

The Gift of Infertility

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ABSTRACT: Religious gender views influence expectations on the identity and purpose of women. Traditionalism teaches that the highest, sacred calling is to be a wife and mother. These portrayed admirable goals, but barrenness continues to result in confusion, doubt, shame, and a questioning God's plan. This article began with the personal journey of the author from sadness to joy as she realized infertility was, in reality, a gift from God. Barrenness allowed her to experience and grasp God's complete purpose, power, and promise. This testimony was shared to explain the effects of religious gender views. True peace was not found in rhetoric and theory, but through understanding and trusting in God's design. Practical suggestions were provided to counsel and encourage other evangelical women discouraged by motherhood culture and point them to Christ.

KEYWORDS: infertility, women, traditionalism, motherhood, identity, purpose, children

The Gift of Infertility

“There is no greater place of ministry, position, or power than that of a mother” (George 1997, 97). This was the standard, the absolute truth I was taught growing up in a traditional Christian household. The godly woman is saved through childbearing and “the mother’s womb the work-place of the Holy Spirit” (Murray 1975, 180). The Titus 2 stereotype spoke of the high calling of being a wife and mother and keeping the home. The Proverbs 31 woman exemplified the wife and mother which inspired beauty, creativity, and thoughtful planning. Bible studies for women always taught the same message: “motherhood is in God’s sight a holier and a more blessed thing than you realize” (Murray 1975, 183).

The traditionalist girl’s greatest dream was to be a pastor or missionary’s wife and have a respectably large group of giggling children. The aspirations came from ideal woman portrayed in the ladies’ Bible study books which taught, “Woman’s highest dignity and her greatest honors are found in contributing to the perfection of the divine purpose of her Creator in her peculiar character of mother” (Burns 2001, 230).

Thus, I entered my marriage with the concept that my identity, my purpose, and my worth were based on my success as a mother and homemaker. Thankfully, God did not leave me with that misconception; He gave me the gift of infertility. That gift was a journey which opened my eyes to look past my personal pain and struggle, to discover my true value from God’s perspective, to experience God’s peace, and to encourage others.

The Beginning of the Journey

My husband and I are planners. We were married in January and intended to start a family right away. According to the schedule, we started trying to conceive in the late summer. Nothing happened. Christmas came and went with no announcement. As each month passed, I felt like I was on a roller coaster of emotions. A single day late in my cycle would cause me to run to the store for another pregnancy test. Each time the test would show negative. This went on for years.

Mother’s Day was the worst. It was always on a Sunday, which meant that the morning church service would be completely given over to celebrating those women who were able to bear babies. Usually, the children would present their moms with a flower. Church was normally a sanctuary where the hurting could meditate on the grace and lovingkindness of Christ, but every year the focus seemed to change from honoring Jesus to honoring mothers. In a moment of

transparency, I approached the pastors to share my struggle about the holiday. I can only imagine it was out of a desire to minister that the next Mother's Day sermon directed everyone's attention on infertile Hannah and how her prayers were answered. I ran into the bathroom to weep. To me, Hannah was miraculously blessed by the Lord and joined the privileged group of respectable women, even though this blessing seemed (to me) to come at a high cost. Her bargain with the Lord was to remove her shame, and in return she would give up her son to temple service. Was this the message that women like me was meant to receive? Did I not pray hard enough? Did I not promise to sacrifice enough? I related more to Hannah at the beginning of the story, fluctuating between broken, sad, and grievously irritated. I felt provoked going to the house of the Lord (1 Samuel 1:6-7).

While being a wife and homemaker is a blessing, a lifetime of only serving one husband confines one to a small sphere. A mother's impact allows a woman to branch out into the world. Her children, who begin under her guidance and care, develop into mature influencers of society. More than that, the mother's effect is not bound by time. Her children are immortal souls which exist for eternity (Cameron 2001, 235). "Mothers have as powerful an influence over the welfare of future generations, as all other earthly causes combined" (Abbott 1984, 137). Therefore, infertile women wonder, what will be the purpose of life if there is no one to influence nor a legacy to produce. If motherhood was a sacred calling to follow, then why are godly women not allowed to answer the call? Respected traditionalist authors offer little counsel. They write about the blessings of motherhood where "hugs and kisses should be routine," but are no little hugs and kisses in a barren home (Peace 1997, 83).

Consequently, I found new female authors who understood my pain. It was comforting to know that I was not the only one who struggled with these feelings. However, most of the authors I read had the happy ending of a provided family, and they shared from hindsight how they conquered their struggles. As time progressed, those other women could only commiserate with me but never relieve my pain. I felt more depressed. While what they expressed was true and heartfelt, it did not satisfy my heart. It was then, in the midst of despair, that the Lord opened my eyes. The authors of the books were not God, and their writings were not inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak to my soul. The only peace I would find to save me from the raging turmoil inside was understanding God's perspective. Many women with infertility, myself included, struggle with our view of God in three areas: His purpose for women, His power over events, and His promises fulfilled. This article will examine these doubts, discover how to find peace, and give practical examples of how others can help those hurting.

Spiritual Confusion

God's purpose for women suggests a consideration of why He created the different sexes. Traditional churches and women's studies often give the answer, "We were created male and female for lifetime partnership through marriage (and) for a lineage through parenting" (Way 2003). The Creator of all things has the authority to proclaim the purpose for His design, which includes procreation (Genesis 1:28). Obedience to the sacred calling of marriage and motherhood demonstrates trust in God's kind authority. He is a good Father who wants to give the best to His spiritual children, and one of the greatest gifts He can give is physical children (Matthew 7:11; Psalm 127:3-5). Therefore, when women follow the directives of God without question, they demonstrate their faith in His goodness, wisdom, and love (John 14:15, 23; 1 John 5:3). God rewards such faith as the Psalmist exclaims, "He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 113:9).

With these expectations as the foundation, the woman's identity becomes wrapped up in the necessity of marriage and the ability to bear children. However, if the purpose of women is childbearing, how can Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 be explained that it is better for some to remain single? Singleness appears to be a contradiction with one's created function. Additionally,

if a woman's identity comes through childbearing, what becomes the purpose of a baby, toddler, young girl, and older woman? Is a female child's worth waiting until she is older and able to conceive? Is usefulness in her older years best served through offering help and guidance to younger mothers? Carolyn James states, "We overlook all the other seasons of a woman's life – which impacts every girl and adult woman and excludes entirely women whose lives follow a different path" (James 2015, 40). If the reader may think that such statements are an overreaction, consider Evans' observation:

Growing up in the Church, I must have heard a thousand times that my highest calling as a woman was to bear and bring up children. While men could honor God in varying capacities through work, family, and ministry, a woman's spiritual aptitude was measured primarily by her ability to procreate. Even as a child I notice that the church deaconesses hosted dozens of wedding and baby showers each year, but never a housewarming party for a single woman or a celebration dinner for a woman who passed the bar or graduated from medical school. Subtly, the belief that I was incomplete without a husband and children crept into my subconscious. Without procreating, I believed, my contribution to the church didn't really count (Evans 2012, 178).

Confusion over a woman's expectations and identity leads to misunderstandings about God's character and purpose. Genesis 1 describes God intentionally creating women in His image. A narrow focus on the image bearer complicates the problem further. Jennifer Saake, who experienced infertility for ten years, explains the dilemma: "God had the desire to create new life, and He wanted to create it in His own image. If he, being perfect and complete, had this desire to create, how could it be selfish or wrong?" (Saake 2005, 27). Since God gave women the same desire to create, barrenness makes them feel inferior or incomplete in their purpose. Infertility seems to disqualify her from being a *complete* image bearer, only allowing her to partially represent God. Thus, God's purpose in creating a reflection of himself has been marred.

This reasoning leads to doubting God's power. If His purpose is for women to bear children, then has His power been thwarted by sin? James describes the lies many believe regarding God's original failed design which led to an alternate arrangement. Infertile women have "the conviction that they have lost God's best plan for them. They believe that they had missed or fallen off the plan, or that something has happened to destroy it" (James 2001, 72). This fear encourages women to take the matter into their own hands, bear the responsibility to fix it and make it happen. This is not a modern-day problem. Scripture provides examples of men and women in the Bible who believed that God was not working and took control for themselves (Genesis 16:1-2; 30:1-5; 1 Samuel 13:8-12).

Infertility also causes doubt in the consistency of God's promises. If the Bible teaches in passages such as Psalm 128:1-3 and Exodus 23:26 that children are a gift to the righteous and then no children are given, does that mean that person is not pleasing to God? If God is quick to bless, then why does He withhold this joy? To rationalize His promise, the barren woman thinks either she is currently living in sin or she has displeased God. The alternative is a God unable to fulfill his promise or thwarted by the enemy. Without a promise to cling to, hope is lost, and "if the light of hope goes out, life shrinks to mere existence, something far less that life was meant to be" (Packer 2013, 89-90). Thus, infertility makes women question God's purpose, power, and promises. While these three subjects plague the soul, God graciously gives His perspective.

Spiritual Peace

Peace comes through understanding and trusting in God's design. Only His perspective can free the deep longings and the bondage of emptiness that infertility causes. Solace can be found in knowing God's true purpose, power, and promise for His children.

Peace can be found in *clarification* of God's purpose. Women are made in the image of God; it defines who they are, but it is not their function. God did command Adam and Eve to fill the earth, but that is not His objective for each individual life. God delights in creating the unique. Ephesians 2:10 reminds us, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." God has never mass-produced any part of His creation. Each snowflake is different; each blade of grass is different; and each of His children is not only formed physically different, but their path is spiritually unique. God prepared the distinctive talents, gifts, responsibilities, and purpose for each person beforehand. He knew which of His daughters would be infertile. That did not happen as a mistake. Yet, He has created each one for good works, through the preordained purpose that He specifically designed. God has not decreed that every woman bear a certain number of children or that every woman serve the church in the same way; rather, God's purpose for each woman is different, specially aimed for her good and His glory.

Ultimately, all people were created for the purpose to glorify God and find satisfaction in Him (Westminster 1648, question 1; Acts 17:26-27; Revelation 4:11; Psalm 19:1; Isaiah 43:7). The core of women's actions and thoughts should revolve around God. Believing that children will give purpose or bring fulfillment means the mind is no longer fixed on God but rather focused on the action. God desires the unwavering love of the heart, not just duties fulfilled. He wants His daughters to rest in complete trust in Him alone, not her ability to produce children. Sometimes to reveal the heart, the caring God uses trials such as infertility to procure a woman's attention and bring her focus back to Him (Coe 2006; Exodus 20:5; 34:14; Mark 12:29; Proverbs 3:5; 1 Timothy 1:5). God has designed each woman for a specific purpose in His plan. To find peace amid infertility, women must forfeit their preconceived plans and seek to discover His. If He has not called on her to bear children, then what ministries does He have in store for her? How can she serve Him with the talents and gifts He has bestowed on her?

Peace can be found in the conviction of God's power. God is sovereign, meaning He has the power to do all things, He is not dependent on an outside source for help or advice, and He is able to accomplish all He desires (Psalm 147:5; Job 42:2; Matthew 19:26; Ephesians 1:11; Philippians 2:13). Scriptures make His omnipotence perfectly clear. The angel Gabriel told Mary, "With God nothing will be impossible" and Jesus declared, "With God all things are possible" (Luke 1:37; Matthew 19:26). God's sovereignty is limited by one thing: His character. A good God does not do something that is not good. A powerful God cannot lose control. Regarding the question of God failing His original plan and developing an alternate one, James responds, "God's plan for us is intact, proceeding exactly as he intended, neither behind nor ahead but right on schedule. Nothing - not our sins, failures, disappointments, bad decisions, nor the sins of others against us - can deter a sovereign God from accomplishing his purposes" (James 2001, 72; Romans 8:35-39). God's plans are never hindered.

Peace can be found in the certainty of God's promises. His promises are always true. God never promised that every woman would have a child, but God did promise that He will do good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28; James 1:2-4, Lamentations 3:37-38). The turmoil women face due to their infertility demonstrates that their definition of "good" might be different from God's definition of "good." Perhaps mankind's definition of "bad" is also skewed. Nik Vujičić, born without arms or legs, is a prime example of what the world determines as "bad." He came to realize that his body's formation was meant for his good and for the good of those around him. Although he initially labeled it as suffering, God has used his "bad" differences as an instrument to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and see many saved. He mused that if God asked if he would rather have his life with arms and legs, his answer would be no (Christian Broadcast 2013, 6:45). Being without limbs is not "bad," but being without a relationship with Christ is. Nik testifies, "If you don't know the truth, then you can't be free, because then you'll believe that the lies are the truth. But once we realize that when we read the Word of God and you know the truth

of who you are, then I'm not a man without arms and legs. I am a child of God" (Christian Broadcast 2013, 5:30).

Likewise, women must see themselves not as women without children, but as daughters of God. A woman's high and sacred calling is not motherhood, but as a disciple of Christ. "Following Christ is something a woman can do whether she is married, or single, rich or poor, sick or healthy, childless or Michelle Duggar" (Evans 2012, 180). Nancy Wolgemuth details three truths that combat the lie that women must have their desires met to be happy: happiness is not found in children or any relationship, but only found in Christ; God promised to give His daughters what they truly need, not necessarily what they want; and contentment is found with God and His provisions alone (Wolgemuth 2001, 139-140). While women may feel like children are necessary, God responds by promising that true peace and happiness is found only in Him (John 14: 27; 16:33; Colossians 3:15; Philippians 4:6-7; 2 Thessalonians 3:16). God uses trials, such as infertility, to dispel false hopes and misconceptions, and spiritual peace is displayed through the clarification of His purpose, the conviction of His power, and certainty of His promises.

Helping Others

Infertility is a difficult problem for women because they often feel misunderstood. Scientific journals admit that "involuntary childlessness is recognized as one of the greatest forms of unhappiness and loss an adult woman might endure" (Thompson 2001, 52). Genesis clearly portrays the woman's hurting heart. "Give me children, or I shall die!" is Rachel's cry to Jacob. He did not understand her depth of pain and instead became angry (Genesis 30:1-2). A dear friend of mine also struggled with infertility. She had a solid view of God's perspective yet was still sad. Her traditionalist husband even quoted Elkanah saying, "Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8). Although he meant to encourage her, this response broke her heart more. As my friend and I cried together, we wondered if pastors and husbands could ever understand Proverbs. "Three things are never satisfied; four never say, 'Enough': Sheol, *the barren womb*, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, 'Enough'" (Proverbs 30:15-16, emphasis added). Frequently women with fertility issues hear simplified answers like "trust in God" or "pray with thanksgiving." However, those remedies last only for a month and then are quickly forgotten when they are again reminded of their unfulfilled desire. Women who are hurt need a compassionate understanding and a practical way to apply God's perspective. Elkanah's original query, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" was self-focused, assuming his love and affection should have been enough for her. Elkanah's words demonstrated that he thought he was the answer to her problem. Instead, Hannah's struggle, similar to many barren women in the traditionalist movement, was an inward and shameful dilemma. She likely felt worthless, especially as she was reminded daily of her failure by Elkanah's other wife. What Elkanah should have said to Hannah is, "You, Hannah, are worth more to me than ten sons." Hannah and my friend needed to understand that their identity, purpose, and worth were valued by their husbands, regardless of barrenness.

The first step to help is through listening, comprehension, and acceptance. Women desirous of reproduction grieve over their difficulties. Shame, anxiety, depression, and guilt are some of the burdens that they carry. The problem is deeper than just not having a child; it is giving up their hopes and expectations. They need a loving community that will be available, sensitive, and comforting. Rebekah Hannah, a biblical counselor and instructor, works with women and the anxieties they experience with childlessness. She suggests that the best way to help hurting women is to comfort them in their moment of need by listening carefully and asking questions, rather than making statements or giving advice (Hannah 2013). The knowledge that someone else hears and seeks to understand the pain felt is often enough to bring encouragement. "Asking appropriate heart probing questions" allows others to enter into her trial and provide acceptance

(Hannah 2013). Frequently, outside expectations (spouse, extended family, church family, community) are harder for a woman to manage than with her own internal struggles. Sometimes she wishes to have reassurance that it is not shameful to be childless. Comfort through listening, physically being there, and prayer are the best tools for support.

The second step is presenting and teaching a solid biblical foundation for suffering. Cynthia Heald asserts, “Whenever we begin to doubt, we must not waver in our faith, but be fully assured that what God has promised, He is also able to perform” (Heald 1992, 74). Not to waver when struggles happen implies that faith must already exist and be firmly rooted in the truth. Ideally, pastors, authors, Sunday school teachers, and mentors should establish a basic groundwork of teaching God’s purpose, power, and promises before a crisis arises. Sermons on infertility are rare. Most messages discuss the topic in the light of God overcoming bareness, but a faithful rendering of God’s provision and care to the barren, the fatherless, and the widow can provide great comfort (Roets 2013). Vujičić reminds, “God can heal you without changing the circumstance” (Christian Broadcast 2013, 3:45). Even during the trial or if there is no end in sight, God’s perspective still brings peace.

Stuart Scott, a Christian counselor and professor, suggests that when faced with any difficult trial, three short questions should be asked: “Could God have stopped this? Did He? If not, why not?” (Scott 2013). Working through the answers to these questions grants insight into God’s character as well as one’s true needs. The beginning question can be rephrased in this way: “Is God powerful enough to fix the problem?” The answer in every case is yes. God’s sovereignty means everything is planned by Him and under His control (Isaiah 46:9-11; Ephesians 1:11). While God is not the author of evil, both hardships and blessings are in His power (Jeremiah 32:42; Lamentations 3:37-38). Therefore, God is powerful enough to solve every challenge, answer every desire, and mend every relationship (Psalm 147:5; Job 42:2; Matthew 19:26; Ephesians 1:11; Philippians 2:13). God delights in turning the brokenness of this world into good (Genesis 50:20). God can give children to the childless.

With that foundational understanding, the second question is, “Did He?” Did God, in His power, take away infertility, the feelings of shame, the reproach of others? The simple answer is no. If God answered the problem according to one’s desires, then there would not be an ongoing trial. This negative response produces the third and most important question, “Why not?”

The answer to “why not” is found in God’s methods which always bring Him glory and us good (Scott 2013). All trials, including infertility, are designed to bring God glory (Job 1-2; John 9:1-3). But when the heart is breaking, it is not focused on God receiving glory; rather, it is turned inward. That is why God, in His kind mercy, also designed for trials to be the means to bring good to His children. Job did not struggle with infertility, but he keenly felt the loss of a family. He learned that God has a purpose for suffering and confessed, “when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold” (Job 23:10). Other biblical examples include Joseph in Genesis 50:20 and Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Eric Spier lists five blessings that come through waiting on God: it reveals our true motives, builds patience, increases anticipation, transforms our character, and develops a deeper intimacy with God (Spier 2013). All of these things are for our good.

Women who are hurting need more than simple testimonies and sermons. The responsibility of the body of Christ is to understand and “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15-16). The obligation of leaders is to first listen and care and then never stop teaching the application of God’s perspective which brings ultimate hope and healing.

The Gift of Infertility

In my testimony, I claimed that God gave me the *gift* of infertility. At the time it did not feel like a gift, but it was. He has made use of ongoing heartache to bring me to a deeper understanding and reliance on Him. He gave me compassion for others who are hurt and the opportunity to minister to them. Most surprisingly, He used infertility to fulfill my desire to serve Him on the mission

field. After coming to terms that we would not have biological children, my husband and I looked into adoption. Through a series of providential events, God led us to Eastern Europe. Over the years, God used adoptions to introduce us to people groups that needed the gospel. He began to instill a heart for missions and a firm faith in His sovereignty. God does not always give the opportunity for us to see how His plans work out for His glory and our good, but we are thankful that He allowed us to see His design in our lives. My testimony is James 1:2-4, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Traditionalists must be reminded that barrenness is not simply a curse. God’s gift of infertility supplies an abundance of peace and trust, which is worth more than ten sons.

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