



## Day 5 Beauty

*Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.* Proverbs 31:30

When I, Denise, was in my teens, my father unknowingly made a comment that lodged in my heart for many years. In a crowded gathering at which both my older sister and I were present, he quipped, “I have two daughters. One’s beautiful and one’s smart.”

In another setting many years later, he explained his remark as meaning that both daughters were beautiful and smart. But that isn’t the way my teenaged brain interpreted it. I was a straight A student. Did that mean my father considered me smart but not beautiful? For a long time, I let that possibility fester inside me.

Beauty is an apparition that haunts every woman. We know the adages: “beauty is only skin deep”; “beauty is fleeting”; “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” In recent decades, we’ve been bombarded with the mantra “every woman is beautiful,” but culture tells us otherwise. So most women—even the ones with undeniable physical beauty—struggle with self-image. Ask any woman “what would you change about your appearance?” and she’ll probably list one or two or ten things.

If we’re honest, we know in our heads that physical beauty is not more important than inner qualities such as loyalty, honesty, faith, and perseverance. But none of us are naïve enough to believe that physical beauty has no influence on us or on those around us.

### **Sarai’s Beauty**

The Bible tells us that Sarai was beautiful—so attractive that men considered her desirable even though she was sixty-five. But do you think her beauty compensated for the emptiness of her womb? I doubt it. Some women may choose beauty over motherhood—remember Scarlett’s choice in *Gone with the Wind*?<sup>2</sup> But Scripture suggests that Sarai longed to have a child, and no doubt she would have willingly traded her physical beauty for a son.

The Hebrew word translated “fair” or “beautiful” is used to describe Sarai. Elsewhere in Scripture, it is used to describe Rachel, Joseph, David, Absalom, and Esther. Perhaps God

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<sup>2</sup> After her daughter’s birth, Scarlett informed Rhett that she didn’t want any more babies. She preferred to keep her tiny waist.

made Sarai one of the most beautiful women who ever lived—comparable to one of her distant descendants, Esther, whose beauty far exceeded the beauty of all the other women of King Ahasuerus’ kingdom, which stretched from India to Ethiopia (Esther 2:3, 17).

You may think that beauty is a blessing—and it can be, if a woman considers her appearance a gift from God that is to be used for His glory. I, Denise, have a friend who is a former Miss South Carolina. Through her books and speaking engagements, she uses her gifts of beauty, singing, and humor to inspire other women to become totally devoted followers of Christ. She views her physical appearance as a way to bring glory to God, not herself.

### **The Unattractive Side of Beauty**

But beauty can also be a curse. Sarai’s beauty made Abram feel insecure. He also felt threatened, thinking that others would harm him to gain access to Sarai. A woman’s beauty may also make a man feel overly jealous, which could lead to other sins such as anger or violence.

Beauty may make a woman proud and self-centered if she uses it as a tool to manipulate others; conversely, it can also make her feel insecure if she believes that others only value her because of her outward appearance. Only when beauty is seen from God’s perspective can any of us value it properly.

### **A Better Choice**

In many Scriptures, God tells us that the qualities He most values—and that our loved ones most appreciate—have little to do with our physical appearance.

You may be familiar with the admirable qualities of a woman listed in Proverbs 31, including trustworthiness, industriousness, strength, honor, joy, wisdom, and kindness (vv. 10–27). That passage ends with the verse used at the beginning of this devotion: *Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised* (v. 30).

The Hebrew word translated “passing” in verse 30 is also used to mean empty or unsatisfactory. The idea is that neither an attractive appearance nor an engaging personality makes a woman beautiful in God’s eyes; He is more concerned with a woman’s commitment to honor and obey Him.

In the New Testament, the apostle Peter (who was married) says this:

*Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. 1 Peter 3:3–4*

Sarai was beautiful on the outside, but God had more in mind for her. He wanted her to manifest a *gentle and quiet spirit*. Sarai needed to put her hope in God—adorn herself with confidence in His character and His promises. Developing a loving and submission heart toward God would help her respond to Abram with a loving and submissive heart too.

In our culture, one of the most beautiful moments in the life of a woman is her wedding day. On that day the bride adorns herself for her husband in her wedding dress. On the day of our salvation, we were given to our bridegroom, the Lord Jesus, and God clothed us with Jesus' robe of righteousness that made us beautiful to God.

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
My soul shall be joyful in my God;  
For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
He has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments,  
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. Isaiah 61:10*

The basis for our beauty before God is both the imputed righteousness of Christ received once and for all at salvation and the practical righteousness of obedience in sanctification as we walk by faith before God.

Here are a few more passages that address the beauty God sees in us:

*For You formed my inward parts; you covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. Psalm 139:13–14*

*Give to the Lord the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come before Him.  
Oh, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness! 1 Chronicles 16:29*

*One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple. Psalm 27:4*

When God looks at us, he sees the *fearfully and wonderfully made* person he created us to be, a beloved child who is holy in His sight. And the more we behold His beauty, the more we will reflect that incorruptible beauty to those around us. That kind of inner beauty never fades; in fact, it becomes more radiant with each passing day and will last throughout eternity.

### **Application**

1. Be honest with yourself. How much does your physical appearance impact your self-worth?
2. On an index card or sticky note, write three reasons God sees you as beautiful. Keep it near a mirror that you often use.
3. Read Psalm 139:13–16. How does this passage affirm your unique beauty?

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus, I know in my head that I *am fearfully and wonderfully made* and that the purpose You have ordained for me is connected to my spiritual fruitfulness, not my outward appearance. I accept my unique beauty that is defined by You and not by culture. Teach me to cultivate inner beauty—a teachable spirit, a humble heart, a wise mind—so I may become the woman of faith You designed me to be. In Your name I pray, amen.



## Day 6 Wealth

*Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. Genesis 13:1*

Imagine two women, Sophie and JoAnn, who visit a wealthy friend—a modern-day Sarai. Sarai's house is much larger than either Sophie's or JoAnn's. Built on a ten-acre lot, Sarai's house features a four-car garage, a pool, eight bedrooms and bathrooms, a live-in maid's apartment, and a kitchen half the size of Sophie's whole house.

When Sophie returns to her small house, she wonders why she and her husband can't earn enough to buy a bigger house. She'd be happy with a house a quarter the size of Sarai's. Then she remembers that her husband loves her deeply and they have four wonderful children growing up in a crowded but loving home. Sophie also hosts a weekly Bible study in her home for several ladies she disciples. One is a neighbor with whom she cultivated a friendship and later led to Christ. Not only does Sophie have physical children, but she also has spiritual children. Sophie also reminds herself that Sarai has no children, and maybe she is sometimes lonely and depressed in her mansion.

"Father," Sophie prays, "Forgive me for being envious of Sarai's possessions. Thank you for all the blessings You've given me—a good job, a loving husband, healthy children, and the privilege of discipling women. Take away the envy and replace it with contentment and joy. In Jesus' name, amen."

When JoAnn goes home, she battles envy too. She compares her house to Sarai's house over and over in her mind. She becomes frustrated with her small kitchen and lack of space to entertain. She resents the hours she spends cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry.

She talks to her husband about buying a larger house even though their budget prohibits the extra expense. She persuades him to get a second job and work extra hours. She takes on a part-time job. Their children see less and less of them, and their teenaged son starts to hang out with some troublemakers at school. JoAnn drops out of her women's Bible study group, and the family stops going to church on Sunday. But the harder she and her husband work, the less content they are. She lashes out to God in anger, "Why don't You do something? This family is falling apart!"

### **The Illusion of Wealth's Power**

Money can buy a lot of things; it may even buy prestige, fame, and influence. But money cannot buy what we most need: peace of mind and heart.

Too many of God's children have failed the test of wealth. They have placed a higher value on temporal possessions than on their souls and the souls of other people, including their loved ones.

God has given to each believer a spiritually barren womb but a promise of fruitfulness in Christ. What price tag would you put on a lost soul being saved through your ministry? It is a wise believer that begins to know how God values one lost soul.

### **Sarai's Wealth**

Sarai was very wealthy. She had many servants and possessions, but neither her beauty nor her wealth could fill the emptiness of her barren womb. And she would not be content until she fulfilled God's greater purpose for her life.

Sarai needed to remember that through the promised heir a nation would be born—a multitude of descendants as numerous as the stars of the heavens. Our temporary wealth must not be a substitute for the faith that will not let go of God until our barren womb gives birth to fruit that remains eternally.

How sad it is to see so many believers fail the test of faith here. They give up on the God-appointed mission and ministry He has purposed in Christ for them because they take consolation in their drive to be successful.

The truth is a person can be successful and spiritually fruitful—if that is part of God's purpose.

Far better to be financially poor and spiritually rich toward God than to be financially rich and spiritually poor toward God. Consider what the apostle Paul, who had learned to be content whether he had much or little, says in these passages:

*Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. 1 Timothy 6:17–19*

*And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19*

Our riches are in Christ, who through His poverty made us rich. If we had the wealth of Solomon but not the fruit of the barren womb, we would be poor indeed. We cannot

allow beauty or material blessings sidetrack us from our God appointed destiny to bring forth eternal fruit unto God.

### **Application**

1. Write down three life goals. Be as specific as possible. Do those goals require wealth? Explain.

2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being low and 10 being high), how content are you with your financial status? Can you say with Paul, *“I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content”*? Explain.

3. Read Luke 12:16–31. Why did God call the rich man a “fool” in the parable? What guidelines did Jesus give in verses 22–31 for learning to be content?

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus, it is so easy to be caught up in accumulating more possessions, more success, and more status. Please redirect my focus to that which has eternal value. Don't allow me to find security in what I own; rather, teach me to find complete contentment in my relationship with You and the many blessings You give me every day. In Your name I pray, amen.



## **Day 7** **Beloved**

*The Lord has appeared of old to me, saying, “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.” Jeremiah 31:3*

Helen and Bob seemed to be the perfect couple. Bob had a good-paying job in a prestigious New York financial corporation. Helen taught special needs children in a local school until she became pregnant. After the birth of a healthy daughter, Helen became active in the children’s ministries at church, which is how she and I, Denise, became friends.

For several years, Helen and I worked together developing and implementing the children’s church curriculum and program. During that time, Helen and Bob added a son to their growing family. Bob also served as a trustee at our church.

One day when Helen and I were working on a project at her home, she seemed distracted. When I asked if something was wrong, she revealed that Bob had announced he wanted a divorce. He had fallen in love with another man and was committed to the gay lifestyle. Helen, of course, was devastated. Never had she expected her high school sweetheart to betray her that way. Her life and her children’s lives were turned upside down.

Fortunately, Helen’s faith was strong enough to survive and grow during the difficult years that followed. She learned to lean on God to supply all her needs—and those of her children. She found that her love relationship with God was more vital and more satisfying than any human relationship.

### **Sarai’s Trial**

God gave Sarai great beauty and wealth. In addition to those blessings, Sarai was married to a godly man, who loved and valued her.

Abram was not cold and callous toward his dear Sarai. He did not beat or abuse her. He was not a womanizer, and she didn’t worry about her husband being drunk and saying and doing things that he later regretted. Neither did he abandon her when she was unable to give him an heir. Sarai had been blessed with a gift that too few women experience—true, lasting love.

But even with a wonderful God-given lifelong companion, Sarai was still missing something. God had withheld from her a son. Some people may conclude that God was



tormenting Sarai with barrenness, but that is one of Satan's lies. Goodness is an integral part of God's essence; therefore, He doesn't capriciously withhold any good thing from us (Psalm 84:11). God had placed the desire for a child within Sarai's heart, and He always meant to fulfill that desire. But Isaac would come in God's perfect timing to glorify God and become a type of Christ.

Even with all the blessings that God had given Sarai, she battled her sinful flesh. Most likely she felt disappointed, frustrated, and maybe even angry that God had withheld a child from her. She battled, as we all do, the giant of discontent.

### **Victory over Discontent**

Each of us must find a spiritual balance between desire and discontent in our trial of faith. One side of the scale should be contentment with the blessings God has given us; on the other side of the scale is a desire—some call it a “holy discontent”—that will not let us be satisfied with less than God's great and unique purpose for our life.

Holy discontent is not sinful; it refers to a deep desire that God Himself has put in our heart to enjoy God's best and fulfill His unique purpose for our life. While we are content with all that God has given us, we at the same time are determined not to be satisfied with anything less than God's fullness and greater spiritual fruit.

God had given Abram and Sarai the desire for a son. But God also wanted them to focus on their relationship with the God who gave them that desire before they focused on the promised son. In Genesis 15:1, God said, *“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”* In other words, God said, “I know your desire for a son because I gave it to you. But until that promise is fulfilled make Me the center of your life. Focus on Me not Sarai's barren womb.”

Sarai needed as much, if not more, encouragement than Abram did. Maybe God spoke to her through a dream or impressed a message of comfort on her heart at some point, but the Scriptures do not record a direct encounter between God and Sarai. We can surmise, though, that Abram probably shared with Sarai all God revealed to him, trusting that her faith in God would grow as well.

Psalm 37:4 says, *Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.* That is the way to gain victory over discontent: focus on God first.

Contentment is a heart condition. Our circumstances may be unpleasant; they may even cause us great pain. But contentment—calm in the storm—comes as we rest in the assurance of God's goodness and presence. If we meditate on the magnitude of His love for us and His commitment to our well-being, we can learn to be content in every circumstance.

### **Honor God First and Rest in His Love**

Verses in Song of Solomon seem to show a progression in a love relationship:

- Possessive Love. *My beloved is mine, and I am his* (2:16).
- Personal Love. *I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine* (6:3).
- Perfect Love. *I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me* (7:10).

Both Abram and Sarai could rest in the assurance that the barren womb would become a fruitful womb and that Sarai would give birth to a son in God's perfect time. When we compare God's word to Abraham, "*I am ... your exceeding great reward,*" to "*I am my beloved's and his desire is toward me,*" we can be content knowing that God's perfect love for us affirms that He will always do what is best for us.

Once we understand that the greater truth isn't how much we love Jesus, but how much He loves us, we can leave the fruit of the barren womb with God and expect that the result of an abiding love relationship with God will be much fruit.

In relationship to spiritual fruit, we're all barren. In relationship to our salvation and the salvation of those who don't yet know Christ, we're all barren. And in relationship to fulfilling the God appointed purpose in Christ that God has uniquely ordained for us, we are often led through a trial that shuts up the natural womb of our abilities for a season so we may experience greater fruitfulness at a future time.

Lasting satisfaction and purpose are found in a contented love relationship with God. Isaiah 54:5 says, *For your Maker is your husband, The Lord of hosts is His name.* As we rely more and more on Him, our dependence on other people will diminish and our satisfaction with the Lord of hosts will increase.

### **Application**

1. If you are content with God, how will that make you content with your other blessings?
2. How will contentment with God make you content with what you feel is the area that God is withholding from you?
3. Read Isaiah 54. What promises are given to those who place their trust in the Lord of hosts as their husband and their redeemer?

**Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for first loving me. May I respond to You with love. Help me to find contentment in believing that Your desire is toward me and You are my exceeding great reward. I give You my desires and trust You to meet them in Your timing and way. May my focus be on loving You first, then on loving my family and others. In Your name I pray, amen.



## Day 8 Consolation

*And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. (2 Corinthians 1:7)*

The house was gorgeous. Nestled in a wooded area, it featured cathedral ceilings, huge windows, updated bathrooms with heated tile floors, a large eat-in kitchen with greenhouse windows, and a wood-burning fireplace. The basement had been converted into a one-bedroom apartment—perfect for visits from our adult children or my husband’s sister.

I, Denise, wanted to live there.

But the house was priced above our budget. My husband was also concerned about the difficulty of navigating the steep driveway during winter. And, he reminded me, the woody setting was appealing, but I wanted a lake view, didn’t I?

I wrestled with the Lord in prayer. The house was right for us in so many ways. “Please let me have it, Lord.”

We put in an offer—about \$25,000 below the asking price. It was rejected because another buyer agreed to pay the asking price.

Disappointment washed over me. But still I sensed God saying to me, “I have a house for you. Not this one. But you will be content with what I provide.”

About a year later, God fulfilled His promise. The house was smaller, but the location was better. No soaring ceilings or an apartment for guests—but beautiful windows from which I can watch the sun rise over the mountains each morning, its rays glimmering on the nearby lake.

God didn’t give me the house I wanted, but He gave me a home I love.

### **The God of Consolation**

The Greek word translated “consolation” in 2 Corinthians 1:7 means “that which affords comfort or refreshment.”<sup>3</sup> When God withholds something in one area our life, He will

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<sup>3</sup> “G3874 - paraklêsis - Strong’s Greek Lexicon (NKJV).” Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 27 Nov, 2020. <https://www.blueletterbible.org//lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongsg=G3874&t=NKJV>.

often give special grace and consolation in another area, if we patiently endure the trial of faith.

All of us have some area where we, like Sarai, are barren, and God has withheld some good thing. But if we respond to the deficiency with trust and patience, God showers us with His abounding grace and consolation. And if we ask God to make us mindful of those blessings, He will increase our gratitude and joy.

If Sarai had focused on her blessings, God may have reminded her of these things:

- “Sarai, you are barren but **beautiful.**” When natural aging would normally take away the beauty of youth, God preserved Sarai’s beauty so well that kings admired her even though she was past sixty years old.
- “Sarai, you are barren but **bountiful.**” While other women raised children, Sarai had over 300 servants who were under her charge. While others worried from day to day how tomorrow’s needs would be met, she had an abundant supply of food, clothes, and other provisions.
- “Sarai, you are barren but **blessed.**” While other women had selfish, domineering, and unloving husbands, Sarai was blessed with a godly husband. Although it would have been culturally acceptable for Abram to divorce Sarai because of her barrenness, he did not do that. He loved her and may not have taken Hagar as a wife if Sarai hadn’t encouraged him to do so.

God also uses deficiencies to help us, and others, better understand the biblical principles of barrenness and fruitfulness. Barrenness forces us to depend on God alone—as Abraham and Sarah had to depend on God to give them their son Isaac. And our barrenness—whether it’s related to finances, health, family, or something else—will help us to depend more fully on God too.

- If God gives you a thorn in the flesh, then He will give you sufficient grace to endure it (2 Corinthians 12:9).
- If you are made weak, then He will be your strength (2 Corinthians 12:10).
- If God leads you through a dark time, then your light will shine brighter in the darkness (Isaiah 60:19–20; Matthew 5:16).
- If God allows you to hunger, then He will feed you with satisfying truths from His Word (Jeremiah 15:16).
- If God sends a trial, then you will learn patience (James 1:2–4).
- If God allows injury, then He will bind up the wounds (Job 5:18; Psalm 147:3).
- If God chastens you, it’s because He loves you and directs your path (Proverbs 3:11–12).

In every case, if the burden is from the Lord, then His grace will help us bear it. May we, like Abraham and Sarah, judge God faithful and *imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises* (Hebrews 6:12).

### **Application**

1. What aspects of your life do you consider barren? What consolations has God provided for you?
2. List ten blessings God has given you. In what ways do these blessings demonstrate that God loves you and has your best interest at heart?
3. Read Philippians 4:3–13. In what ways do you think the mindset Paul recommends in verses 3–8 influenced his ability to be content in all circumstances? How can that mindset help you develop contentment?

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, forgive me for complaining about what I lack and for failing to praise You daily for all my consolation blessings. Thank You for what You are doing in my life even when I do not see it or understand it. Help me to focus on all the blessings You have given me and find contentment in Your promise to provide all I need. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.



## Day 9 Trials Build Strength

*Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land. Genesis 12:10*

When Bill and Julie were newlyweds, Bill promised Julie he would build her dream house. She believed Bill would fulfill that promise and waited with anticipation as year after year they worked hard and saved as much money as their budget allowed.

One day Bill came home to their small rented apartment and announced, “I’ve found the perfect house.” Julie’s excitement and joy grew as they drove to the property. Bill parked the car, then insisted that Julie put on a blindfold before he helped her out of the car and guided her several hundred yards up the street.

Before Bill removed the blindfold, he said, “When I remove the blindfold, I don’t want you to see the house and property as it is now but as it will be when I’m finished transforming it into the dream house I promised you.”

When Bill removed the blindfold, Julie burst into tears. Looking at the old house’s peeling paint, broken windows, and neglected yard, she could not see what Bill, a talented builder, saw. She could only see what the house was, not what it could become.

### **God’s Vision for Abram and Sarai**

Abram, by faith, believed God’s vision of his and Sarai’s future—a spacious land and a fruitful womb that would bring forth God’s chosen son. Perhaps Abram described his vision of what God had promised them, and Sarai was excited to see the fulfillment of her dreams.

Imagine that Abram blindfolded Sarai on their journey to the land of promised blessings, attempting to increase her delight when she saw the land for the first time. But when they arrived and Abram removed Sarai’s blindfold, all she saw was a barren land—a painful reminder of her barren womb. Then the famine arrived, which would test their faith in the future God had promised. Would they see with their human eyes or with the eyes of faith?

In this instance, unfortunately, Abram and Sarai chose to focus on what they saw with their eyes, so they chose to go down to Egypt and dwell there. They chose to walk by sight, not by faith.

## The Purpose of Trials

Have you ever wondered why God tests our faith? Why give us a promise and then make us wait? Why give us a promise and then allow or create circumstances that seem to make the fulfillment of the promise difficult or impossible?

God gave us Abram and Sarai's story as examples. The way God helped them in their trial of faith encourages us when we go through testing, and learning from their mistakes may help us to avoid painful consequences.

In the next few devotions, we'll look at several reasons God allows trials. One reason is that He wants to build our faith today so we'll be able to endure more difficult trials tomorrow.

One principle every athlete learns is that muscles gain strength under stress. I, Denise, don't consider myself an athlete, but I do walk a 2.5-mile footpath around a nearby lake several times a week. One optional route around the lake includes a steep hill. When I first tried to walk up the hill, I was gasping for breath by the time I reached the top. But the more times I climbed the hill, the easier the ascent became. My muscle strength grew, and my lung capacity expanded. Within a few weeks, I was able to climb the hill with ease.

Similarly, God strengthens our spiritual muscles as we exercise them. James, the brother of Jesus, describes the process this way:

*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (James 1:2–4)*

The Greek word translated *perfect* in James 1 means “brought to its end, finished, wanting nothing necessary to completeness, full grown, mature.”<sup>4</sup> God's ultimate goal for us is that we grow and mature spiritually. He doesn't want us to lack anything that will help us in our journey of faith with Him. Therefore, God designs specific trials or challenges to strengthen our faith in preparation for future trials. If we don't keep increasing the strength of our faith, then we will never reach the goal—to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).

One of God's goals for Sarai was that Isaac's birth came when she was ninety, not sixty-five. The Bible doesn't list all the spiritual lessons Sarai learned in those twenty-five years, but we can be confident that the process described in 2 Peter 1:5–8 was as necessary for Abram and Sarai as it is for us:

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<sup>4</sup> “G5046 - teleios - Strong's Greek Lexicon (NKJV).” Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 19 Nov, 2020. <https://www.blueletterbible.org//lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=G5046&t=NKJV>.



*But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

In other devotions, we'll look at some of the more difficult tests that lay ahead for Abram and Sarai. But the first step in passing those tests was passing the famine test and the barrenness test.

God is also at work designing trials of faith for us. If we don't have to depend on God, it isn't a trial of faith. If we can see the reason for the situation or figure out how to resolve it on our own, it isn't a trial of faith. Could Abram and Sarai end the famine? No. Could they make Sarai's barren womb fruitful? No. They had to *walk by faith, not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5:7).

And if our spiritual muscles are to grow strong, we must walk by faith too.

### **Application**

1. Think back five years or so. How did the trials you faced then help prepare you for the trials you're facing now?
2. Select one of the trials you listed in question 1. During that trial, did you *let patience have its perfect work* (James 1:4), or did you try to work your way out of the trial yourself?
3. Read again the growth process given in 2 Peter 1:5–8. What attributes do you think God is developing in you at this point in your life?

### **Prayer**

Dear heavenly Father, if I were left to myself, I would choose sight over faith and comfort over spiritual disciplines. But I do want to grow in a deeper love relationship with You. I know that I have a tendency in times of famine to go down to Egypt for immediate relief just as Abram and Sarai did. Lord, forgive me for letting fear rob me of faith and the refining process that You are bringing me through. I pray for patience so the trial of faith will complete *its perfect work*. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.



## Day 10 Trials Deepen Our Relationship with God

*The Lord knows the days of the upright, and their inheritance shall be forever. They shall not be ashamed in the evil time, and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied.* Psalm 37:19

I, Denise, grew up in a middle-class family. Although I didn't always like the taste of the food my mother prepared, she never failed to prepare a meal. At breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I had food to eat. My parents also provided me with a safe house and proper clothing. I felt secure in their love.

My mother, however, didn't grow up with that security. Before she was adopted at age eight, there were days she scavenged food from garbage containers. She didn't always have a bed to sleep in or clean clothes to wear either. She couldn't rely on her biological parents to provide for her, and she felt no connection to them. For her, the words *mother* and *father* only applied to the man and woman who adopted her.

Whether your background is more like mine or my mother's, one truth is the same: our heavenly Father is the perfect parent. His love is everlasting, and He is able and willing to meet all our needs.

### **Deepening Our Relationship with God**

God wanted both Abram and Sarai to progressively grow in their faith and love relationship with Him. He wanted them to be satisfied with more than the blessings of the land and His provision for them. God wanted a relationship with them in which they delighted more in Him than in the blessings He gave them. That is a second reason God allows us to encounter trials: they help us focus more on *who He is* than on *what He gives*.

Consider Peter's and Paul's perspectives in these passages:

*Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.* 1 Peter 4:12-13

*And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now*

*hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Romans 5:3–5*

Until we reach this level of a mature love relationship with God, we'll question God's love every time something bad happens to us. We'll question God in every famine and every kind of barrenness. If we cannot see it, touch it, or gain immediate benefit from it, we may whine like a toddler and beg God to remove the trial of faith instead of trusting Him to bring us through it.

But a maturing love recognizes the unchanging eternal love of God. He is always working toward our eternal good even when we are in a barren land with a barren womb. God does not tell us all the good He has planned for us tomorrow. He asks us to rely on His guarantee that the good will come.

### **Nothing Separates Us from God's Love**

God not only wanted to mature Abram's and Sarai's love for Him, but He also wanted to demonstrate that nothing could separate them from His love:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Romans 8:35*

What were Abram and Sarai to do when circumstances indicated that all they possessed would be lost in a famine? Had God led them from a land where their livestock flourished to a land where their livestock would perish?

Abram and Sarai could have trusted God to provide for them during the famine. Abram could have said to Sarai, "I know God said, 'Go to this land, and I will bless you.' So in spite of the famine in this Land of Promise, I will remain here and trust God to provide for us." And Sarai could have demonstrated both her trust in God and Abram by responding, "Yes, God has promised to take care of us. Let's stay here."

But instead, Abram and Sarai chose to go down into Egypt. Maybe their rationalization went something like this:

"Abram, we left everything behind and came to this land because you said God told you to come."

"He did tell me to come, and you agreed with my decision."

"But now there is famine. Let's not risk everything we have. Let's go down to Egypt where there is plenty of grasslands and water for our livestock."

"You may be right, Sarai. It only makes sense to go down there. We'll return as soon as the famine ends."

We know what could have happened if they had stayed because later God gave Abraham's son Isaac a similar test of faith with famine, and Isaac stayed in the land. God then gave him a "hundredfold" blessing in a time of famine.

*There was a famine in the land, besides the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. Then the Lord appeared to him [Isaac] and said: "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you. Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you." ... Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. (Genesis 26:1–3; 12)*

Famines can feed our faith or starve it. Famine can diminish our blessings, or faith can increase our blessings. In a marriage, we can believe God and encourage our spouse to trust Him too, or we can waver in faith and discourage our spouse because of our fear (as Job's wife attempted to do—Job 2:9–10).

Faith in the midst of famine begins with confidence in the steadfast love of our heavenly Father. He is good. He will provide. Will we choose to rely on His promises, or will we, like Abraham and Sarai, take matters into our hands?

### **Application**

1. On a scale of one (unsure) to ten (very sure), how confident are you that God loves you and will take care of you? Explain.
2. If you had been Sarai, would you have advised Abram to stay in the land or go down to Egypt? Why?
3. Read Romans 8:28–35. In what ways do these verses encourage you to keep trusting God even in difficult circumstances?

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus, forgive me when I doubt Your love for me and Your ability to provide for me in times of famine. I have been comfortable walking by sight. I often want my way and demand too much attention. Lord, let me grow up to become a mature servant of Jesus Christ. I know You love me. Famine and barrenness are not signs that You have abandoned me. Jesus's sacrifice on the cross proved once and for all that You love me now and always. I love You, Lord Jesus. Amen.



## Day 11

### Trials Produce a Greater Harvest

*Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. James 5:7–8*

I, Truman, was just five years old. I had watched my father plant a family garden, and later we enjoyed the wonderful fruits of his labor. Mom fixed cabbage and squash from the harvest. Then we enjoyed the tomatoes and lettuce for salads and sandwiches. Corn on the cob, radishes, a variety of beans and other vegetables were all part of my dad's bountiful family garden. But then there were my favorites that I could pick and eat at will—strawberries, watermelons, and plums.

One day my mom and I went to the local farmers market. I asked, "Can I have a small packet of seeds to plant?" She agreed and purchased some seeds for me.

My dad was working out of town, so I became an unsupervised farmer. I used one of mom's kitchen spoons to plant a few seeds. I planted in hope, anticipating the kind of fruit I saw my dad harvest.

I watered the ground where I planted the seeds, but the next day nothing was growing. When I complained to Mom, she assured me that plants take time to grow—just be sure to water them each day.

Each day I checked on my plants, but not one had broken the surface of the ground. Each day I became more impatient. I told Mom, "I'm going to dig them up and see what's wrong."

Mom replied, "You just have to be patient. They will grow."

Ignoring the wisdom and experience of my mom, I decided to dig up the seeds that I had planted to find out what was taking so long. I uprooted the small plants as they were in the germination process and interfered with the Creator's law of the harvest. I then gave up on farming and decided to go back to play time. I did not have the patience to wait for the process of growth that preceded the harvest.

We can all learn from the farmer's ability to wait patiently for a harvest. We may plant spiritual seeds with hope and faith, but if we lack patience, we will not see the lasting

fruit that God intends to produce in our lives. Abram and Sarai began well in hope and faith, but they needed to practice patience during the famine.

### **More Fruit, Richer Fruit**

Another reason God allows trials is to prune us, so we can bring forth more and richer fruit. In chapter five of his book, James reminds us that harvesting the *precious fruit of the earth* requires effort and patience. The farmer cannot bring *the early and latter rain* himself. He must trust that God will bring the rains, then wait for God to bring them.

James also mentions how the prophets and Job waited for God's promises to be fulfilled: *My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful* (5:10–11).

Most prophets never saw the wonderful outcomes God promised. And some prophets, such as Jeremiah, only saw the ruin that preceded the restoration. Job, however, did live to enjoy God's blessing after his years of suffering. In fact, Job 42:12 tells us that *the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning*.

### **Patience Strengthens Faith**

Out of obedience to God, Abram and Sarai by faith came to the Land of Promise with the guarantee of His blessings. Like farmers, they depended on God to give His blessing of rain. Without rain, the grass and plants die. Without grass and water, their livestock would die.

The famine placed Abram and Sarai in the middle of a trial of faith. They were in the will of God, but there was no blessing of rain from heaven. Every week that passed without rain, the famine intensified. The Bible doesn't describe Abram's or Sarai's emotional state during this time. Did they encourage one another, or did they become so anxious that they snapped at each other? Did they pray together for rain, or did they grow distant as they grew more frustrated?

On our journey toward spiritual maturity, faith has a partner: patience. The writer of Hebrews says, *Show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises* (6:12).

Abram and Sarai needed a farmer's patience to wait on God to open the windows of heaven and provide rain. Had they waited longer God would have rewarded them, just as he answered Elijah's prayer during a famine:

*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. James 5:17–18*

Not only would Abram and Sarai have received rain from heaven like Elijah had they waited with patience in the Land of Promise, but they also would have strengthened their faith. And maybe a more robust faith would have better prepared them for the future tests involving Hagar and, later, her son, Ishmael.

### **Application**

1. In a few sentences, explain how patience and faith work together to help you grow spiritually.
2. Have you ever begun to obey God in some area, but after waiting for some evidence of fruit, you ran out of patience and just moved on to something else? What did you learn from that experience?
3. Read the story of Moses' failure to wait in Exodus 2:11–22. What were the consequences? How did God prove himself faithful in spite of Moses' unfaithfulness? How does God's faithfulness to Moses encourage you?

### **Prayer**

Dear heavenly Father, I better understand that You test the faith of Your children to grow and mature them. I understand that I need to trust You and walk by faith, not by sight. Abram and Sarai's trip to Egypt in a time of testing instructs me to wait on You. But You did not give up on them, nor did You give up on Moses. Thank You for Your faithfulness even when I lack faith. Teach me to wait on You. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.



## Day 12

### Our Trials Benefit Others

*Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:11–13)*

“But what should I do?”

“Find someone who is farther down the road than you are, and ask them to mentor you.”

I, Denise, sat in the office of the marriage counselor. My husband and I were going through a difficult time. He wasn't living at home, and I didn't know if we'd be able to work out our difficulties.

“Do you know someone who has faced a similar situation?” the counselor asked.

I thought of Pat, an older woman in my church, who had shared her testimony at a recent woman's retreat. The details of her situation were different than mine, but God had restored her broken marriage.

When I returned home that day, I called Pat and arranged to have coffee with her. She became a strong support for me during my trial of faith. She prayed with me, encouraged me, and walked alongside me. Twenty years have passed since my husband and I reconciled. God healed our marriage. I'm so grateful that He also gave me a friend and mentor in Pat.

#### **Common Problems, Consistent Patterns**

God uses His people to set examples for us to follow. Just as we all have common temptations and trials, we also have a common pattern of how God dealt with people of growing faith—whether those people are living now or lived long ago.

The temptations that Abram and Sarai faced are common to us all. In fact, all the stories of people in the Bible are recorded for us as good or bad examples. Paul lived in such a way that he could say, *Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern (Philippians 3:17).*



Scripture gives us a consistent pattern of how a trial of faith unfolds:

1. God reveals and makes a promise.
2. The promised is received and believed.
3. The believer then faces a trial of faith waiting on the fulfillment of the promise.
4. The believer sometimes wavers in his faith and tries to help God fulfill the promise.
5. After failure, the believer waits again.
6. In His time and way, God fulfills His promise.

This pattern is clearly seen in Abram's and Sarai's lives. Consider point 4 in the above outline where the believer tires of waiting on God and tries to help God bring to pass God's promise.

- Abram went down to Egypt in time of famine.
- Sarai offered Hagar as a concubine wife to give birth to Ishmael.
- Sarai then tried to banish Hagar and Ishmael from Abram's household.
- Abram wanted God to choose Ishmael as the promised heir.

Consider point 3 above in relationship to the following scriptural examples:

- Sarai had to wait on the birth of Isaac from the barren womb until she was ninety.
- Jacob had to wait over twenty years before God called him to return to Bethel.
- Joseph had to wait over twenty years before his family bowed to him in Egypt.
- Moses had to wait forty years before God called him back to Egypt to deliver Israel.
- Joshua had to wait over forty years before he led Israel in the conquest.
- David was anointed as Israel's next king, but he had to wait nearly twenty years before he sat on the throne.

If Abram and Sarai had known about the billions of people who've been helped by their trial of faith, do you think they would have been even more determined to be faithful to God?

### **Pass It On**

We not only can be encouraged by the example of the faithful servants of God in Scripture, but we also can be encouraged by the examples of other Christians and, in turn, encourage the people whom God places in our path.

Consider Paul's words to the Corinthians:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves*

*are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. 2 Corinthians 1:3–7*

The Greek word translated “comfort” and “consolation” in the passage above has a broad meaning in Greek: “a calling near, admonition, encouragement, persuasive discourse, stirring address.”<sup>5</sup> A form of this Greek word is also used to describe the role of the Holy Spirit as “counselor” (see John 14:26).

Sometimes the Holy Spirit Himself speaks to our spirit—encouraging, comforting, teaching, admonishing. And sometimes He sends another human being to minister to us. But God never leaves us alone in our trials to fend for ourselves.

During Abram and Sarai’s trial of faith, God sent some unlikely encouragers, including the Pharaoh of Egypt (Genesis 14) and Abimelech, king of Gerar (Genesis 20). God used both of those men to convict Abram of wrongdoing. Other times God sent angels, and once he sent Melchizedek, king of Salem (Genesis 14).

God may send some unlikely encouragers to help us during our trial of faith too. But if we keep our spiritual eyes and ears open, we’ll recognize these people as His messenger-companions, who will support us during our darkest times.

### **Application**

1. In what ways has Abram and Sarai’s story encouraged you so far? Is there another Bible character whose trial of faith encourages you? Explain.
  
2. Have you considered that the trial of faith you are going through may be an example and encouragement to someone in your family or church? Consider keeping a journal of what God is teaching you so you’ll be able to share it with someone else when the time is right. What could you write in that journal about your current situation?

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<sup>5</sup> “G3874 - paraklēsis - Strong’s Greek Lexicon (NKJV).” Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 20 Nov, 2020. <https://www.blueletterbible.org//lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=G3874&t=NKJV>.

3. Read 1 Samuel 20. How did Jonathan and David encourage and support each other during this crisis? What can we learn from their example?

**Prayer**

Dear heavenly Father, thank You for being transparent with the examples of Bible characters, recording both their failures and successes. Help me to learn from their examples. Show me how my trial of faith can be an example and encouragement to others and give me opportunities to tell others what You have taught me. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.