

Sarah and the Advent of Jesus

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Well, friends, first, a number of years ago, I was speaking at a conference, and they did the usual thing. They interviewed me before the first talk, and you get used to the standard questions.

They're always much the same. Tell us a bit about your family. Tell us how you became a Christian. What do you do? And then came the final question, who is your favorite Bible character?

Now, normally, when I get that question, I respond with Daniel or Paul. But this time, I was taken aback a bit, and I actually realized my favorite Bible character had changed.

I'd never really thought about it. But as I thought about the alternatives, my mind alighted in an unusual place, and it settled not on a hero, but on a heroine.

Not on a man, that is, but a woman. You see, one of my enduring biblical heroes now is Hannah, the mother of Samuel. And in my view, Hannah is not just any hero.

[1 : 03] I think she's, and she's not just my hero. I think in some ways, Hannah is the hero of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, the heroine of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

You see, I think her story is a story that kicks off the two books. Her story provides a model of godliness for the two books. Her song, her prayer that she prays when God grants her a child provides a theological backbone for the whole of the two books.

Her actions models what it is to be godly, and so on. And her prayer, she teaches us the theological basis for godly kingship. And when you think about it in the Bible, it's not that uncommon to have women heroes.

You see, in the Bible as a whole, women are often heroes. They're not often talked about, but they are. In a world that's often so patriarchal, God chooses to honour often women.

And while, you see, for example, if you're reading through the book of Exodus, Exodus 1 and 2, the men are largely, do not terribly much, except Pharaoh, who's an aggressor and oppresses people.

[2 : 09] But the women are quite active. There are five women who act to deliver, whereas men are not doing much at all. The first and the last prophets in the story of Israel in the land of Israel are women.

The star of the story of David's birth is a woman, Ruth. It's women who stand out when Luke tells the story of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 1 and 2.

It's women who are the first to witness the resurrection. And for that reason, when I was considering a series that we might do in the run-up to Easter, that is an Advent series, I thought, well, maybe we could look at women and Advent.

And that's what we're doing this morning. And each of the women we look at look forward in some ways to what God will do in Jesus. Now, I need to warn you before we start that as we look at the passage today, the focus is not so much on the woman, but her situation.

And as we examine her situation and what God does with it, we're going to learn some great theological truths. So, let's get underway. I want you to open your Bibles.

[3 : 19] It's not a very hard passage in the Bible to find. It's probably got a... It doesn't need a page number. You just... It's page 11, but really, you know, if you can't find it, there's something wrong.

Because you just open your Bible and you've got to Genesis, and then you just flip through until you get to chapter 11. So, turn with me to Genesis 11. Within a few short verses, we have one of the major passages of the whole Bible.

Imagine for a moment you were taking a flight over the terrain of the Bible. As you took the flight, you would see various mountain peaks come along as you flew through the story of the Bible. One of those major mountain peaks is this passage here.

It is a critical passage within the story of the Bible. Nearly everything that has happened beforehand leads up to it, and nearly everything that follows after it comes from it. So, a pinnacle passage that

we're going to look at.

Now, let's take a look at the genealogy. So, if you're looking at the end of chapter 11... My guess, by the way, is that most of you, if you read the Bible regularly, are like most modern readers of the Bible.

[4 : 27] That is, you come across a genealogy, and what do you do? Skip over it. Yeah, I can see you all do it. And we think we do this because it's just for Jews, really, genealogically-minded Jews.

We'll just move on and get to the real story. But actually, if you do that, you will miss some great things in the Bible. You see, genealogies and name lists in the Bible are very important.

They often have very important truths from God. And this passage here is a great case in point. But to show its importance, I need us to go back in the Bible a little bit.

So, go back with me to Genesis chapter 1. Okay, so flip in your Bibles, Genesis 1. And I want you to look at verse 27 and 28.

These are very famous verses about God's creation of humanity. Verse 27. Now, I wonder if you can hear what this passage is saying.

[5 : 45] It's God giving his view of humanity. And according to God, being human is about what? Well, a number of things, but a large part of it is increasing in number.

It's being concerned with filling the earth and subduing it. A sign of God's great blessing upon the earth is, therefore, the ability to have children and fill the earth. And that's the purpose of the genealogies.

Because what the genealogies tell us, as you read on, is that humans do exactly that. They demonstrate a very important theological point. They show that God has blessed human beings by making them fruitful.

They keep having children. So, in Genesis, genealogies are a sign of God's blessing. Let me just show you. Have a look in your Bibles at chapter 4, verse 1.

So, just one or two pages over. Chapter 4, verse 1 of Genesis. We're told this. Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.

[6 : 46] And she said, With the help of the Lord, I have brought forth a man. Now, here is the story of the very first human birth that's recorded in the Bible. And notice what's said.

It is by the help of God that that happens. It's by the blessing of God that that's happened. Because God has been active, Eve is able to bear children. And humans increase and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, according to God's word.

Now, flip over in your Bibles to chapter 9, verses 1 to 7. These verses are after the flood. So, the flood has happened, and humans have largely been wiped out from upon the face of the earth. But there's one family left. And look at what is said in verse 1. Then God blessed Noah and his son, saying to them, Be fruitful and increase in number.

Fill the earth. Flip down to verse 7, same chapter. As for you, he says, Be fruitful and increase in number. Multiply on the earth and increase in it. I wonder if you can hear what's being said.

[7 : 50] God's saying, Just go on doing what I set you up to do in the first place. Go to it. Increase in the earth. Multiply.

Fill it. Subdue it. And it's a great sign of blessing that that actually happens. And so, Genesis just records just how successful it is. There's even a table of nations when you come to chapter 10, where human beings are so filling the earth that they now become multiple nations.

And they're subduing the earth. Please understand the point. In Genesis, genealogies are a way of telling us how God blesses human beings. They're a great proof of the blessing of God.

God gives increase. However, the other thing that happens when you read through the genealogies, if you watch out for them, is that you hear what they say at another level.

I want you to notice, and I'll tell you the genealogical pattern from chapter 5. In chapter 5, you have a pattern that goes something like this. And to avoid having to name the tricky names there, I'm just going to give A and X and Y, okay?

[9 : 00] But there's a pattern. The pattern goes like this. A lived X number of years, and he begat B. A lived Y number of years after the birth of B.

He had other sons and daughters, and all the days of A were Z years. Okay? So can you hear what's happening? You go to the birth of the first, the son through whom the line will follow, and then you say how many years it is, and then right at the end you say, and he died.

And if you read it out loud, you'll hear one phrase over and over and over again, and it is, and he died. And he died, and he died, and he died, and he died.

And that's a constant refrain. And it goes on with other genealogies as well. You see, genealogies tell us what? On the one side, they tell us about God's great blessing. On the other side, they show God's great curse, because death is the result of sin.

Death in the world is the result of human sinfulness. And so what a genealogy does is says, God on the one hand gives blessing, humans increase. On the other hand, they have to live with the curse of the fall and of their own sin.

[10:14] They die. Those are the two sides of human life. On the one hand, human life's about blessing and living and enjoying life and being human and having kids and so on.

On the other hand, human life is about standing under the curse and judgment of God. It's about living out of kilter with other people. It's about living out of kilter with God.

Humanity, therefore, stands under both the grace of God and the judgment of God. Okay, that's the background to our passage. So now turn to Genesis 11. We're told about a man, Shem, who lived with God.

Shem is the godly line, the one through whom the purposes of God will come. His descendants are outlined for us here in Genesis 11. And that line of descendants ends, up with a particular person.

Can you see it there? One man, a man called Terah. Now, notice where the account of Terah ends. So just have a look, quick flip through his genealogy. Where does Terah's genealogy end?

[11:17] It ends not with a man, but with a woman. And look at verse 30. Now, Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive. Now, can you hear the point that the writer is making?

Here's the godly line through which God's purposes will flow. And they represent the future of humanity. And this is where the future of humanity ends. Where does it end? It ends with the barrenness of this woman who can't bear children.

The writer's making a very important point. He's saying, as humanity grows, as it stands under the blessing of God, as it develops and increases and multiplies and subdues the earth, it ends with a barren woman.

Under the curse of God, as it were, not this woman in particular, but humanity. Sarah cannot produce, or Sarai, as she's known at this point. This purposes of God ends with a woman who cannot live out the command of God to increase and multiply and subdue the earth.

Sarai's barrenness is therefore a sign of human sinfulness. Barrenness. That's where humanity ends. The purposes of God through this particular family, barrenness.

[12:27] Ends with a woman in waiting, waiting and waiting and waiting for a child. Now, we in our own family know this. We've had one of our sons, who with his wife, have struggled with bearing children, with getting pregnant.

And let me tell you, those of you who have either experienced it yourself, or have family members who have experienced it, know the grief of it. It is a desperate situation to be in, because every bone in your body, as it were, as you're married, struggles, wants to have children.

God has put that within us. You see, marriage is meant to be about blessing, and family, and children, and community. That's where life's meant to be going, isn't it? And that's what God intends.

Now, I want you to now, flip to Genesis 12. Genesis 12, 1 to 3, and I'll read it to you. The Lord had said to Abram, go from your country, your people, your father's household, to the land I will show you, and I'll make you a great nation.

I will bless you. I'll make your name great. You'll be a blessing. I'll bless those who bless you.

Whoever curses you, I will curse, and all the peoples on the earth will be blessed through you. Can you hear all the language? I'll give you a land.

[13:43] I'll give you a place to live in. I'll make you a great nation. That is, I'll make you and your children, and their children, and their children, be very significant in number. Later on in the Bible, say like sand on the seashore.

And not only that, you're feeling the curse at the moment. I will fill your life with blessing. I will fill your life with blessing. But I want you to notice how God ends the curse.

Do you notice how he does it? What does he do? He speaks, doesn't he? He says to Abram, I will give you a land, children, blessing.

I'll bless those who bless you. I'll curse those who curse you. God speaks. He promises that this husband and his wife will have children.

That instead of curse, there'll be blessing. God's about to do it again, you see. His powerful word is coming into Sarai's barrenness. And it's about to create a whole new race, a whole new humanity, the people of God.

[14 : 48] And that's the God we know so well, isn't it? You see, this is God who is intercreating things out of nothing. God is a God who loves bringing life where there's death, who loves bringing fertility where there's barrenness.

That's the God of Abraham. As Paul puts it in Romans 4, he says, this is the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being the things that are not as though they were. Friends, this is where all faith in God starts.

You see, the Bible doesn't begin with Genesis because it's the first thing that happened. It begins with Genesis because it's theologically one of the most important things you can hear. God creates. God is a creator. He is creating again in Sarai, just as he did right back at the beginning. This time there's no emptiness and void of the universe. No, this time there's just the emptiness and void of a human being's life.

That emptiness is the life of Sarah and her womb. And into that situation, God says, let there be life, as it were. Let there be a child. Let there be a nation.

[15 : 57] Let there be blessing on all the world. Let them be like the stars of the sky in number, the sand of the seashore in number. Let there be in this barren woman and her husband, the seed which will eventually lead to the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, who will be the savior of the world.

From them, a savior will come in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. I wonder if you can hear what I'm saying. It's very important. And I really just want to stress one point.

This is a, though it's taken me a little while. This is a one point sermon. Just one thing I want you to take home. This truth is, the truth is this. Sarah and Abraham's situation had led, has led us to a fundamental truth about God.

And that truth is that the creator, that the God we believe in is a creator. His whole relationship with his world is about creating and recreating.

That's what God's work is in his world. It is to create and recreate. He does it on day one and he'll keep doing it until there's a new heavens and a new earth, which he has created.

[17 : 07] He will create and recreate from beginning to end. That's his nature. It didn't stop after seven days. It continues throughout history. It continues even to this day. And what I want to do today is get you to ask this question in response.

Do you actually believe in a God who can do this? Do you believe in a God who can do this? Do you believe in a God who can make something out of nothing? Do you believe in a creator?

For if you see, you do. If you believe that God can create something out of nothing, then he can do anything, can't he? He can, in fact, recreate a world gone astray, like he did back then.

If he can create something out of nothing, then what would it be for him to cause a virgin to conceive and give birth to a saviour? Nothing at all.

He could do it. Because if he can make the world out of nothing, he can cause a woman to conceive. Can you see why the Bible starts with creation? It starts with creation because creation is the guarantee of salvation.

[18 : 17] If God can create, God can save. If God can do it once, well, he can keep doing it. Again and again and again. And if you're a Christian, you know this truth.

For if you are a Christian, then God has done it in you, hasn't he? God has already recreated you, hasn't he? For you were once in sin. You were once out of relationship with God.

You were once under God's judgment. And then God acted and changed all of that. He acted in you to make you a new creation through what he did in his son.

Through his son dying, he enabled you to be forgiven. You are now, because you believed in the son, related to God. You are now, if you're a Christian, a person under God's blessing rather than his curse.

The God who made the world out of nothing did it again in you. The God who made the world out of nothing is still doing his work in you today. Creating light where there's darkness and life where there's death.

[19 : 25] But if you're not a Christian today, then this passage speaks to you as well. You see, it says this. The God who runs this world is a creator God.

He can bring something out of nothing. He can bring hope out of hopelessness. He can bring salvation where there's death and sin.

And Paul makes this very point in one of his letters, which he writes in the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians 4 verse 6. He says this. He's speaking about people becoming Christians.

And he says, The God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shone into your hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Can you hear what he's saying? He's saying the God who made the world can shine into the darkness of human hearts and make things new. And make new creatures. Later on he will say, Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

[20 : 32] The old has passed and the new has come. You see, God can transform you. If you're not Christian here today, he can speak into the darkness of your hearts as he did in the beginning.

As he did with Abraham and Sarah. As he did with Israel. And he can do it with you by speaking that word about Jesus. So I want to close with just a few verses from the New Testament.

In your Bibles, flip to Ephesians chapter 2. And if anyone's got a page number, that would be helpful. Ephesians 2.

1174. 1174. And I want you to just look at what he says. Paul says, As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sin.

Now, in other words, you had died. In relation to God, you were dead. In which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air and of the spirit that's now at work in those who were disobedient.

[21 : 39] All of us, Paul says, even people like Paul, a Jew, was in the same situation. All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh, following his desires and thoughts.

That is, we were running away from God, pursuing things that led us away from him, that made us dead in relation to him. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath or of God's anger. Can you see what Paul's saying?

We as human beings stood under the anger of God. We were dead. We were, as it were, like Sarah's womb. We were like human beings. We had death hanging over us.

But then Paul says, look at verse 4. It's one of the great but's of the New Testament. But, he says, but, because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive even when we were dead in our transgressions.

Wonderful statement, isn't it? We were dead, but, through Jesus, we were made alive. It is by grace you have been saved.

[22 : 41] And I think probably, Abraham, if he could see what had happened in Christ, would echo the words of verses 8 to 10. Look at them with me. For it is by grace you have been saved.

He says, nothing Abraham did, it was what God did. It's by grace you have been saved through faith. And it's not of yourselves, it's the gift of God, not by works. That is, we can't earn it so that no one can boast.

For we are God's handiwork, created, notice the language, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Friends, the focus of today's passage has not so much been on Sarah as her situation. Her situation has opened up for us, hasn't it, an incredibly large theological truth.

We know that the hopes of the world lay in this woman and her husband. Those hopes focused on her barren state. And without God, that state would have been filled with despair.

[23 : 45] But with God, it is filled with hope. For the God in whom we trust is a creator. And Sarah's barrenness, therefore, points us eagerly forward in hope.

Her story becomes a model of salvation. It's filled with hope. It points us forward with eager expectation. And so, I just want to conclude by showing you one of the practical benefits it has for us.

I don't know about you, but as I live the Christian life, I often find myself filled with despair because of my own sinfulness.

I had occasion yesterday to be reminded of it. And I despair of the fact that I cannot accomplish what I would like to accomplish in terms of godliness and right relationship with God.

I despair of the fact that my life is not at all as I would like it to be. And friends, let me tell you, if I did not believe in God who could create, I would cry out desperately and hopelessly.

[24 : 55] But I believe in a God who can create. The God I know does not leave me in despair without hope. He is, you see, the God of Genesis 1, the God of Sarai and Abram.

He's the creator. And he not only creates once or twice or three times or four times, he creates over and over and over again. He's done it throughout history. And you know what?

He does it with me. Because this morning at 7.45, I came into church remembering my deeds from yesterday and I confessed my sins and I was assured by God that God had forgiven me by God's word.

You see, time and time again God says to me, Andrew, because of my son, I can make it new again. I can make it new again.

I can make it as though there's nothing between us again. I can make it fresh again. I can make you a new creation again. I can make it as though there was not that sin between you and me.

[26 : 03] I can make you anew. I can turn the barrenness of your life into fertility and I can change death which would be your fate and decay into life and fruitfulness.

Friends, let me tell you, this is what God loves to do. that is what is always done in his world. So as you live your life this week, as you cry out to God in your sinfulness, as you wonder if he can break into your life again, be aware that God creates and recreates and makes new.

and if you do, do you remember how he did it? Do you remember how he does it? He speaks his word and the ultimate word he speaks is the word who is the word in the flesh.

Jesus, his son, who we remember coming in the flesh in these next coming weeks. So, but the communication of who Jesus is comes through the written word where we see Jesus in all his grandeur.

So, read the written word so that you might know his living word, Jesus, and let God speak to you and let him make you anew. Let's pray.

[27 : 24] Father, we thank you that you are the creator and that you can make things new.

So, Father, please help us to hear your word, to read your word, but most importantly to get to know your word who is the living word, Jesus. And please, as we receive that word, make us anew, we pray, through his work done for us on the cross.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.