

Hope for the Hopeless

Luke 1:26-38

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It is hard to believe that Christmas is just around the corner. People from around the globe will be celebrating the birth of the Son of God. While the manner of our celebrations may vary, we will all be focused on one thing ... giving tribute to the most significant birth in all of human history. The story of Christmas touches every single person; believer, and unbeliever, alike.

The presentation of the Christmas story has been radically cleaned up over the centuries. We have tried to make the story palatable to the world; therein, we have lost the true hopelessness of the world into which Jesus was born. One thing for sure, life in Judea around 6 B.C. was not a pleasant time to be alive. Herod the Great had seized the throne through a series of bloody murders while Rome looked the other way. Then, once Herod was in power, he guarded his stolen title of King of the Jews with ruthless abandon. History records that he was willing to put his own sons to death if he perceived that they were becoming a political threat to him.

Herod was not Jewish; however, he pretended to be by ridding his diet of pork. Historians tell us that Herod had a ferocious appetite for murder. He is also credited with building a magnificent temple in Jerusalem for the Jews. He was responsible for appointing one corrupt priest after another, to do his personal bidding. Herod was particularly fond of the provision in Old Testament Law that required a temple tax to be imposed on the people. However, he repeatedly ignored God's Ten Commandments. He broke the very first one by building cities in honor of the Roman emperor. These cities were complete with temples dedicated to his host of Roman deities.

During this time, if you were well connected and independently wealthy, you would enjoy a time of unprecedented economic and political advancement. However, if you fell among the overwhelming majority of the people, you would experience a time of horrific oppression. It is easy to see how a thick and dark cloud of despair had settled over the people of Israel. It is into this darkness and despair that Jesus would make His entrance onto the stage of human experience.

A Faithful Couple

Somewhere in the hill country of Judea, a woman named Elizabeth became pregnant with her first child. To say that the news astounded the people of her community is probably an understatement. The news of Elizabeth's pregnancy was not all that remarkable under the normal circumstances of conception. But this news took on a whole new twist in the conversations of her neighbors because Elizabeth was well past the child-bearing age.

Everyone who knew Elizabeth and her husband, Zacharias, knew that they had prayed for a child all of their married life. The prayer appeared to have gone unanswered as Elizabeth simply was not able to conceive. As a matter of fact, she was known in her community as barren. In that time of history, a barren condition was often attributed to God's judgment for sin. Can you imagine the cruel conversations of her neighbors? They probably wondered "out loud" what these people had done that could result in this horrible circumstance ... God shutting up her womb. Truth be told, the sins of Elizabeth and Zacharias were no greater than the sins of their neighbors.

However, God's judgment on Israel's unfaithfulness was symbolized in Elizabeth's barrenness. Over the centuries, the Israelites were not known for being all that faithful to God. They constantly chased after foreign gods, especially in difficult times. Their pursuit of the God of their forefathers; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was only for show. They had seasons in which they were faithful, but that was usually only after God delivered them from a crisis or an oppressing enemy.

Removing the Shame of Barrenness

Barrenness was not only a personal embarrassment to a woman; but it was also a moniker of shame given by her society. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* states the following:

“The image of the barren wife is one of the Bible's strongest images of desolation and rejection. In Isaiah's prophecy, the promise that God will restore the blessedness of life is expressed through transforming the imagery of the barren land and the barren woman. In the day of restoration, the desolate land will burst into bloom and the barren woman will sing and rejoice because of an unexpected and abundant fertility.”

Let's look at the promise of Isaiah as it relates to the barren land in Isaiah 35:1-7, *Even the wilderness will rejoice in those days. The desert will blossom with flowers. Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel's pastures and the plain of Sharon. There the LORD will display his glory, the splendor of our God. With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. Say to those who are afraid, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you." And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will shout and sing! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the desert. The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land. Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish where desert jackals once lived.*

God's promise is clear through the prophet Isaiah. God promised that a day would come when He would reverse the barrenness of the land. This renewal of the land will begin when God comes to deal with the desolation caused by sin. In other words, when the Messiah comes, the barrenness of land will be banished.

God also spoke through the prophet Isaiah and gave a promise to reverse the barren condition of the wombs of Israel. We find recorded in Isaiah 54:1, *"Sing, O childless woman! Break forth into loud and joyful song, O Jerusalem, even though you never gave birth to a child. For the woman who could bear no children now has more than all the other women," says the LORD.* Every barren woman in Israel was aware of Isaiah's prophecy to open the wombs of shamed women.

They all clung to the hope ... one day Messiah will come and change everything. Everyone was looking forward to that day. The Messiah would make the barren land flourish again and He would give reason for the barren woman to sing. He would deliver them from the poverty of a barren life and from the oppression of Rome.

The Announcement that Changed Everything

Zacharias and Elizabeth had given up hope of bearing children; then an angel appeared to Zacharias with an announcement that would change everything. The angel, named Gabriel, told him that his wife would bear a son and that he was to name him, John. Gabriel also told him that his son would be a unique child. His son, John, would have a very special purpose in life for he would be the forerunner of the Messiah.

This announcement leaped in the heart of this aged priest for he fully understood what the angel was telling him. It was a double joy: Elizabeth was going to give him a son; and best of all, the Messiah would be here soon. Zacharias realized that all of the hopes and prayers of Israel were about to be answered ... Messiah is coming ... everything is going to change!

God proved His faithfulness to Elizabeth even though she had two strikes against her. He used Elizabeth's barrenness, coupled with her advanced age, to announce to the doubters and skeptics of the world that nothing was impossible for Him. The infant son of a small town priest, and his aged wife, would indeed grow up to be known as, John the Baptizer. Even before this child could take his first steps, or say his first words, he carried God's message to the world around him. God was stating emphatically: "What I did through Elizabeth, I will do for all of humanity. I will come and reverse life's barrenness and forever remove its shame."

A Story Filled with Hope

The Christmas story is filled with hope for every one of us who are faced with hopeless circumstances. This is one of the reasons that Jesus was born. Who among us hasn't watched one or more of our dreams die? Who among us hasn't stood helplessly by as the last of our hopes withered away? Jesus entered the darkness of human experience in order to reverse the curse of sin and to forever banish hopelessness.

The *barren land* in Isaiah's prophecy represents our barren lives. Through Christ, the barrenness of our empty lives is reversed. When we connect to Jesus, everything changes! Now we live our lives with purpose and meaning. When we surrender our hearts to walk in an intimate relationship with the Lord, the landscape of our lives blossom and flourish in His amazing grace. It is through our relationship with Jesus that our life finally works.

The *barren womb* in Isaiah's prophecy represents our barren hearts. Christ has reversed the barrenness of our hearts. Jesus touches our hearts in such a way that all of our personal goals and dreams start to stir again with new hope. Gone is the habitual frustration of not living up to our claims of being a follower of Christ. Through the grace of Jesus, we can finally become all that God purposed for us to become.

As the Christmas season approaches, take time to reflect on what a wonderful gift has been given to us in the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. If your heart is discouraged and hope has taken flight, turn to Jesus. Let Him show you how to make life work.

**Jesus Came to Reverse Our Hopelessness!
Jesus Came to Bring New Meaning to Life!
Jesus Came to Bring New Purpose to Life!
Jesus Came to Bring New Hope to Life!**

HE, ALONE, SHOWS US HOW TO MAKE LIFE WORK AS GOD INTENDED!