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Infertility

We knew before we got married that we were going to struggle with infertility. It wasn't something which worried us in the early days of our marriage; in fact, we told people back then that we weren't too concerned whether we had children or not – there just seemed to be many years in front of us to think about that. Nevertheless, it was always in the back of Jennie's mind and as the years went by, it started to cast a longer and longer shadow over our lives.

According to the UK's National Health Service (see www.nhs.uk/conditions/infertility – accessed 13 September 2018), infertility is when a couple fails to conceive despite having regular unprotected sexual intercourse. In our day, a diagnosis of infertility was generally given after this had gone on for two years of trying, though the best advice was to seek medical help if nothing happened after one year of trying.

Helping the Suffering

When infertility strikes, it can hurt. Think of Hannah's experience in I Samuel 1:10-11. She's been unable to conceive. And here's what it does to her.

Deeply hurt, Hannah prayed to the Lord and wept with many tears. Making a vow, she pleaded, 'Lord of Armies, if you will take notice of your servant's affliction, remember and not forget me, and give your servant a son, I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and his hair will never be cut.'

There is highly emotive language there. Hannah experiences bitterness of soul. She weeps with many tears. She talks about her affliction, her misery. She longs for a son, and she is ready to dedicate him to the Lord for life – if only he comes.

And that's what infertility can feel like. It's heartache. It's like bereavement, grief over a person who never was. It's an aching within. It's despair, hopelessness, abandonment. It brings fears of loneliness in old age. It makes you wonder whether God really loves you. It makes you feel inadequate, like there's something wrong with you.

By 2008, when we'd been married for ten years, we knew that it was the right time for us to confront our infertility medically. We prayed. We shared with close family, a few friends, and the elders of our church. And we started to make medical appointments.

One of the curious things about infertility is that the husband and the wife can feel quite differently about it. A couple of years later, in 2010, we were asked to contribute to an excellent

book about infertility called *Just the Two of Us?* by Eleanor Margesson and Sue McGowan.

Here is part of what Jennie wrote.

'Infertility for me is a very difficult, exhausting and challenging road to travel. I sometimes feel very alone. My husband is very supportive and seeks to understand where he does not have the feelings that I might. Few people ... understand or even remember that this is such a problem for us. Even if people remember, they forget to ask or are too embarrassed to do so. Most of the time I am screaming inwardly for people to ask me how I am, to give me a cuddle, or simply to listen and not say anything.' She was acknowledging there that, though James also felt our infertility deeply he didn't always have the same strength of feeling about it. So, for his part, James wrote: 'When I see a young woman with a pushchair, I wish it was my wife. When I sense my wife's heart sinking because she sees the pride on a new mother's face, I grieve with her.' But there could be times when the ache was not as keen as Jennie's.

As a result of our slightly different perspectives, it became vitally important that we saw the situation not as Jennie's problem nor as James's problem but as our problem. So we sought to share with each other, to pray with each other, to laugh with each other and to mourn with each other as much as we could.

Ironically, church can be a very hard place for those struggling with infertility. It can be really hard when there's news of another pregnancy. Or when couples who've only just

got married conceive almost immediately. Or when families which are really large announce that another is on its way. Or when parents get stressed with their children for misbehaving and say, 'You must be glad you don't have kids when they behave like this!' Church can be a place of dread for those suffering from infertility.

And so it was that we were plunged into a merry-go-round of infertility treatments. We found the hospital treatment very clinical and sometimes felt like a specimen. The treatment was intrusive and emotionally draining. There were prods and pokes, cameras, scans, blood tests, questions and more questions, lectures on anatomy, lectures on diet and weight, questions about regularity of sex, and on and on it went. There were expectations, discouragements and confusion.

At times, the only thing which gave us any encouragement was the fact that we have a God who can ordain whatever He wills. Jennie wrote, 'I generally feel pessimistic about whether we will ever have children but know that I have to remember that God is in control. It is very difficult to remember this continually, and it is sometimes the last thing I want to hear said by someone else, but I know that this is the only thing that will keep me going and strengthen my faith.'

And then it happened! Our local hospital suggested some new medication which involved daily injections for a fortnight. A few weeks later, on 7 April, we discovered, to our absolute shock, that Jennie was expecting. We were on our way to visit friends in the north of England at the time. We were staying

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in an appalling hotel in the Midlands. The contrast between the new life which was just starting to grow inside Jennie and the grim surroundings was very striking. But we were able to thank God for answering the prayers of many years. We were equally overjoyed that another couple who'd been struggling with infertility along with us conceived at almost exactly the same time. God had been good to us.

And so the scans began. We had a seven-week scan which showed a little heartbeat. We had the usual twelve-week scan which showed our baby at about two inches long. And we waited for our twenty-week scan which was to happen on 23 July.