

Pastoral Care for Those Experiencing Infertility and Miscarriages

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She was overwhelmed with grief and sorrow. Her husband loved her, but still she felt cursed by God. Indeed, she felt that ancient curse spoken over the first woman: *“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children.”*

Who is this woman? I originally wrote those words about Hannah, but many other Hannahs sit in the pews of our churches, empty, sad, bearing with bitterness the curse in their bodies: *“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception.”*

Some women feel the pain in childbearing; others feel the pain of not having this gift. And then there are the children who are no more, who never draw breath, passing away without funeral, the only baby shower being the tears of parents grieving in secret.

Why? There is no answer, not for any particular woman. God’s ways are hidden from us. Some women pass all of their days without a little one to cradle, while other women wait years in silent grief until they have a child to mother. Abraham’s wife Sarah. Isaac’s wife Rebekah. Jacob’s wife Rachel. Elizabeth, who became in her old age mother of John the Baptist.

And then here is Hannah. Her prayers are not polite; she breaks all decorum, and that, in the place of sacrifice. *“And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish.”¹*

¹ 1 Samuel 1:10 NKJV

If we are going to discuss pastoral care for those suffering infertility, miscarriage, and other tragedies, we most need to understand that bitterness of soul experienced by so many women – and not women only, but also men, who long to be fathers.

One picture will not do; the griefs and heartaches, the spiritual challenges people face are different. So I want first to sketch for you, with broad outlines, some of the crosses our people are carrying, and the sins and spiritual problems that assault them.

The Crosses of the Barren

The barren woman feels isolated. My wife and I adopted a little boy, James, just over a year ago. We had numerous visits with our social worker after placement before the adoption could be finalized. At one of the first visits, she asked us, “Have you discovered the club yet?” She meant the parenting club, and I had been oblivious to it before. Now, however, my conversations had turned from sports statistics to sleeping statistics, and shameless comparisons of the color and consistency of infant excrement. There *was* a secret society that had been holding meetings in broad daylight! Well, that society was secret to me – but it isn’t secret at all to the barren woman. She is isolated and excluded. These are not high school cliques – but in some ways they’re worse, because the only way in is a baby.

The barren person feels like a disappointment – a disappointment to husband or wife anxious for a child, a disappointment parents anxious to be grandparents. No matter how loving and patient these are, the barren person cannot shake the feeling, “I’ve let everybody down.”

Eventually people begin prodding: “When are you going to start a family?” Which communicates to the barren couple that they are not a real family. And just as the culture has begun to judge “breeders” for having children,

so there is an opposite judgment of the childless for their selfishness, and the barren feel indicted by that unjust judgment, made more bitter by their longing.

“Now I’m finally an adult,” said one proud father after the birth of his first child – unintentionally causing the barren to feel stunted, not even regarded as a full member of the community.

These are problems not from secular Western culture, but problems that arise within the culture of our churches. If you have cancer, we’ll put you on the prayer list. If you are pregnant, we’ll put you on the prayer list. But if you are struggling to get pregnant, the church does not publicly remember you or acknowledge you. Like mental illness, the crosses of barrenness and miscarriage are often treated as taboo.

That’s inside the church. What’s influencing us from the outside?

Cultural Catechesis: What Dogmas Dominate the Western World?

A core problem in our culture is the idea of autonomy: that we are laws unto ourselves, to each individual belonging the right to make every decision concerning sexuality, marriage, and parenthood, even when these things contravene nature. The church must address how the concepts of *choice* and *control* dominate our own thinking about children and family.

The culture indoctrinates us with these ideas:

- Having children is a choice
- *Pro-choice* is not just about abortion, but about the decision to pursue pregnancy.
- Thus even most pious Christian marriages begin with the assumption that children are not gifts from God given in His good time, but lifestyle choices according to our timing. And it would be best to wait. Wait until

school is finished, wait until we have enough money, wait until we have a large enough house, wait until we are ready.

- And while we are waiting, we use birth control. Note that language of *control* – our will dominates. The natural functioning of the body, and one of the principal purposes of marriage, is willfully subverted, in an attempt to keep God from controlling, to keep God from giving us a blessing that we are terrified will be a curse.

At the core of this focus on control is the lie that we are the masters of our destiny, that we can shape life according to our will. Russell Moore calls this “the god of a self-directed future”:

This counter satanic humility can be seen, first, in Christians learning to give up the sense of desperation we feel when we lose “control” of our lives, our expectations, our families, our churches, our country. I don’t know what your personal trap is for kingdom building. For me, the satanic temptation was there in the having of children. When my wife and I first married, I was absolutely terrified of her getting pregnant “too early.” I had all kinds of plans for my schooling and for my ministry, and I didn’t think we could “afford” children for a while. The day finally arrived when I was “ready” to be a father. Maria and I made the “decision” and celebrated around the table. It was almost like an engagement. But nothing happened. Thank God.

That’s easy for me to say two adoptions and two births—four children later. But if we had conceived right away, I would have been a miserably bad father. I would have seen those children as simply an extension of myself and of my plans for the future. I know that because of the way I reacted to years of infertility and miscarriage. Although I never would have put it this way, I actually felt as though God was taking something away from me. He was taking away from

me the “normal” life I’d mapped out for myself. In fact, he was taking away from me my god, the god of a self-directed future. [Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ, p149]

I don’t mean to upset anyone for airing my antediluvian views on contraception. But wherever you come down on that question, I hope you can see how the acceptance of that worldview, where childbearing is a matter of our choice and within our control, sets the stage for deep confusion and heartache when the god of our self-directed future turns against us.

Spiritual Problems in the Pursuit of Progeny

What happens to people spiritually as they seek a child? Consider a young woman just out of school. If she wants to competitively pursue a career, she probably needs to delay childbearing. Just a few weeks ago, technology companies Apple and Facebook announced offering up to \$20,000 in egg-freezing coverage for female employees.² The clear message to female coders: career first, family later.

Years later, once the decision is finally made to reproduce (note the mechanism of the factory in that term, in contrast to procreation), often a woman’s most fertile years have passed.

Now what will she experience in her soul? Guilt. “We should have begun this earlier.” Recrimination. “I wanted to, but you wouldn’t listen!” Resentment. “If you had only paid more attention to me.”

Ah, but there is a god this couple can turn to! The god is Science, and this cult has its priestly class, fertility doctors. The sacrifices demanded are more costly than anyone realizes.

² <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/390942/no-egg-freezing-wont-let-women-have-it-all-madison-v-peace>

It isn't just the money, although the costs start high and only get higher. Soon a husband is depositing his sperm in a cup to send it to the lab for testing; what does that do to his soul? Pills for the wife begin altering her hormones to do the opposite of the pills she used to take. After a few months, if those pills don't work, the fees get higher and the probings more invasive. Perhaps she will have to drive to a speciality pharmacy some distance away, to receive a speciality kit that must be kept refrigerated. Charting her temperature, she goes every other day to the clinic, where her insides are probed, measured, studied. Then, at just the right time, she is to stick herself with a large needle filled with a medicine that costs several car payments for a single dose. Then, there is a narrow window of time when there must be marital intimacy.

Everything the culture has taught—and everything even this pious couple has practiced themselves before the decision to pursue children—is that sex is for fun, and perhaps also for relational closeness. In this scenario, there is no fun, and what should draw the couple together may even be replaced by a kind of hostility.

What if it doesn't work that month? How many more times will they try? How big is their bank account? How long can this go on without their love turning to hate? Is it different from a gambler, thinking that he can't walk away now, because the next pull on the slot machine will surely be the one that makes him rich? The couple may find that they have entered the Hotel California, where you can check-out any time you like, but you can never leave. The thoughts linger: what if we had tried one more time? "Earlier you were against artificial insemination. But the doctor says it will increase our chances. Have you changed your mind?" "The pastor said that IVF was wrong. But how can it be wrong if we get a child, our own child, to love?" "Should we pursue adoption?" "No, too risky. Besides, I'm not sure I could love someone else's child."

The pursuit of the child has now become an idol. And it can be a form of self-idolatry, as one seeks not someone other to love, but a reflection of oneself.

Instead of, or along with, all of these challenges, the barren family can simply experience a deep sadness. Every child they encounter is a reminder of their failure, their brokenness. The husband goes to the barber shop to get his haircut, and there sees a dad with his little boy, teaching him about tipping the barber. He won't cry, he won't discuss it – but he goes home sad, empty.

Meanwhile, every baby shower invitation, every infant baptism at church, and each successive Mothers Day becomes another reminder to this woman that she is flawed, barren, excluded from the celebration.

Russell Moore observes,

Mother's Day is a particularly sensitive time in most congregations, and many pastors and church leaders don't even know it. Infertile women often find this day almost unbearable, not because they're bitter or covetous or envious, but simply because it's a reminder of unfulfilled longings. Some pastors, commendably, mention in their sermons and prayers on this day those who would love to be parents but haven't yet been given this opportunity. (*Adopted for Life*, p173)

Now if this couple is pious, they've probably already been praying. Or maybe they start. Addressing the twenty years of barrenness in Isaac and Rebekah's marriage, Luther highlights the challenge of persistent prayer:

Rebecca took refuge in earnest and persistent prayer and sighed anxiously night and day. Isaac, too, prayed for her and placed before God nothing else than that one trouble, namely, his wife's barrenness. We should learn from this that all our troubles, even those that are physical, should be placed before God, but above all

the spiritual needs. Isaac prayed in this way: “If it means the hallowing of Thy name, and if it tends to preserve Thy kingdom, give Rebecca offspring.” Where a promise is lacking, as Rebecca lacked it, prayer should supply this and should come to the rescue. But it is a difficult thing and requires great exertion. It is far more difficult than the preaching of the Word or other duties in the church. When we teach, we experience more than we do; for God speaks through us, and it is a work of God. But to pray is a most difficult work. Therefore it is also very rare. [AE 4]

Prayer is difficult. When our imaginary couple begins to pray, now the spiritual games really begin. Let’s make a deal with God. “You give me a baby, and I’ll be a good dad, a good mom. But don’t do it for me, God. Do it for my husband. He’d be such a good dad. Do it for my wife, her parents, my parents. You see, O Lord, what a mess the world is in, the church is in. Give me a child, and I will raise him to praise You.”

No, wait, none of this is right. I’m still selfish. “But You said, God, to pour out my heart to You. Your Word says to make our requests known to You. So this is my request. Your will be done.”

Except that isn’t true. I don’t really want God’s will to be done. I want my will to be done. I bet God won’t answer my prayer until I really, really mean that I want His will to be done. If I read the Bible more, pray harder, become more humble and more selfless, then God will answer my prayer.

Days pass. Months. Years, even. Crickets.

Why do You stand so far off? Why are You aloof from me? Why do You not answer?

The sadness may become bitterness, anger at God, resentment at the fecundity of others, or perhaps a numbness that becomes a kind of functional atheism, even as the person continues to go to church. “For

whatever reason, God, if there is one, doesn't answer my prayers." And so the person stops bothering at all.

Or, they believe that God has judged them, that their failure to have children is a special punishment from God. Luther in his Genesis lectures refers to this as the trial of barrenness. Discussing Isaac and Rebekah, he says,

This is another trial. After the flame of lust has ceased and Isaac has become a husband and has had Rebecca as his wife for 20 years (for so long does God delay the promise in which He had promised his father Abraham: "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named"), another affliction now follows, and indeed one that is far more burdensome than the previous trial. The victor over lust overcame the devil by his chastity up to the time of his marriage. In the marriage state he longs for offspring, in accordance with the promise; and he certainly has no slight hope, since he knows that his wife was prepared for him and brought to him in accordance with God's plan. But Rebecca does not bear a child; nor does she have a promise that she will be a mother, just as Sarah, too, did not have a promise at first. This undoubtedly troubled his heart, and to this trial were added fear of and worry about perpetual barrenness, which they considered to be a curse. For the fathers laid very great stress on this statement (Gen. 1:28): "Be fruitful and multiply." They felt that a special blessing of God rested on this statement; and because they did not multiply, they supposed that they were cursed and under God's wrath.³

Cursed and under God's wrath. That's just one track our imaginary parishioners can go down. Now stop and imagine somewhere along that path we've traced, the couple becomes pregnant.

³ AE 4

The Misery of Miscarriage

It worked! All the money, all the time, all the arguments and frustration – it finally paid off. We’re going to be parents! No, we *are* parents! Should we tell people? No, we have to wait. Everyone waits.

The euphoria of that time, it is like a dream. Colors are brighter, food tastes better, music more clear. “Let’s start planning names! Do you think our baby is a boy or a girl? We need to start getting the nursery ready.”

Suddenly every step his wife takes is perilous. He pampers her, and begins thinking about their finances in greater detail than he ever has. She has gone straight to Amazon and ordered *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. She takes her pre-natal vitamins, quits coffee and wine. She glows. He is giddy.

Then, one morning, something is wrong. She knows. He doesn’t want to believe it. “You’re just worrying. Everything is fine.” But it isn’t. She knows, even before the doctor sees her.

“It’s not your fault,” the doctor says. “You didn’t do anything wrong.” But how can she believe that? Everything is wrong. But more specifically, *she* is wrong. Broken. Cursed.

Now stop for a moment, pastor, and think. What do you tell her? Because her next call might be to you. But she is numb and can’t handle the phone, and nobody calls anymore anyway, so it might be a text message, an email, or a private message on Facebook or Twitter. But probably it’s from the husband.

I laughed when I was asked to give this paper, because all I could think of were all my mistakes. I think the first time a woman told me she had a

miscarriage, I stammered out a few pious words but largely said nothing. I honestly had no idea what to say. “I’ll pray for you”? Certainly we should pray for our people. But those words alone are hollow – too often a way to avoid the problem. And it’s not much comfort to the mother.

So later I sent a note, because I was too cowardly to call and apologize for being an idiot. I’m sure it was a nice note, handwritten, filled with Bible passages and concern. But it felt meaningless. I really didn’t know what to say, so like a politician, I said something safe and moved on. Everyone else moves on! But how does she move on? Her baby is dead, almost no one knows, and the few who do nervously look the other way and hope the topic doesn’t come up.

Some time later I stood at the bedside of a woman who had miscarried later in the pregnancy. A surgery was required to remove the baby. I read the prayers in the Agenda, but it all seemed empty. She was so sad.

Then a little baby was stillborn. We had a funeral at church, and the next day we went to the cemetery, just me and the parents, to bury the baby. It doesn’t get very cold in Virginia, but that day was freezing, a rare day when the ice and snow still clung to the ground. It crunched, as the wind bit my cheeks, and when the prayers were over we stood and waited as the man from the graveyard struggled to shovel the frozen earth on top of that tiny little coffin. That is the outer darkness, where there is wailing and the gnashing of teeth.

But still, one maintains a professional distance. Being a pastor offers you plenty of opportunity for gratitude. I may not like my life, but a lot of people are seriously suffering, and I’m so glad it’s not me.

And then one day it was me. My wife Kassie and I shared that secret joy of pregnancy, followed by the horrible anguish of miscarriage. People said insensitive things to us, and some of those people, to my shame, I was

angry at for a long time. Isn't that rich? Angry at people for being as clueless as me.

For the most part, though, we kept it secret. Which is a mistake. It is awkward, to say the least, to announce the death of a baby that nobody knew was alive. But when we hide the sorrows from the public prayers of the church, we really make the prayers regarding children and family into an announcement of our successes, while burying our griefs in a deep pit of shame and resentment. Suffering the death of their child, most people want to hide and be alone, and we shouldn't force people to make public what they want to keep to themselves. And in the immediate aftermath, the mother is physically dealing with the very undignified end of her tiny baby's life.

But that isolation, it can kill the soul. It sent me into a fierce spiral of anger and depression. Getting into the pulpit became the hardest thing to do. Here I'm charged with preaching God's love and grace, and all I could feel was that He hated me. I knew all the stories, how Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Elkanah and Hannah, Zachariah and Elizabeth, how they struggled and prayed. Now I am a great sinner, and one of my sins was in being angry that God answered their prayers and not mine.

I needed a way to grieve publicly about this, to receive the support of others. As it turns out, there is another club, this one much more secret than the parenting club, and it's very hard to get in because you have to make yourself vulnerable, to break the taboo and risk hearing hurtful and insensitive, if well-meaning, words.

The best thing that happened to me was one person telling another about our miscarriage, and after church one Sunday that woman came to me, whispered that she knew, and then gave me a hug and said simply, "We love you and are hurting with you." Those simple words did more for me than everything else put together.

I think only someone who has experienced hurt—whether it’s this particular pain or not—can say that. But having somebody identify with your pain, to share it, begins the journey to the cross, where we find in Jesus the One who loves us and hurts with us.

The Hell of Barrenness

For those who are childless because they cannot find a godly spouse, for those who are childless because their bodies are broken, for those who suffer the profound regret of abortion, for those who live with the pain of miscarriage, still-birth – we must see these as trials. “Whom the Lord loves, He chastens,” and every branch that bears fruit He prunes. That pruning is painful, but the trial—for whatever reason He has chosen it for us and for our parishioners, is designed to drive us to despair, and in despair, to find the only answer to all human longing in the open arms of the Savior who loves us and hurts with us. Both Rachel and Leah experienced times of barrenness. Turning again to Luther, he has a beautiful passage about Rachel’s despair driving her to prayer:

Therefore Moses has employed a significant word: “The Lord remembered.” It is as though he were saying: “She had almost despaired within herself, and she was convinced in her heart that God would never remember her, yes, that He had forgotten her forever.” “I shall not be a mother,” she thought, “but I am the most wretched of all women. I should have been the mother of the house, but God has forgotten me.” In this way she was led down into hell, where no hope of help seems to be left. In despair she takes hold of her maidservant and hands her over to her husband, which she would not have done if she had not given up all hope. Yet she despairs in such a way that she retains a spark of faith. In her despair she retains that sobbing which Paul calls ineffable (cf. Rom. 8:26), but this is so deeply buried and covered with impossibility and

contrary emotions of the heart that she is barely conscious of that sobbing or sighing.⁴

Is My Baby in Hell?

A particular grief that some—but not all—people have is the eternal state of their miscarried or stillborn child. We emphasize, and rightly so, the importance of Baptism for infants. What do we tell a parent whose little one died without benefit of Baptism? Cold rationality, no matter how Biblically faithful, is not always comforting to the grieving parent.

The only thing to do is commend the child into God’s hands. The *Augsburg Confession* says that in infant baptism children “are committed to God.”⁵ When we don’t have opportunity to administer the means of grace, we commend ourselves and everyone we love to the grace of God, asking the One who is love to remember us in love.

I find Hannah to be among the most remarkable women in the Old Testament, because after years of tears, anguish, and prayers that seemed to go unheard, she receives the gift and turns around and gives her son Samuel back to the Lord. She is confessing that nothing is ours, everything belongs to God.

Mention Luther’s tract, “Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage,” AE 43. Luther’s principal points: (1) “God’s will is always better than ours, though it may seem otherwise to us.” (2) We should hope that the believing parent’s prayer is effective, that God hears it. (3) God will do better things than you desire. Ps. 50.15, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble.”

Did I Kill My Baby?

⁴ AE 5, on Genesis 30:24

⁵ AC IX.2, German (Tappert)

Discuss ectopic pregnancy - baby develops outside the uterus (typically within the fallopian tube). Child cannot survive, mother's life is in danger

Unique horror - miscarriage and abortion together. The woman, although she undergoes a procedure necessary for her own life and ethically permissible, she nevertheless feels guilt.

The pastor should be with the family. Go to hospital with them.

Practical Matters

Barrenness is not a sin. But it is the result of sin, and it also can produce many sins. Fortunately, the church has the one thing that can address all of this: the Absolution. We need to name these inner struggles our people face. Ponder the burdens our people have: resentment, anger, the loss of control, disappointment, isolation, jealousy and envy at seeing fertile families. Name those sins, burdens, and hurts. You don't have cliches or pat answers, you don't know the mind of God. But you can tell people about Jesus who says to them the same thing that my kind parishioner said to me: "We love you and are hurting for you." That's the meaning of the incarnation: "God said to His beloved Son, 'It's time to have compassion. Then go, bright jewel of My crown, and bring to all salvation. From sin and sorrow set them free, slay bitter death for them that they may live with You forever.'"⁶

One woman said to me years after her miscarriage, "What can you say?" There are no right words in the moment. Go ahead and acknowledge that. And then realize that you'll need to keep on talking to these people:

Spiritual care in the instance of a miscarriage is not a singular event. Though it may lessen over time, the grief remains with them. Thus don't regard it as a bad event in the past, but in your preaching, public and

⁶ *Lutheran Service Book* 556, stanza 5.

private prayers, and personal words, be even mindful of their grief and sorrow, resentment and loneliness, and all the other terrible ways the devil assaults the heart and conscience.

Offer absolution to the hurting. Not only for specific sins, but for the contagion of sin causing this brokenness, and the sins committed against them.

Pray regularly, in the public prayers, for those who long to have children, those who have lost children to abortion, miscarriage, and still-birth.

Be sensitive to the unintentionally excluded. This doesn't mean that you can't have events, groups, or recognitions of particular vocations. But remember that when we talk about marriage, there are people who long to be married but have not found a spouse. When we celebrate children, there are people who are childless. Remember them with compassion

God calls us to unexpected, even undesired vocations. He uses these to teach us and to be a blessing to others. Preach contentment in the vocations we have, not the ones we wish we had.

Our identity is not found in what we accomplish or by what we lack. Our identity is found in Jesus.

Most importantly, we speak to the hurting the joy of the atonement. The atonement is justifying, but Christ's work on the cross is not only a forensic transaction. "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." We preach Jesus who is with us in all our brokenness and loss, and will at the last wipe every tear from our eyes. In that day of new creation, the former things will be forgotten, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.