

FINDING PEACE

FROM STORIES OF INFERTILITY IN THE BIBLE

When I realized how many stories in the Bible discuss infertility, I knew there was something important to learn from their life lessons.

By Rachel Sheffield

It's hard not to cry when I talk about the struggles with infertility my husband and I endured. I felt hopeful. I felt like a failure. I felt gratitude for the physicians who worked so hard to help us. I felt shattered with each failed treatment. I felt loved by my family and friends. I felt lonely and desolate in my pain. It was a difficult time.

As I searched the scriptures during this time, I noticed there were many couples who suffered from infertility: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Elkanah and Hannah, and Zachariah and Elisabeth. This surprised me. The Bible covers only a tiny piece of a vast history. Why would God inspire prophets to include so many stories of infertility? This felt like the beginning of an answer to my prayers; there was something here for me to learn. So I decided to study each of the women in these stories, and as I studied, I learned four important lessons that helped me grow and find peace despite my struggles with infertility.

1. Infertility is not a reflection of our worthiness or capability

When faced with infertility, I found it hard not to feel like it was my fault, that God didn't trust me for some

reason. Was I not faithful enough? Would I not be a good enough mother? I would lie awake at night after my husband fell asleep, aching to know what characteristic I lacked. My brain said I was being unreasonable. My heart kept me awake. One of the greatest lessons I learned from studying these women in the Bible is that my infertility was in no way tied to God's trust or lack of trust in me.

The amount of information I could find about each childless woman varied, but they all had certain things in common. Their lives were not easy, and childlessness was just one part of that. Most experienced the reproach of others as a result of their childlessness. Several had to wait a long time for children. Yet they kept the commandments and they prayed. After Hannah finally had a son, she brought him to Eli the priest and reminded him of her prayers: "Oh my lord, . . . I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the Lord. For this child I prayed" (1 Samuel 1:26–27; see also verses 10–12).

They all remained strong and faithful women, even when their prayers and supplications for children weren't immediately answered in the way they expected. And that was the point. Their faith was not contingent on the answer they received or whether they had children in this





life. They had chosen to trust in our Heavenly Father. And I could do the same.

When these women eventually had children, they raised some of the most incredible and faithful men to have lived on this earth: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, and John the Baptist. As I considered the impact each of these men had on the world, I was struck by the trust Heavenly Father had placed in these women, by the trust He places in anyone He asks to teach His children—mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, Sunday School teachers, bishops, nursery leaders, and others. In the eyes of God, these women were not defined by their infertility, and neither was I. We are daughters and sons of God, and He believes in us.

2. God's plan involves more than we can presently see

I love the story of Elisabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. We know so little about her and yet I learned so much from her. Elisabeth and her husband, Zacharias, had prayed for children, but those prayers hadn't been

answered in the way they hoped. On top of that, others regarded her with disdain because of her lack of children, which I'm sure only exacerbated her heartache.¹ Despite this, she and her husband remained faithful to the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. They must have been incredible people.

Eventually they were blessed with a son. I wonder how Elisabeth felt when she realized that the timing of her pregnancy was at least in part caused by the fact that her son, John, would prepare the way for the Messiah. Being the faithful woman that she was, she probably used it as a lesson to teach her son to trust in the timing of the Lord.

Elisabeth reminded me that I can see only a tiny sliver of what the Lord sees. This thought kept me going after each failed infertility treatment. I could not understand why the Lord kept directing us down paths that seemed like failures because they didn't end with us having a baby. Now, looking back, I can see how each of those seeming failures was an important stepping-stone on our path to understanding His timing.

President Russell M. Nelson once encouraged the “childless sisters” of the Church to “remember [that] the eternal timetable of the Lord is much longer than the lonely hours of your preparation or the total of this mortal life. These are only as microseconds when compared to eternity.”² I know that there is so much more that He sees and knows about our future, and if we listen to Him, He will always direct us down paths that will *eventually* lead to great happiness.

3. Find joy in the present and appreciate the knowledge you are gaining

Another woman in the Bible whose experience I learned from was Eve. I have always loved and looked up to Eve. She was faithful, courageous, compassionate, and wise. Considering her story through the lens of my struggles with infertility has only deepened my admiration for this incredible woman. I do not know if Eve was fully aware of her inability to have children without leaving the Garden of Eden, but Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the

Twelve Apostles explains that Eve “understood that she and Adam *had* to fall in order that ‘men [and women] might be’ [2 Nephi 2:25] and that there would be joy”³ (see 2 Nephi 2:22–25).

We know how Eve came to view her decision to eat of the fruit in hindsight. After Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, an angel came and taught them of Jesus Christ and His Atonement (see Moses 5:6–9). Afterwards the Holy Ghost fell upon Adam, causing him to testify. Eve happily said, “Were it not for our transgression *we never should have had seed*, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient” (Moses 5:11; emphasis added). She found joy in her decision. I cannot imagine how painful it was to be cast out, to leave the presence of the God she loved. And yet, as she looked back on that decision, she rejoiced in the knowledge she had gained, knowing that, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, she could eventually return to our Heavenly Father. Eve taught me to find happiness in the present. She could have spent her life wishing she were still in the Garden of Eden, yearning for the life she had left behind. Instead, she found joy in her current situation: in her children, in the knowledge she had gained, and in the power of the Savior’s Atonement. Eve’s lesson was a powerful one for me. During my struggle with infertility, I was often tempted to focus on only what I lacked, but by focusing on the present I too found joy.

Among other things, I was able to use this time to volunteer as an ordinance worker in the temple. Before, I attended the temple because that was what I was supposed to do. But now I love it even more. I have a deep appreciation for the ordinances we receive in the temple. The blessings promised to those who keep their covenants are incredible! And they are given to everyone. Young and old. Physically fit and disabled. Married and unmarried. Those with children and those without. I am a different person because I served in the temple. I value eternal families more. I have a deeper understanding of the Savior’s

Atonement. I pray more consciously. And I know that the greater knowledge and faith I gained from serving in the temple will make me a better mother.

4. We are all mothers

Eve also taught me that being a mother does not have to be tied to having children: both God the Father and Adam called Eve “the mother of all living” (Genesis 3:20; Moses 4:26) before she ever bore a child.⁴ As Ardeth Greene Kapp, who served as Young Women General President and who was never able to have children herself, asked, “Is motherhood reserved only for those who give birth? Was not the sacred mission of motherhood foreordained by God *for all women* before the world was?”⁵ She also observed: “I have come to know that we can all . . . rejoice in the sacred calling of motherhood. To give birth is but one part of this sacred calling.”⁶ This realization was a soothing balm to my broken heart. I was a mother—not in the traditional sense, certainly, but I had a role to play, a responsibility to bear.



Sheri Dew, former Second Counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, said:

“Motherhood is more than bearing children, though it is certainly that. It is the essence of who we are as women. It defines our very identity, our divine stature and nature, and the unique traits our Father gave us. . . .

“As daughters of our Heavenly Father, and as daughters of Eve, we are all mothers and we have always been mothers.”⁷

Through Eve’s experience, I realized that motherhood is a calling to love, nurture, and lead those of a younger generation, and I had that calling regardless of whether I bore children. Within days of discovering that I had infertility problems, I was called as a Young Women leader in my ward. I know this was a merciful blessing from a loving Heavenly Father. As I poured my heart into that calling, each girl became like a daughter to me. I felt a love for them that could only have come from their Heavenly Father. I was able to experience what it means to be a mother without bearing children, and it was beautiful.

I am grateful for the stories of these wonderful, righteous women in the Bible. I never expected to relate so deeply to women who lived in such a different time from my own, but their faith and courage in the face of infertility have meant so much to me. I have learned to more fully trust that I am a daughter of God and that He loves me, believes in me, and has a plan for me. I have learned to love the temple and to find opportunities to learn even in the middle of heartache. I have gained a greater understanding of what it means to be a mother. Most importantly, I have learned that even the smallest details in the scriptures can be used by a loving Heavenly Father to give us knowledge and comfort. ■

The author, who is now the mother of two-year-old twins, lives in California, USA.

NOTES

1. See Luke 1:25; see also definition of *reproach* in *New Testament Student Study Guide* (Church Educational System manual, 2007), 53.
2. Russell M. Nelson, “Lessons from Eve,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, 87.
3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Because She Is a Mother,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 36.
4. See Neill F. Marriott, “What Shall We Do?” *Ensign*, May 2016, 11.
5. Ardeth Greene Kapp, *All Kinds of Mothers* (1979), 9; emphasis added.
6. Ardeth Greene Kapp, “Drifting, Dreaming, Directing,” in *Blueprints for Living: Perspectives for Latter-day Saint Women*, ed. Maren M. Mouritsen (1980), 1:84.
7. Sheri Dew, “Are We Not All Mothers?” *Ensign*, Nov. 2001, 96, 97.



RESOURCES FOR THOSE STRUGGLING WITH INFERTILITY

Infertility is a physical, mental, and emotional struggle. Medical treatments can also be a huge financial burden for couples. Fortunately, there may be local resources available to help ease these burdens. Many countries have a national infertility association that can provide information about various types of treatments, local infertility clinics, support groups, and financial aid. Below are a few other resources as well. (These resources are not sponsored by the Church.)

Financial Support

- A variety of organizations offer infertility treatment “scholarships.” Some scholarships are open to anyone; others are restricted by geographic area, financial need, or other circumstances.
- Infertility clinics sometimes offer free consultations. Call around to your local clinics to see if they offer this service.
- Some clinics may work with independent organizations to offer infertility treatment “packages” that provide multiple treatments for a single, reduced fee.
- Some medication companies and some infertility clinics offer discounts to self-paying and low-income patients. Ask your local clinic if they have or know of any discount programs.
- The price of fertility drugs and medications can vary widely among pharmacies. Carefully shop around to make sure you are getting medications that are not only at the best price but also medically sound and of high quality.

Emotional Support

- Some areas have both peer-led and professionally led support groups. Peer-led support groups are informal organizations that allow men and women experiencing infertility to discuss their situations with others going through similar experiences. Professionally led support groups are more structured and are led by trained and licensed therapists. You can find information on local support groups through a local fertility clinic or hospital, online at a national infertility association website, or by searching online.
- There are a variety of support resources on social media platforms too, from Facebook support groups to infertility-focused Instagram and Twitter accounts to infertility vlogs on YouTube.
- Although there are many formally organized support resources, many people continue to feel alone as they experience the pains of infertility. If you are suffering from infertility and feel open to sharing that with others, consider organizing a support group in your ward or stake. Or if that feels like too much, consider selectively letting some family members, friends, or ward members know about your struggles with infertility. This may lead to discovering others who have experienced infertility (now or in the past) as they follow your lead and open up to share their own experiences.



LIVE WITH PERFECT HOPE

“If we have faith in Jesus Christ, the hardest as well as the easiest times in life can be a blessing. In all conditions, we can choose the right with the guidance of the Spirit. We have the gospel of Jesus Christ to shape and guide our lives if we choose it. And with prophets revealing to us our place in the plan of salvation, we can live with perfect hope and a feeling of peace.”

President Henry B. Eyring,
Second Counselor in the First
Presidency, “Mountains to
Climb,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 26.