

Pause: Learning To Wait on God Sarah

Welcome Colonies family! As of today we have met as many Sundays online and in the parking lot as we have in person this year. I have to admit when we made the decision to close the doors of our building, I could not have imagined we would still be doing this at the end of May. It has been an exercise in patience.

Knowing how trying these times would be for us, we began a study earlier this month that I have titled Pause: Learning to Wait on God. Hardships become a testing ground for faith as we wrestle with a lot of questions. Those questions intensify as time passes and we wonder if we have been forgotten.

Memory is filled with mystery. Our memory systems are beautiful in their elegance and complexity, but they are frustrated and fallen, like everything else in this world. Sometimes it's a struggle just to remember the everyday details of life — what we have to do and where we need to go. We forget things, or people, more often than we like to admit.

An elderly husband and wife visit their doctor when they begin forgetting little things. Their doctor tells them that many people find it useful to write themselves little notes. When they get home, the wife says, "Dear, will you please go to the kitchen and get me a dish of ice cream? And maybe write that down so you won't forget?" "Nonsense," says the husband, "I can remember a dish of ice cream." "Well," says the wife, "I'd also like some strawberries and whipped cream on it." "My memory's not all that bad," says the husband. "No problem - a dish of ice cream with strawberries and whipped cream. I don't need to write it down." He goes into the kitchen; his wife hears pots and pans banging around. The husband finally emerges from the kitchen and presents his wife with a plate of bacon and eggs. She looks at the plate and asks, "Hey, where's the toast I asked for?"

We can laugh at faltering memories, but there is a real pain behind the smiles. The Forget-me-not flower speaks of our strong desire to be loved and remembered. According to one legend a young knight was walking along a river with his beloved when she spotted the beautiful flowers on the bank. Wanting to please her stooped down to pick the flowers for her. Just as he pulled them from the ground he stumbled into the river. Unable to swim due to the weight of the river he tossed the bouquet onto the bank. Before being swept away he declared his love and shouted "Forget me not." She wore the flowers in her hair for the rest of her days in honor of her love.

When reading the stories of Scripture, I think it is easy to simply not notice how often people wait on God wondering if they have been forgotten. Heroes of faith like Peter, Abraham, Ruth, Naomi, and Joseph spend lengthy periods of time waiting for God to act and wrestling with what faithfulness looks like in the meantime. A few weeks ago we talked about Abraham's up and downs. His decisions had consequences on those around him, including his wife. This morning I want to turn our attention to her.

Sarah's introduction includes the problem that will be her biggest test of faith.

Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive. (Genesis 11:30, NIV)

Women have long been defined for the ability to produce children. Through modern medicine we understand that both the man and the woman can have issues with the reproductive system. In ancient times women bore the responsibility alone. Most of the time when Sarah is introduced the qualifier of being childless is attached.

The problem is compounded by the promise given to her husband, “he will be the father of many nations.” Noticeably absent from the promise is who the mother will be. Perhaps that is why she goes along with the plan to become a wife to the Pharaoh in order to save Abraham. And it most certainly was the motivation behind her plan in Genesis 16.

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, “The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.” Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. (Genesis 16:1-4, NIV)

Scholars have been able to piece together from ancient documents some of the cultural practices in response to infertility. According to Jewish rabbinic teaching, ten years of barrenness was considered grounds for divorce. It became acceptable to use maidservants to produce offspring that would be recognized as the child of the wife. We see this played out in a later story in Genesis with Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.

What Sarah proposes was socially acceptable and the plan serves its purpose. Hagar becomes pregnant and will soon give birth to a son. But that does not mean all is well. Conflict ensues. It appears that Hagar despised Sarah and began to treat her with contempt.

I know that many view the sexual ethic of Scripture, meaning sexual intimacy between one man and one woman within the boundaries of marriage, as antiquated and restrictive. However, anyone who has read the Bible closely knows that God is not a prude who is trying to prevent us from enjoying the pleasure of sex. Instead, God as in all areas of life wants what is best for us. Breaking the boundaries of the sexual relationship, in other words sin, increases the likelihood of bringing trouble on ourselves and others.

Even though this was Sarah’s idea she blames her husband.

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.” (Genesis 16:5, NIV)

While searching for answers to the questions that fills her mind while she waits for God to act on the promise, Sarah begins to blame others for her problems. Blaming others can be a way of coping with the anxiety of our longings. It gives us an explanation for why we are suffering and waiting.

Some of us don’t like to blame others. We like to blame ourselves. Anything that goes wrong we are convinced that we deserve it. Now we may not use that strong of language, but we will make promises to God bargaining our behavior for his goods and services. We need to feel as if we are in control or that we have earned God’s remembrance.

God would visit Abraham and Sarah to confirm his promise. Abraham would indeed become a father and this time he adds that Sarah would be the Mother.

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?” (Genesis 18:11-12, NIV)

Sarah has felt forgotten for years, and now God remembers her. What she has heard is not humanly possible. But she is going to learn that her God is a God that delights in the impossible.

One year later God visits Sarah again.

Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." (Genesis 21:2-6, NIV)

Sarah teaches us that **our faith might not be perfect, but God's faithfulness to us is.**

One day Charles Spurgeon was walking through the English countryside with a friend. As they strolled along, the evangelist noticed a barn with a weather vane on its roof. At the top of the vane were these words: "GOD IS LOVE." Spurgeon remarked to his companion that he thought this was a rather inappropriate place for such a message. "Weather vanes are changeable," he said, "but God's love is constant."

"I don't agree with you about those words, Charles," replied his friend. "You misunderstood the meaning. That sign is indicating a truth: Regardless of which way the wind blows, God is love."

We may dismiss the story of a woman of ninety becoming pregnant by saying they lived longer then. So they must have remained fertile longer. Or as one of those strange things that happens. But Sarah knows it was God that has brought her laughter.

The New Testament affirms she became pregnant because of God's faithfulness saying,

And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. (Hebrews 11:11-12, NIV)

While we have limited control of what we remember God is in complete control of what he remembers. You are one thing God chooses never to forget.

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me. (Isaiah 49:15-16, NIV)

Sarah likely had good reason to believe she was forgotten. She has waited a long, long time. Life has been difficult for her. She knows her own sinfulness. But none of that changes who God is.

There is another legend behind the origin of the forget-me-not flowers. God stopped in the garden of Eden beside a blue flower and asked it its name. The shy flower whispered that it had forgotten the name. God renamed the flower as "forget-me-not" saying that He will never forget the flower.

I like to imagine God saying something like that to Sarah following the birth of Isaac. Surrounded by flawed memories, I would like for each of you to be certain of that as well. Repeat this to yourself each day. Write it down. Ask a friend to remind you of this truth: No matter what happens to you, God cannot and will not forget you. He has engraved you on the palms of his hands.