

LEARNING
TO COPE

WITH
Infertility

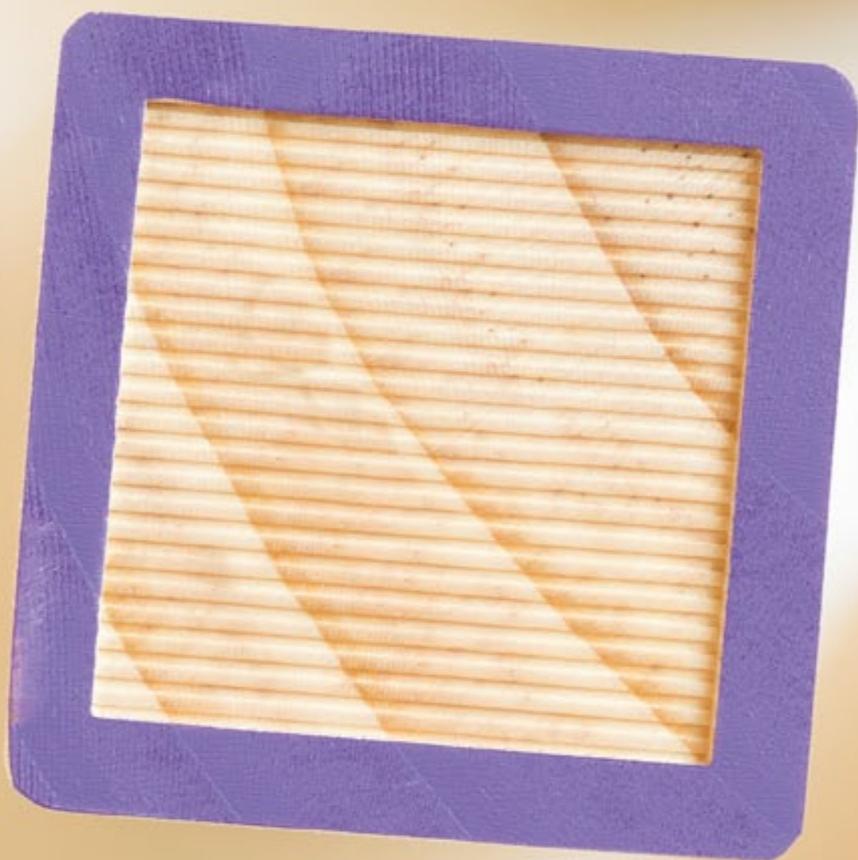
*How personal
revelation, insight
from the scriptures,
and the prophetic
word have
sustained us.*

ByCarolynn R. Spencer

I sat in the temple seeking peace, but there it was again: the first commandment given to Adam and Eve, and to all of us, to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28). I wanted nothing more than to obey this commandment. I had a firm testimony that “the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7). Why, then, could I not get pregnant? My husband, Tim, and I had been married in the temple and felt ready in every way to welcome a child into our family, but even with the most advanced medical intervention, our hopes remained unfulfilled and

our prayers seemed to remain unanswered as the years passed by.

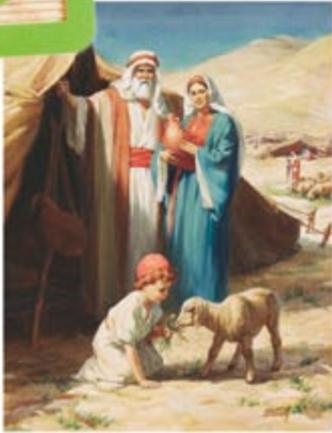
The career I had begun without much thought upon graduation from college moved forward, and at a certain point I realized that from the world’s standpoint I had achieved success: a beautiful home, a flourishing career, a comfortable lifestyle. I thought how ironic it was that those things didn’t matter much to me; my dreams all centered on raising an eternal family—which, in my mind, included children. Although my close friends and family knew of my anguish, others in my ward and extended family didn’t. It was awkward to respond to questions regarding when we



would start our family and devastating to hear hurtful comments regarding our selfishness in putting our careers before having children. Others tried to compensate; unfortunately, that wasn't always helpful either.

I learned to dread few days as much as I did Mother's Day. On many other days, I

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cringed when I listened to women complain about their pregnancies or their children or the responsibilities of mothering. Didn't they realize how blessed they were? Didn't they realize that others longed to be in their shoes?

Month after month, and then year after year, Tim and I rode waves of hope, only to feel them come crashing down when our dreams failed to materialize.

I tried not to give in to despair. I accepted invitations to baby showers for friends or loved ones and rejoiced in their happiness and good fortune. Despite being told by a doctor after surgery that it was impossible for me to have a child, I never gave up; my patriarchal blessing was too specific about the children who would one day be "born" to me. However, in my darkest moments of sorrow, I couldn't help but wonder why babies seemed to come easily to some women and not to others.

I wondered if Heavenly Father felt I was in some way unworthy or undeserving. Could He not entrust me with one of His children? Was His love for me somehow less than for my sisters and friends who were blessed to become mothers? I began to search the scriptures and soon found others, beloved daughters of God, who had shared my pain.

Lessons from Women in the Scriptures

From Abraham's wife, Sarah, who "was barren; she had no child" (Genesis 11:30), I learned that miracles do happen, that nothing is "too hard for the Lord" (Genesis 18:14), and that the Lord's timing is critical. I learned that even when we think the time has completely passed for a miracle to occur in our lives, it still can: "For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him" (Genesis 21:2).

From Isaac's wife, Rebekah, I learned I needed to keep trusting in the words of my patriarchal blessing, recognizing that blessings aren't always fulfilled in mortality or in

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the ways we expect. I learned that if my prayers weren't answered right away, I still needed to keep praying. I could also ask loved ones to pray with and for me. Rebekah had been blessed that she would "be . . . the mother of thousands of millions" (Genesis 24:60). Despite this blessing, she too had no children until "Isaac intreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren: and the Lord was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived" (Genesis 25:21).

From Elkanah's wives, Hannah and Peninnah, I learned some unexpected lessons (1 Samuel 1:1–21). I instantly empathized with Hannah because of her childlessness, but I soon realized she wasn't the only one suffering. I was moved by Hannah's pain in her barrenness, Elkanah's pain in Hannah's unhappiness, and Peninnah's pain in her loneliness, which despite her many children must have been great as she understood she was less loved by her husband than was Hannah. From Hannah and Peninnah, I understood that we each have trials and challenges; we each have secret sorrows and pain. Was Hannah's pain in her barrenness greater than Peninnah's pain in her loneliness? I didn't know. I couldn't say. But I suddenly realized that I wouldn't trade trials with Peninnah. For me, it was a revelation.

I learned from Hannah's despair that it makes no sense to let gratitude for the blessings we do have be crowded out by sorrow over the one thing we lack. I wondered if Hannah recognized how blessed she was in her marriage, despite her childlessness. Her husband, Elkanah, wondered the same: "Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8). We each have joys in life despite our trials; what a waste to fail to notice or cherish or celebrate all the reasons we do have to rejoice. Our gratitude



helps us recognize that Heavenly Father loves us and does hear and answer our prayers in many, many ways—even if it's not always with a "yes."

Finally, I learned from Hannah to continue to seek peace at the temple. I found special solace in doing initiatory work and listening to the sacred promises given during that ordinance. I understood that these promised blessings pertaining to motherhood were not limited to mortality; motherhood was an eternal role I would always have, no matter what happened during this life.

From Zacharias's wife, Elisabeth, I learned that infertility was not God's punishment for my imperfections, weaknesses, or unworthiness to be a mother. In Luke, we find that Zacharias and Elisabeth "were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

"And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years" (Luke 1:6–7).

Elisabeth remained steadfast and immovable despite the fact that her dreams of motherhood went unfulfilled for so many years. How could Elisabeth have known during those long years of waiting that she would one day become the mother of the forerunner to Jesus Christ? From Elisabeth, I learned patience and faithful endurance, and I learned that God's plan for our lives might just be greater than we could ever imagine.

From all of these women in the scriptures, I learned that I was not alone in my heartache; other women who had gone before knew just how I felt, and surely there were others surrounding me who knew as well. Most of all, the Savior knew; not only could He comfort me in my burden of sorrow, but He could ease it for me as Isaiah promised: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4).

Further, Isaiah 54 taught me about joy. I knew this passage of scripture had a larger, deeper meaning



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encompassing the redemption of Zion, but as I searched for understanding and continued to liken the scriptures to myself, I learned that it would still be possible to find joy *even if I never had children*. I clung to the fact that the Lord spoke of mercies and kindnesses—and above all, peace—for both the barren woman and the children her future eventually held.

Our Story

When we had finally done everything we could possibly do to try to have a child, including two surgeries and then beginning the in vitro fertilization process, doctors discovered I was already expecting; I had become pregnant without further medical intervention. Tim and I were stunned, thrilled beyond belief, and filled with gratitude. Our first son, Tristan, was born just after we celebrated our seventh wedding anniversary. Motherhood was more fulfilling than I had even imagined it would be, and after a while we began to hope that we could have a sibling for Tristan. Doctors had told me it would be much easier for me to get pregnant a second time, but we soon found they were wrong. However, after four more years of fervent prayer and fasting and more medical intervention, I gave birth to our second son, Gavin.

After two such miracles, we hardly dared to hope that there could be one more baby for us. In fact, I struggled with feelings of guilt that I would be so greedy as to ask for yet one more miracle. I focused on my gratitude for the two sons we had already been blessed with, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that our family was incomplete. As once again the years passed by, I began to feel we

The Spencer family today: Tristan,Carolynn, Tim, Gavin, and Caden.

couldn't wait for a miracle much longer. I felt that if there was another baby meant for our family, I needed to somehow get that baby on its way—soon!

We did a lot of research, prayed, and fasted to know whether our avenue this time should be in vitro fertilization or adoption. After all, I had had two children “born” to me, so maybe now my patriarchal blessing was fulfilled and we would add to our family in another way. Our hearts were completely open to either option, and we felt we just needed confirmation from Heavenly Father before we moved forward. By the end of our appointed day of fasting, which was filled with studying the scriptures, praying, and rereading my patriarchal blessing, I knew that for whatever reason we were not to pursue adoption. I knew if another

child was to join our family, it would be our own biological child. I turned my focus to the in vitro option, thinking that no adoption automatically meant in vitro. I did not receive a confirmation that we were to move forward with in vitro and neither did Tim. As we discussed this, Tim reminded me that the Lord had His own time frame.

Two days later, I sat down to read my scriptures and decided to read the October 2003 issue of the *Ensign*, which had just arrived. I opened to Elder Dallin H. Oaks's talk entitled "Timing." Among the many passages that spoke directly to my heart was one in which he quoted Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004):

"The issue for us is trusting God enough to trust also His timing. If we can truly believe He has our welfare at heart, may we not let His plans unfold as He thinks best?"¹

After I finished reading the article, I asked the Lord if this was my answer, and if we just needed to wait upon Him and not pursue in vitro either (having already received the answer "no" regarding adoption). I started feeling a burning in my chest. I savored this feeling for a few minutes, but then I started doubting and panicking that I was making it up. I prayed fervently for a stronger confirmation, and the thought was immediately impressed on my mind in regard to all the women I had studied in the scriptures—Sarah and Elisabeth, as well as Rebekah and Hannah: none of these women had in vitro as an option,² yet nothing is too hard for the Lord (see Genesis 18:14). I wept as I realized that the Lord had confirmed my impression of moments before. He was aware of Tim and me and our righteous desires, and we simply had to await His timing.

I quickly called Tim at work, and luckily he had a minute to discuss the experience with me. I said, "I still want you to get a confirmation too," and he responded that honestly, he didn't feel like he needed one. He felt this had been my struggle because all along he had felt we needed to accept and trust in the Lord's timing. My desire to alter the Lord's timing had been the cause of my anguish. My answer just confirmed what his heart already knew.

Nearly one year after that powerful answer to prayer and fasting, and four years after the birth of our second son, Gavin, I gave birth to our third son, Caden. We felt overwhelmed with gratitude. We also felt at peace and knew that our family was complete. "God remembered Rachel" (Genesis 30:22)—and Sarah, and Rebekah, and Hannah, and Elisabeth, and yes, Peninnah too. And He remembered me. How grateful I was, and how grateful I am that "He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the Lord" (Psalms 113:9).

Each person's story is unique, but I have a testimony that miracles do happen—even if they don't happen in the way we hope for or expect. I know that we can find peace in the scriptures, in prayer, in the temple, and in the words of the prophets. We have a loving Heavenly Father who will help us. He will strengthen us to meet our challenges if we put our trust in Him and in His timing. ■

NOTES

1. Neal A. Maxwell, quoted in Dallin H. Oaks, "Timing," *Ensign*, Oct. 2003, 12.
2. The answers we received were specific to us at that specific time. We recognize that others who are struggling with similar problems may receive different answers that are specific to their situations, whether the answer be in vitro, other medical procedures, or adoption. I know Heavenly Father will give each of His children the guidance we need if we ask in faith.



THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPENSATION

"The Lord compensates the faithful for every loss. That which is taken away from those who love the Lord will be added unto them in His own way. While it may not come at the time we desire, the faithful will know that every tear today will eventually be returned a hundredfold with tears of rejoicing and gratitude."

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (1917–2008), "Come What May, and Love It," *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 28.