

A Failed Fertility
Judges 13:1-25

Friends Mahaneh Dan is located in the hills which overlooking the Sorek Valley to the south west – it would sort of be like looking off towards Bragg Creek from the west side of Springbank Hill here – only there wouldn't be snowcapped mountains in the distance but another set of rolling foothills

And it was a beautiful view as you can see; not only because of the scenery but because it was prime agricultural land – a valuable commodity in those days. Its wide fields could be easily plowed and planted and it had a readily accessible source of water running through it – it was a nice piece of real estate.

And this view constantly reminded the tribe of Dan that they had failed to completely conquer the Promised Land and take full possession of their inheritance.

You see friends in spite of the amazing victories which took place when the Israel first entered the Promised Land, the most famous of which is probably Jericho, once they had gained a secure foothold in the land some of the tribes for one reason or

another did not completely drive out the nations which God had told them destroy.

And the tribe of Dan was one of those tribes – and as we discover in Judges 1:34 “*The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain.*”

So the tribe of Dan had to settle for living in the hill country, bordering the Amorites who eventually were replaced by the Philistines – who kept them from taking the best of the land that God had promised them.

Now you would think that this would constantly nag at the Danites, that they would consider the Philistines and all they stood for as their mortal enemies and that they would always be looking for a way to conquer them and take what God had promised to them.

You would think it would be this way, but it wasn't. In fact it was the opposite, while the Danites did despise the Philistines, their culture and way of life rubbed off on them and

pretty soon the Danites, and the rest of Israel as well were worshipping the gods of the Philistines and had forgotten about the Covenant relationship they had with God and their responsibilities in it.

So, when they forgot about God, God would forget about protecting them – so the Philistines and other nations who lived around them would then come and oppress them and rule over them. But when the oppression became too much to bear Israel would clue in and remember to call out to God and God would raise up a hero to deliver Israel and lead them as a nation.

And as long as the hero was alive – Israel would stay faithful, but once the hero died they would go right back to their old ways. This happened over and over and over, and each time things would get progressively worse and even the heroes weren't very righteous any more.

And eventually the people of Israel just became complacent about the whole situation, they forgot about the covenant, and so the Lord had allowed the Philistines to oppress them and that's just the way things were...

So the beautiful view of the Sorek Valley was always there as a reminder of what was rightfully theirs, and of the fact that they had failed to take this fertile piece of land from the Philistines – but that's just the way it was, that's the way it had been... for a long time.

And this context in which the story of Samson takes place is reflected in the relationship between Manoah and his wife.

Manoah's name means "rest" – but not a good rest like the kind that comes after a hard won victory – its more like a lazy rest. He's a lethargic fellow – in fact if we were to diagnose their childlessness today the tests would show he has "lazy little swimmers" – that's why his wife can't get pregnant.

His wife seemed to have the potential for fertility but Manoah it is insinuated, has perhaps at one time tried and failed to give her a child, and now seems to have given up – and so his wife stays barren for a long time – that's just the way it was, they had sort of accepted it.

Manoah's complacent apathetic character is mirrored in his reproductive inabilities and of course that illustrates his spiritual condition as well.

Things were not good in the Promised Land, things were not good for the nation of Israel but nobody was complaining about it, nobody was going to do anything about, in fact nobody was even asking God to do anything about it.

But God decided to do something about it anyways, and Friends doesn't that just speak volumes about who God is?

It reminds me of that verse in Romans 5:8 *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

God is going to help out the people he has made a covenant with, in spite of the fact that they aren't even making an effort to repent, or even cry out to Him – because their relationship was barren, just like the relationship between Manoah and his wife.

And Friends whenever you see a childless woman in the stories of the bible – this is an indicator as to where, or rather with whom God is going to start taking action.

God starts his work in the place where human efforts have so obviously failed to bring about conception – the creation of a new life.

But the instances in the bible where God brings life from barrenness and makes fertility possible again are there not so much to give those who are struggling to conceive some hope,

But ultimately to teach all of us the fundamental truth about our human nature and show us the limits of what our amazing God giving abilities can do about it.

Friends, the hard truth is that we all start out spiritually barren, we all come into this world biologically alive but spiritually dead. That's not to say that our psychological capacities are not functioning,

You see when the bible talks about spirituality it is referring to our capacity to desire to love God, to want to serve Him, to be

eager to obey Him, to be enthusiastic respond to Him – which as we learned last week is the definition of worship.

And the sad truth is that we are all born without this desire, this capacity is just not there

oh to be sure the potential certainly is – after all we are made in God’s image and nothing can rid us of that...

but friends, what the Bible calls SIN is the state of existence we are born into where there is no life, no fertility in our desire to respond to God – it is dead, it is barren.

This is what the Apostle Paul speaks about in Ephesians 2:1 when he says *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”*

But whenever we see God causing the conception of new life in the relationship of a barren woman and an impotent man in scripture it teaches us that only God can breathe life into us so that we desire to respond to Him.

It teaches us that no amount of effort on our part - and think of all the effort a couple goes through when they try to conceive a child, and think of all the additional efforts that they are willing to undertake when conception seems to have failed....

that no amount of effort on our part can bring that desire, that enthusiasm, that willingness to respond to God, back to life. God himself must do it – and He does.

So the Angel of the Lord appears to Manoah’s wife and tells her that she will have a child.

What wonderful news, finally after all these years – a child. Their union will finally bear fruit, she will be able to nurture and care and give a mother’s love. She will have a son who will take care of her in her old age, an heir for Manoah to pass on their estate – maybe she might even live to see her son have children – what a thought, grandkids!

Friends so often when God breaks into our lives and begins to bring new life and blessings we’ve been spiritually dead for so long that our first response is often an inappropriate one.

Now I don't mean inappropriate in the manner of a fellow who had lived a rough life but one day experienced God telling him to go to church one Sunday so he could hear about Jesus, and so he went but he was so nervous about going and especially in front of all the good folks in his town that he drank half a 2-4 of beer to settle his nerves and took his dog with him – I don't mean that kind of inappropriate...

I mean the kind of inappropriate response which thinks that we've stumbled on to some kind of golden goose, a self-interested response to God's initiatives in our lives – and Manoah embodies this kind of self-interested response.

He becomes jealous and suspicious when he hears the good news that his wife will have a child. He hasn't been able to give his wife a child and so he thinks perhaps she's gone and had an indiscretion out in the field with a stranger and knows she is pregnant, and she's trying to pass off the situation by saying a prophet came and told her she would have a child, to make him think the resulting child was his.

So he prays – not a prayer of thanks or for guidance but for proof so he can be sure nothing funny has gone on.

God humors his suspicion and sends the angel a second time and Manoah confronts the angel – are you the one who “talked” with my wife... and did nothing else???

Manoah then tries to take back control of the situation – he says “**when** your words are fulfilled” meaning since you have not impregnated my wife, when **I** get around to giving her a child, how should **we** raise him? You stay away, keep your distance...

And Manoah also figures that there is opportunity to be had here – it's not everyday that one comes across a prophet, maybe they can put him in their debt by hosting him for dinner, maybe they can track him down and consult him in the future if they learn his name...

Friends – ever thought about the ways we can respond inappropriately to God's work in our lives or in the lives of those who are close to us?

We can become jealous that God has become so important their lives; we can resent the fact that we are no longer needed in some way because God is working in their life...

We can also try to set the terms and conditions when God works in our life, right? We might say – listen God it was my decision to follow you and so this is what I'm willing to give you, that's it – I'm the one calling the shots here do you understand!

Or maybe we realize that we've come across something very useful in our lives – when God does things it can make our dreams come true. He can give us peace, security, blessings, an insight into the future, an edge over the competition... So we look for a way to get an angle on God so we can get those blessings – pragmatic religion.

Friends, these things can be factors in our relationship with God, whether we're just experiencing God breaking into our lives for the first time, or whether we've been experiencing His activity for years.

And I think that we can see when it's described like this, when we observe Manoah relating to God this way, that it's not appropriate. The question is can we see it in our own lives?

And the good news is that if we are responding to God in this way, God won't stop interacting with us, and he won't encourage these kinds of responses from us.

The angel of the Lord refuses to give Manoah what he's after, but he doesn't just leave. Instead He responds to Manoah's inappropriate behavior with answers that correct and guide Manoah and his wife to eventually respond appropriately, and they offer a sacrifice to the LORD.

Then everything becomes clear to them, they realize who they have been speaking with and they realize that God's initiative in their lives isn't something to be controlled, or used for selfish gain, but that God had a plan and they were to play a part in it – the fact that they had faced the Angel of the Lord and lived to tell about it proved that much.

Friends – as a minister, my greatest desire for you is that you would encounter the Living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And while God has sent angels in the past to tell people what their role is to be in his plan to save this world, today he reveals Himself to us in a different way - as Hebrews 1:1 says *“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son”*

But I can't generate this experience for you no matter how good a sermon I preach, and you can't conjure it up for all your sincerity or good intentions.

Friends there isn't any we can do to manipulate Jesus - it is his initiative and his decision. It is his promise that He will come and meet with us when we gather in His name – and we can trust Him on that.

So my hope and constant prayer is that God would use what we do here on Sundays to set up an encounter between yourself

and his son Jesus Christ - so that everything becomes clear to you.

That you come away realizing that you've been in the presence of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ and that what you've experienced in that encounter calls you to give 100% of yourself back in response, and experience new life in the midst of barrenness. Amen.