperaments of each of the women, it is

written into the sacred history as a lasting testimony to the misery of unfulfilled desire. It was not only the frustration of mother instinct that made Rachel cry out, 'Give me children or else I die' (Genesis 30:1), but also the sense of reproach (v. 23). The same may be said of Hannah as well, for it is recorded of her in 1 Samuel 1 that she wept much and went off her food, and 'was in bitterness of soul.'

Both these women were greatly loved by their husbands. Jacob had spent fourteen long years serving Laban, Rachel's father, as a dowry for her. But great as Jacob's love for Rachel was, her grief at her inability to bear children and her constant cry to her husband caused him at last to be very angry with her. It was not his fault she was childless, and his reply to Rachel reveals very clearly that he regarded her barrenness as something that only God could rectify.

It was the same with Elkanah, Hannah's husband, in his day. He tried by every means he knew to comfort his wife in her disappointment. He gave her special gifts connected with the yearly sacrifice, and pointed out that he was better to her than ten sons, but all to no avail; she wanted a son and nothing else would satisfy her. How plainly this is brought out in the record. Nothing brought alleviation to Hannah. The annual feast and sacrifice and worship and gifts, even though the latter were the adoring double portions of her husband's bounty, were turned in her to bitterness of soul. It seemed to her that all was in vain unless the basic reason for her union with her loving Elkanah should be fulfilled. Her yearly trip to Shiloh to worship in the temple of the Lord was sheer misery. Her enemy only took advantage of it to torment and provoke and afflict her. What was wrong with the marriage? Just one thing, she had no child. Apparently that was failure and loss without compensation.

Again, reading later in scripture in 2 Kings 4, it seems that Gehazi, Elisha's servant, rightly interprets the heart of the great woman of Shunem. In answer to the prophet's question, 'What is to be done for her?' Gehazi said, 'Verily she hath no child.' So far as we are able to see, this woman had never once mentioned her childlessness to either Elisha or Gehazi. Moreover, she did not at the time entertain any hope of ever having a child, nor did she believe it possible. In fact, she openly accused Elisha of lying to her when he promised her a son. But despite all the improbabilities and impossibilities, her heart still wanted the dear fruit of marriage.

She was a great woman, having great powers of perception with open-hearted generosity and strength of character. Doubtless had she lived within the days of the ingathering of the bridal church of Christ she would have been classed with those who could truly be called Christ-like, a living branch of the vine really bearing the fruit of the Spirit. But bearing such fruit had never satisfied her, and underneath everything Gehazi recognised it: virtues do not make up for barrenness. We see also that she was as humble as she was great, for she sought nothing as a reward for her generosity. To be mentioned by the prophet to the king or to the captain of the host would have meant recognition and reward, riches and fame, but her answer to his suggestion of such repayment for her loving-kindness was, 'I dwell among mine own people.' She wanted nothing: she did all she did for love. But not all she was or had, nor all she did, made up for the greatest disappointment of her life -- she had never embraced a son.

So in these four women we have seen that great privilege and great love, and great gifts and great character, did not make up for their obvious lack of children. They each were greatly blessed and fruitful in many things, but fruitfulness along the lines of personal gifts, or graces, or possessions, is not offered nor was it accepted as a substitute for the other greater and fundamental fruit. None of these could replace the sense of grievous and reproachful loss in the essential field of reproduction. All these women were either pitifully barren or, for some reason not disclosed, could not enjoy the blessedness of fruitfulness within the

marriage union as they ought, and for which it existed. Surely divine election and surpassing love, and worthy endowments related to the commemorative sacrifice, and acknowledged greatness, considered separately or conjoined in one, wonderful as all these things are, in themselves fall woefully short of their real purpose if in any person they do not result in that kind of embodied fulfilment which is the fruit God seeks.

If we may borrow a phrase taken directly from the lips of the Lord Jesus Himself in the story recorded in Luke 13: 6-9, we shall know the authentic description of the desires of His Father's heart in this matter, 'Behold . . . I come seeking fruit . . .' Although it was spoken of other fruit and in an entirely different context, God's attitude to life is always the same, fruitfulness. There is no mistaking the plain implications and statements of the Lord; only fruitfulness justifies life. Apart from fruit-bearing, 'Why cumbereth it the ground? Cut it down.' The answer given again points the purpose for existence, 'If it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.' Both Husbandman and vine-dresser agree, and grace and time are afforded that God's purposes should be achieved. So if the purpose for which life is granted be unfulfilled, only destruction remains.

All this seems to be borne out very distinctly in the person of our blessed Lord Jesus Himself. It appears He expected and found that the result of union with His Father through death and resurrection was children, and in this He is the perfect example to His people. In Hebrews 2: 13 we find Him quoted as saying, 'I will put my trust in Him . . . behold I and the children which God hath given Me.' Thus it may not be so incongruous to consider the cry of Rachel of old as though it were found in the lips of the Lord Jesus Himself, 'Give me children or else I die,' for it is most certain that this is the true desire of the Godhead. Jesus was to be and is the captain of salvation leading many sons unto glory. Father's heart was and is wanting many, many more sons in His eternal home, each one like unto his captain Jesus, and there can be no doubt that it is for this that the Holy Ghost came. It is He alone who creates, ratifies and cements men in union with the risen Christ. This He does in order that the cry of His heart may be found upon their lips also, 'Give me children or I die.'

All those spiritual qualities (of character) that form the dispositional characteristics of life called 'the fruit of the Spirit' were to be found in the person of the Lord Jesus from His childhood upward. But this fruit, precious and vital though it is. was not sufficient for Him and His Father. God must have children as well as progressive and maturing personal perfection in any individual.

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