



THEN COMES THE BABY IN THE BABY CARRIAGE

*Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; The fruit of the
womb is a reward.*

—Psalm 127:3

As they placed Alexis into my arms, my heart filled with love for this tiny miracle. Her perfect blue eyes fluttered as I stroked the waves of dark hair that fell in tiny ringlets around her face. She was beautiful, completely healthy, and filled with the promise of life.

Her tiny fingers gripped mine as her foot kicked free from the swaddling blanket that wrapped her securely. Each diminutive toe was perfect. I was completely in awe of this beautiful gift from God. I wondered what she would be like as she grew into a toddler and eventually into a wonderful young woman. I held her close to my heart as I rocked her into sweet newborn sleep.

It was amazing how such a small baby could cause such a marvelous reaction in my heart. My chest felt as if it would explode, like baking soda and vinegar in a science fair project. I could feel the tears being forced like a geyser to my eyes. I quickly kissed her forehead and handed the sleeping newborn back to her mother. I could hardly say good-bye as I closed the door to the hospital room. By the time the door had clicked shut behind me, tears were leaping from my eyes. I rushed to my car, escaping into the fortress it provided, and let my tears flow.

I was on an emotional roller coaster. It was exhausting, and I didn't know how much longer I could stand the highs and lows. It had been this way since my husband, John, and I started trying to conceive a child. My mind was consumed with counting days and calculating hours, taking temperatures, allowing excitement to well up each time I thought, *This is the month*. Every time the results came in, "not pregnant," the disappointment hurt more deeply. My heart had calloused over the wounds to the point I could hardly bring myself to express happiness for my friend. My emotions were sandpaper on my soul where my deepest joy and my greatest pain had become conjoined twins.

The child we would have someday consumed every day of our lives. Each passing month pushed "someday" farther away. It was difficult to accept the fact that infertility was becoming an intimate part of our marriage. Three years after we began trying to start our family, it was time to look for answers.

After a physical examination and a few routine tests, my doctor didn't see any reason that I should not be able to get pregnant. At his recommendation, we decided it was time to see a specialist. There were several listed on our insurance. My doctor helped us choose one with a good record of successful pregnancies. The office was an hour from our home, but we would have driven even farther for the chance to become pregnant.

The specialist took tubes of blood and ran a few tests. He said that my hormones were slightly off and put me on Provera, a mild progesterone replacement. After three months, he recommended the use of Clomid, a fertility drug that assists with regular ovulation. He said it would help my body become more fertile. I began taking the drug faithfully and visiting his office every week for a urine test to check hormone levels. If the Clomid worked, we would know right away.

Another three months passed. We were considering which options to try next when we got the call. The most recent test had come back positive—I was pregnant! I could hardly believe it. What perfect timing! It was Father's Day weekend.

I left work early and went straight to find John's very first Father's Day card. I was thrilled to have such a poignant weekend to tell him about our baby. He was as excited as I was. We spent the weekend

looking at cribs and bottles, diapers and strollers. We talked about names for boys and girls. We discussed the best schools and thought about looking for a bigger house. There was so much to do before our baby joined our household.

The following Tuesday we went to the doctor for a follow-up appointment and physical examination—and he told us that the pregnancy was not viable. “I’m sorry,” he said. “The embryo never attached to the uterine wall.”

His explanation was cold. His apologies rang empty and insincere. I was numb. The words were coming through a tunnel. Our baby was gone. We would never know this child whom we had so immediately loved. That night John and I cried together over the child who was not to be. At the doctor’s recommendation, we decided to wait six months before we tried again.

Six months later, I was in a wheelchair recovering from a broken hip and pelvis. We could suddenly see God’s hand in our lives even through that miscarriage, and we had faith that He was at work. God knew that being pregnant with those injuries would have been detrimental to me and to the baby. I rationalized that He must have been showing us that we would have a child later. He was in control.

I worked hard to recover from a series of surgeries to repair my broken bones. It took almost two years to walk on my own. Our final question for my surgeon was about the safety of a natural childbirth. He said my hip should be just fine and there was no reason to wait any longer. That was exactly what we wanted to hear.

We prayed for guidance as we consulted specialists again. We decided to try Clomid again and proceed cautiously if that didn’t work. There were so many options available. It was hard to decide which of modern medicine’s developments were in line with our faith and which ones crossed spiritual lines. Neither John nor I were very comfortable with the idea or expense of invitro fertilization, but we had not ruled it out. I was in my early thirties. There was still time.



John . . .

Growing up in a farming family, one understands that at least one son will take over the farm operation at some point. In our family that was even-

tually going to be me. That meant I needed a son to take it over from me some day. I wasn't sure if I would be a great dad, because my relationship with my own father wasn't the best. It scared me to think that I might be like him. Still, I thought about all the things I would be able to teach my son. I would take him fishing and hunting, teach him about the land and the way things grow and how amazing God is to have created all of this for us to care for. I looked forward to watching him grow up.

Pamela used to ask me what I would do if we had a girl. I always made some smart comment, but I know I would have loved her and would eventually spend too many hours keeping her away from boys like me. That's just what dads do.

I forced myself to remain unaffected by not having children. I told Pamela that it didn't matter. I didn't have to have kids. In fact, I was pretty good at becoming apathetic about the whole thing. I didn't think about the fact that my apathy left her feeling alone as she dealt with changing hormones and the need to become a mother.

My neutral position changed the day she told me she was pregnant. Suddenly it wasn't an abstract idea for some other day. It was real—I was going to be a father. I was going to raise a child who would become my legacy. Apathy could not remain where so much love immediately arrived.

For a few days, I loved in a way I never knew I could. Then, as fast as it had come, it was gone. I had never felt such a gut-wrenching pain. Pamela started talking about trying again later. I could not see why she would want to go through this again. It hurt too much.

Apathy makes a good anesthetic. It may not heal the wound, but at least I didn't have to feel it. I had to shut down my emotions so that I wouldn't think about the son who might have been. I couldn't watch her cry anymore. This was not the way it was supposed to be.

When Pamela's hip broke, it was almost a relief that she wasn't pregnant. I don't know how we could have chosen what to do for her if we had our unborn child to consider. During her recovery from multiple surgeries, there was a reprieve for me. For the first time in years, we weren't worried about getting pregnant.

It was nice to enjoy just being together without so much pressure. Even with the wheelchair, crutches, and hospital stays, I felt closer to Pamela than I had in a long time. I thought maybe she would get pregnant more easily when we were ready to try again.



Pamela . . .

As little girls we dream of the day we will meet the man God created for us: Prince Charming. I had planned my wedding and my family by the time I was in fifth grade. I would get married at twenty-five and have my first baby, a boy, before I turned twenty-seven. Being a mother was part of the package.

Do you remember playing house? Every generation of little girls has argued over who gets to play the role of the mom. The boys take turns being the dad. Even when we were preschoolers, something told us that parenting was the best part to play.

By sixth grade, teasing one another over who likes whom has become a favorite pastime. "Jimmy and Suzie sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage."

I knew in high school what I would name my first child. It would be a girl, and her name was Aubrilyn Paige. Most of my friends had chosen names too. In high school, we were assigned an egg or sack of flour to carry around for a week. The care of our pretend children was graded very seriously. They had to be fed, clothed, and cared for twenty-four hours a day.

Schools across the nation have invested in these types of classes to teach young people the proper care of babies. Most of us named our pretend infants according to our plan for a real future baby. We cared for the tiny project and even argued with our appointed parental counterpart over the care of the pseudo-child.

When we grow up and become serious about a relationship, one of the first things we discuss is the number of children we want. We dream about sons and daughters who will come to bless our family someday.

My friend Tamara Clymer, a writer and speaker, started planning her future with her husband and children while still in high school. Tamara shares her story:

The time I first saw Shad and watched him play a pickup basketball game from across the gym, I knew in the way only a seventh-grader can that I had found my soul mate. As is typical

with adolescent boys, it took a while for him to figure it out. By my eighth-grade graduation, we were an item, and we never looked back.

Over the next five years we chatted in the hall by our lockers, rode the bus to ballgames, and attended homecomings and proms. We planned our futures and dreamed of the family we would someday have. He wanted two kids; I dreamed of four. He wanted girls, and I preferred boys. We finally settled on three in whatever combination God decided would be best. We were absolutely sure we could plan our family the way we would plan a summer vacation.

Our life was unfolding on schedule. We were married on a warm September day in my sophomore year of college. I went on the pill to make sure the timing of our plan stayed on track. We planned to start our family in two years when we were ready to graduate. We thought getting pregnant in time for the baby to arrive the summer after graduation was the perfect plan.

By our third anniversary we realized our plan was unraveling. It was clear that something was wrong. After twelve months of trying to start our family, we were not pregnant. We hadn't seen as much as one late cycle.

Our family doctor convinced us to calm down and keep trying. "Surely it will happen soon," he assured.

But it didn't. Month after month we expected to be expecting. Our hopes and dreams rose and fell every twenty-eight days.

After several months, we set up another appointment with the doctor. He ordered a battery of tests that ended up being just the beginning of probing, temperature charts, medication, and even more stress. Over the next few years our lives became consumed with trying to have a baby.

Month after month our hopes were raised and dashed. It was the only thing dependable about my monthly cycle: a few days of trying, a week and a half of waiting, then the crash of disappointment—only to start the whole thing over again two weeks later. Every month we were sure: *This will be the month our dreams will come true.* But it wasn't.

We prayed. Actually it was more like begging. We begged God to give us a child. We made deals with Him, pleading for His bless-

ing of children, earnestly hitting our knees before the Father. We spent sleepless nights crying out for His help. But as our fifth, sixth, and seventh anniversaries came and went, we slowly started coming to terms with God's answer to our prayers.

We were childless, and it appeared that drugs, surgery, and medical probing would not change that fact. What we had taken for granted—our perfect plan—was quickly consuming our lives. What had started as our dream had become a nightmare.

Tamara's story of shattered dreams and dashed hope resonates with millions of childless families around the world. We never dream of the day when we will sit in a sterile exam room and hear the words "You will not be able to have children." The emotions that those words evoke are indescribable. A combination of anguish, denial, and panic twists through our minds.

In the United States alone there are more than 2.1 million (7.4 percent) married couples who are unable to conceive a child.¹ According to the Centers for Disease Control, 7.3 million women ages 15-44 have impaired fecundity, the impaired ability to have children. That is 11.8 percent of all women in the United States. These numbers are contrary to the feelings of isolation and aloneness that shadow those going through the infertility experience.

Infertility treatments range from herbal potions and home remedies passed through generations to advanced medications that prompt ovulation and stimulate hormones. Scientific advances have come a long way in assisting with conception. Methods such as artificial insemination (AI) and in vitro fertilization (IVF) are widely practiced worldwide.

There is some controversy in the Church about IVF due to the use of cryogenic embryos that were thought of as science fiction only a few years ago. The question of what to do with harvested, fertilized eggs that are cryogenically frozen should be considered before a couple moves forward with this type of infertility treatment. There are options, such as donating them to a fertilization clinic or embryonic bank, where they are cryogenically contained until a matching mother seeks to adopt them.

There is never a shortage of people who are willing to share the best methods with the childless couple. When John and I had been

unable to conceive a child for more than a year, a friend called with the answer. Her grandmother's cousin had used this remedy, and it worked so well that she had seven children. All I had to do was to cut strips of virgin flannel and soak them in lanolin. I was instructed to lay them in a woven pattern over my abdomen for one hour each night. Fresh flannel would be required each time. In truth, some studies link lanolin to infertility, and many people are allergic to it.²

In this epidemic of infertility, many couples try various remedies and cures and then find themselves the proud parents of multiple children. Others decide to forgo medical treatments and pursue adoption to fill their nests and their hearts. There are thousands of stories of miracle children—wonderful gifts from God after infertility.

My friend Siobhan's story is like that of many other infertile couples. According to doctors, she and her husband should have never conceived a child. In their desire to fill their home with more children, the couple discovered what a gift their only child is. They also gained insight and compassion for those who are permanently childless.

"I am one of those people who have been irregular all of their lives," Siobhan told me. "I have known since I got married that having children was going to be close to impossible."

Siobhan's diagnosis was polycystic ovarian syndrome, the most common cause of female infertility. "I had almost all of the symptoms," she said.

Siobhan and her husband tried Clomid, temperature-taking, and everything else her doctor suggested to try to get pregnant.

"Nothing worked. We more or less gave up and just went back to life as normal."

In the middle of the summer of 2001 Siobhan noticed soreness in her breasts. Coworkers tried to convince her that she was pregnant.

"I laughed, because I knew it just wouldn't happen to me like that. I even took a pregnancy test, and it was negative," she said.

Her symptoms were persistent, so a week later she took another test. "I was shocked when it was positive," she said, unable to contain her joy even seven years later.

Garrett was born twelve weeks early and weighed only 2.76 pounds. "We were scared, but we knew God had given us this little

guy. We prayed that He would allow him to stay with us. Today Garret is a perfectly healthy little boy.

Siobhan got pregnant again in 2002 but miscarried. They were devastated. In 2004 they decided to try again with the help of a fertility specialist.

"We were told that Garrett was a fluke," Siobhan said. "The doctors said I shouldn't have gotten pregnant with him. I knew that whether a fluke or not, he was a gift from God. I was obviously supposed to have gotten pregnant with him."

"However," she continued, "after giving myself shots in the stomach, taking pills, two IUI's [intrauterine insemination], and spending more money than we could afford, we knew it was time to give up trying to conceive again."

Siobhan has never been able to have a second child. "I know it doesn't compare with a lot of people's stories, but infertility touches people in so many ways. The realization that your own body has failed you is a shock."

Stories like Siobhan's give many childless couples hope that one day they will have the thing they want the most: a child to love, a child to raise to be a wonderful adult, a child to teach the things of God, a little someone who will know that he or she is the biggest blessing in life. What happens when that hope does not come? What happens when the chance to become a parent is ripped away forever?

Newlyweds don't usually worry if they haven't conceived in the first year or so of marriage. Most doctors won't even consider fertility testing or treatment until a couple has been unsuccessfully trying to become pregnant for six months if they are over thirty-five, or a year for younger couples.³

Some couples may even count it a blessing to have time to grow together and fall into their roles as husband and wife before adding the joy of children to the home. By the second or third full year of marriage without a pregnancy, though, most couples have consulted their doctor and tried simple methods like ovulation prediction to try to conceive their first child.

Soon the questions from friends and relatives sneak into casual conversations. Parents on both sides are wondering when their grand-

children will come. As friends begin to start their families, a twinge of panic accompanies each baby shower invitation.

Infertility check:

- Have you been trying to get pregnant for more than two years?
- Have you ever had a miscarriage?
- Have you had issues with obesity or rapid weight gain?
- Do you have irregular or missing menstrual cycles?
- Have you ever been told by a physician that you might have trouble conceiving or carrying a child?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you should see your gynecologist to determine if you are experiencing issues of infertility. If you answered yes to three or more of these questions, you should consider seeing a fertility specialist.

The summer I turned thirty-one, it seemed as if ninety percent of my friends had newborns or were pregnant. I received a baby shower invitation at least once a week. Cute little cutout booties, baby bottles, and rattles urged us to share the joy of the new arrivals. Every invitation required a trip to stores with names like “Babies-R-Us” and “Children’s Orchard.” Mulling over the many items listed on gift registries was torture: tiny baby shoes, cuddly baby blankets, the newest technology in baby monitors. By the end of the summer, opening mail became a chore. I sorted envelopes, choosing to open bills before anything that was hand-addressed.

The fun in silly shower games eluded me. I didn’t want to guess what was in the bassinette, I didn’t care if I got the mustard-filled diaper, and guessing which baby food was being spooned into my mouth did not make me crave baby showers.

Making small talk with women I hardly knew was the hardest part of the shower circuit. Every conversation included a question about children. “Do you have kids?” “How many kids do you have?” Although questions like those are conversation-starters for most people, to the infertile woman they are enough to start a flood of tears.

There is no correct response. If you simply say you have no children, the next question, predictably, begins an interrogation to find the reason.

If you say you don't have any children *yet*, you open the door to twenty minutes of pseudo-encouragement and tales of how they or someone close to them got pregnant. Finally, if the conversation identifies you as infertile, it will invoke an awkward silence followed by stories of miracle pregnancies intended to encourage. The whole thing is exhausting and invasive. It didn't take long until the dread of those conversations kept me from attending baby showers totally.

I eventually enlisted the help of a sympathetic friend to shop for baby gifts for me. I made excuses not to attend the showers and just dropped the gifts off when I knew the mother-to-be wasn't home. It wasn't that I wasn't happy for my friends—I just didn't want to ruin their special days by having to excuse myself early or by walking out in tears. It was better simply to stay home.

The last thing I wanted to talk about was infertility. It was like the elephant in the room—always there for everyone to see.

If you have had an experience like mine, deep down you know at some point the truth will have to be acknowledged. Once we accept our infertility, we can begin to come to terms with it. At that point, accepting that we will not have a biological child leaves us searching for hope. We cling to faith that God will somehow bring a miracle child into our family—and sometimes, through a miracle pregnancy or adoption, He does.

But only sometimes. For many infertile couples the choices run out, and miracles are withheld for reasons they don't understand. Coming to terms with permanent infertility is nearly impossible for some couples, but it is also the first step toward healing. If we keep our focus on the Lord, He will draw us close during the trial of infertility, and our relationship with Him will grow.

North Carolina native Lynn Fries shares her infertility story with other childless women to lend support during their despair.

When we began to plan for our family, it seemed that other couples around us just thought, "Let's have a baby," and it happened. We thought the same thing, but pregnancy eluded us. While our struggle to become parents was a source of great pain,

it also fostered in us a complete dependence on the Lord. We knew the closeness we gained in our relationship with Christ would be the core of our family when that gift finally came.

We kept waiting for our miracle, believing it would come. We were childless, but we were happy. We trusted that a baby would join our family when it was God's time for it to happen.

When we found out we were permanently unable to conceive a child, we were forced to deal with our infertility on a different level. We had to be put the dream to rest. People in the church talk about victory over trials and fighting to get the reward when faced with challenges in life, but what do you do when you fight a hard fight and the reward never comes?

We were still waiting on the Lord, knowing we would love any child the Lord chose to give us. It felt as if the whole universe were fighting against our having a child to love. After the hysterectomy, we considered adopting an older child, but we were afraid even to hope that it could happen, and we didn't know if we had the energy, money, or time to go down one more road that could be a dead-end.

We wanted to know all the joys and challenges that come with being a parent. We still do. We have grieved for the children we won't have. Many times we have been spectators in life, watching others live the things we dreamed. The reminders are constant. The grief is greater some days than others. It comes unexpectedly most of the times.

Simply seeing a mom with a baby stroller can bring me to tears. Sometimes it is just a flash of pain, while other times the anguish lingers. It can be like a scratch on the surface or feel as if it's tearing my heart out. The hardest part is not knowing when it will hit. We can anticipate it, try to prepare for it, but it's as if the grief has a life of its own.

We will never have the joy of seeing our children take their first steps, open their Christmas stockings, or go off to school. We won't bake cookies with them, watch them grow up, or go on family vacations. In our house there is no such thing as Friday movie night with the kids. There will be no children to hold close, no character to build, and no little league games to attend to cheer for our little

guy. We won't tuck them in, kiss them good night, or watch them sleep. We will not be parents.

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*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer
and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests
be made known to God. And the peace of God,
which surpasses all comprehension,
will guard your hearts and your minds
in Christ Jesus.*

—Philippians 4:6-7

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It is impossible to understand why some start their families so easily and for others it is so difficult. As we struggled with infertility, peace was the last thing I could find. Every time I saw a child being neglected or abused, I became angry. It didn't seem fair to me that a woman who did not want her children had several and that couples who prayed desperately for one child were denied.

As I read the words of Paul, I realized that my petition for a child might take a while, but the peace that takes me beyond my limited understanding was just waiting for me. My sanity was intact because of the peace of Christ within me.

It is easier to pray for what we want than it is to allow the answer to come in God's time rather than ours. As much as we knew that we would love our children, God loves us even more. As much as we would have done everything to protect our children, our Heavenly Father will protect His children too.

My nephew tried to run into the street one day. His goal was the ice cream shop on the other side. He knew the destination, and he knew how to get there. As I grabbed his arm to stop him, he protested.

"I know how to cross the street," he complained.

At that moment, the semi that had rounded the corner as he stepped off the curb passed in front of us.

"Oh—I didn't see that," he said.

We cannot see what's coming around the corner. Trusting God will never be detrimental to our lives.

Lord, our family is in your hands. Lead us to the doctors and procedures that are part of your plan for us. Help us to communicate with each other and to support one another throughout this journey. Help us rejoice with those who celebrate pregnancies and children during our time of barrenness. We will trust you to walk with us. In Jesus' name. Amen.