

STILLBORN DREAMS: THE HEARTBREAK OF INFERTILITY

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(Genesis 18:11, 12)



An estimated 15 to 18 percent of all married couples struggle with infertility. Physicians define infertility as the inability to conceive after one year of unprotected sex. Since most couples desire to procreate, the failure to do so often generates bitterness, anger, hostility, and depression. Couples may blame each other for their inability to conceive and/or begin avoiding friends who have become parents. But perhaps the most difficult emotion to own and work through is the anger we feel toward God when our prayers are not answered in the way we hoped.

KNOWING GOD CARES

Romans 11:33 says that the ways and wisdom of God are "past finding out." We must remember that God is big enough to take our confusion and to work through it with us. We must be willing to own our true emotions and bring them to Him. Infertile couples need to know that God cares deeply about their inability to conceive. He designed the process of procreation when He created people in His own image. This intricate process whereby a brain produces hormones which stimulate ovaries to produce eggs or testicles to produce sperm was conceived by the Master Reproductive Endocrinologist. Recognizing that this intricate designed mechanism was not functioning normally, God intervened in the lives of several biblical couples. Consider, for example, Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17:16) and Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1:13). These miraculous conceptions demonstrate God's compassion for infertile couples. In Bible times, a woman who was unable to become pregnant was described as "barren." Modern medicine gives us a fuller understanding of this term. Some

couples may be "barren" because the man does not produce enough sperm to fertilize an egg. In other cases, the woman fails to ovulate or does not produce adequate hormones to maintain a pregnancy. A woman may also be infertile when her fallopian tubes, which carry the egg from the ovary to the uterus, are blocked due to previous infection. For example, bacteria from sexually transmitted diseases denude the lining of tiny, hairlike cilia, leaving it like a barren desert.

If our own choices have caused a sexually transmitted disease to lead to the grief of infertility, it can be a crushing blow. Yet we are still not beyond the mercy and grace of God. He stands ready to forgive us if we recognize the mistakes we have made and determine to walk in a better way. But He does not always remove the consequences of bad choices. However, He is willing and able to redeem our mistakes. What is required is the willingness to die to our ways of fulfilling our dreams. He always gives us hope for the future. Of course, our dreams and hopes may not look the way we expected them to look. Without an adjustment of our vision, we will miss the joy and fulfillment the Father is offering to us through His redeeming gift of

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TRUSTING GOD'S WAYS

Regardless of the cause of infertility, the couple must treat each other with love, avoiding shame and blame. Prayer is the greatest resource during these difficult times. Sometimes a "no" from God is a provision and protection that a couple refuses to receive. We must not let our self-worth be defined by our ability to have children. We lose a sense of direction and purpose when we hold our personal happiness hostage to our limited idea of what it means to be fertile and to nurture new life. Yes, the inability to conceive a child is undeniably painful and requires us to jump huge hurdles of faith in order to go on with a life that is not going as we hoped or planned. But, we can admit our pain while still clinging to the promises of God for abundant life. Though our capacity to produce life in one specific way may be altered, we can be very sure that our loving heavenly Father will fulfill those very ideas and desires in some way in every human being He has created.

Our Creator has given to the human mind the capacity to cultivate life in amazing ways. Techniques of assisted reproduction involving stimulation of ovulation or facilitating the placement of the husband's sperm to be proximate to his wife's egg for fertilization do not appear to be contrary to God's Word. But a couple must understand the risks involved. There is always the risk of conceiving a child with a congenital defect. Pursuit of assisted reproduction also can cause deep division in the marriage with feelings of inadequacy on the part of one or both partners. The process of using donor sperm from another male or donor eggs from another woman should be discouraged, for it may result in a conception contrary to God's design, with the biological parent being asked to give up the rights to his or her own offspring.

While we pray earnestly, our spirits

must remain soft and pliable, willing to receive God's will in His way and time. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end."

Our God is a God of love, and His ways are unfathomable, worthy of our trust and calling for our submission. This intimate love exchange will produce a rich harvest of peace and joy that will go deeper than our pain. We must pray that our hearts and minds will be opened to His unique ways of fulfilling our dreams.

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of infertility include:

- > 1 Samuel 1:1—2:26
- > Proverbs 30:15, 16
- > Luke 1:5-80

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on infertility at 1 Samuel 2:5 on page 345. See also the personality profile of Hannah on page 345.

bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and* with his descendants after him. ²⁰And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year." ²²Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

²³So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. ²⁴Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; ²⁷and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

THE SON OF PROMISE

18 Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre,^a as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. ²So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, ³and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. ⁴Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest

yourselves under the tree. ⁵And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant."

They said, "Do as you have said."

⁶So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead *it* and make cakes." ⁷And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave *it* to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. ⁸So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set *it* before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

⁹Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?"

So he said, "Here, in the tent."

¹⁰And He said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son."

(Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.) ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; *and* Sarah had passed the age of childbearing.^a ¹²Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

¹³And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a *child*, since I am old?'"

¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."

¹⁵But Sarah denied *it*, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.

And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

18:1 ^aHebrew *Alon Mamre* 18:11 ^aLiterally *the manner of women had ceased to be with Sarah*

SOUL NOTE



That's a Laugh! (18:11, 12) When she heard God's promise, Sarah laughed first in disbelief. Later, she laughed with joy (21:6). The desire to be a parent is powerful, and Sarah had gone to great extremes to have a child. What can a couple do as they face what the Bible calls "barrenness"? First, they should pray. They can consult with a doctor and see what measures are possible (considering their personal feelings and their budget). They can look into other options, such as adoption. But ultimately, they must trust God's plan for their lives. **Topic: Infertility**

from the well's mouth, water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the well's mouth.

⁴And Jacob said to them, "My brethren, where *are* you from?"

And they said, "We *are* from Haran."

⁵Then he said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?"

And they said, "We know him."

⁶So he said to them, "Is he well?"

And they said, "*He is* well. And look, his daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep."

⁷Then he said, "Look, *it is* still high day; *it is* not time for the cattle to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go and feed *them*."

⁸But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and they have rolled the stone from the well's mouth; then we water the sheep."

⁹Now while he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. ¹⁰And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. ¹¹Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice and wept. ¹²And Jacob told Rachel that he *was* her father's relative and that he *was* Rebekah's son. So she ran and told her father.

¹³Then it came to pass, when Laban heard the report about Jacob his sister's son, that he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. So he told Laban all these things. ¹⁴And Laban said to him, "Surely you *are* my bone and my flesh." And he stayed with him for a month.

JACOB MARRIES LEAH AND RACHEL

¹⁵Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you *are* my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what *should* your wages be?" ¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder *was* Leah, and the name of the younger *was* Rachel. ¹⁷Leah's eyes *were* delicate, but Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance.

¹⁸Now Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter."

¹⁹And Laban said, "*It is* better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man. Stay with me." ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed *only* a few days to him because of the love he had for her.

²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give *me* my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in to her." ²²And Laban gathered together all the men of the place and made a feast. ²³Now it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴And Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah *as* a maid. ²⁵So it came to pass in the morning, that behold, it *was* Leah. And he said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?"

²⁶And Laban said, "It must not be done so in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Fulfill her week, and we will give you this one also for the service which you will serve with me still another seven years."

²⁸Then Jacob did so and fulfilled her week. So he gave him his daughter Rachel as wife also. ²⁹And Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as a maid. ³⁰Then *Jacob* also went in to Rachel, and he also loved Rachel



SOUL NOTE

Trying to Earn Love (29:32) Although Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (29:30), Rachel envied her sister Leah who had children while Rachel was barren (30:1). Leah thought that having children would win Jacob's love, while Rachel thought that not having children meant Jacob would love her less. Both women

were wrong.

Hannah felt the same. She struggled with her barrenness, but her husband acted wisely, declaring his love for her (1 Sam. 1:8). Couples facing infertility must not let that draw them apart, but instead draw closer together as they declare their love for each other.

Topic: Infertility

KEY PASSAGE



Infertility

HANNAH'S HURT

(2:5)

Hannah's infertility caused great distress because children were seen as a sign of God's blessing. By extension, therefore, barrenness was seen as a curse.

Children were important for the continuance of the family line and family inheritance.

Infertility still causes pain, although perhaps for different reasons. Like Hannah, women who are infertile often hear others' painful comments—even when people don't mean to be hurtful. Barrenness does not make a woman any less important in God's eyes. It is not a curse. Women facing infertility can pray, as Hannah did. God may answer the prayer miraculously, as He did for Hannah, and provide a child. He may answer the prayer in other ways. Infertile couples should pray, being open to God's different ways of answering.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about infertility on pages 24, 25. See also the personality profile of Hannah on this page.

PERSONALITY PROFILE



Infertility

HANNAH—COPING WITH INFERTILITY

(1 SAMUEL 2:5)

Hannah loved her husband. Elkanah loved her in return, though their relationship was somewhat complicated by a second wife in the house—Peninnah. Hannah struggled to accept her husband's repeated demonstrations of affection because she was unable to give him children. The "fault" was hers, for her rival Peninnah seemed to have no difficulty conceiving. Hannah's shame deepened under Peninnah's resentful attacks. Elkanah's assurances that his love for Hannah wasn't based on her fertility fell on deaf ears. Instead of love, she heard only reminders of her failure.

After years of humiliation, Hannah turned to God in a special way. We don't know how often she prayed about her infertility, but during one trip to Shiloh she gave her problem to God. She made a painful vow: If God would give her a son, she would present the child back to God for lifelong service. Hannah made no promises about her own feelings, or threats about what she would do if God chose not to accept her vow. She simply gave up her part of a long struggle. She returned to her husband, leaving her burden with God.

Within months, Hannah conceived and gave birth to Samuel, and she kept her promise. When she returned to Shiloh, Hannah brought her toddler and presented him to Eli for upbringing in the temple. He grew into a mighty man of God—a prophet, priest, and judge. Meanwhile, Hannah had other children. God demonstrated His faithfulness to Hannah. In her life, God's answer opened her womb. But the deeper, more important, healing occurred in her soul. She finally understood that God had heard her. Such a settled faith allowed her to dedicate Samuel.

Modern medicine has made great strides in overcoming infertility, and God is still there hearing prayer. Hannah's example to women remains one of hope. God knows their sorrow, and He remains faithful.

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