



## **EMPTY WOMB, ACHING HEART**

**– AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR MARLO SCHALESKY**

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**Q: Why did you write this book?**

**A:** When my husband Bryan and I first started down the road of infertility and infertility treatments, we found a lot of information on the more intellectual side of the journey – on medical interventions, ethical issues, possible causes and tests. But those weren't the issues I was dealing with every day.

There were no pamphlets or books telling me how to cope with the monthly cycle of hope and disappointment that was tearing me apart, or what to do when I walked down the toilet paper aisle at the grocery store and cried when I saw the diapers, or when I opened the paper and saw an increase in teen pregnancies and abortions and cried out "It's not fair!"

It was only when I met others struggling through infertility that I found they dealt with the same issues I was struggling with, and some even invaluable insights that helped me so much in my own journey.

And that's why I wrote this book – to share the stories, wisdom, and insight of Christian men and women who have traveled the road of infertility and found hope and deeper relationship with God in the midst of it. I wanted to share the stories that have helped me.

**Q: What has been the hardest part of the infertility journey for you?**

**A:** For me, the monthly roller coaster of hope and disappointment has been by far the hardest. It always starts the same, with me telling myself not to get my hopes up. But still, I can't help wondering if this could be the month, especially if I've undergone some form of treatment. Every twinge in analyzed, I feel a little sick to my stomach and I wonder if it might be morning sickness. I try not to count the days, but I do anyway. 29, 30, 31... and then it starts, and I know I'm not pregnant...again. Still. I can't help crying.

And this happens month after month, until I'm so emotionally exhausted that I just don't think I can stand one more cycle of it.

The best help I've found for this is to try to look beyond today's storm to the rainbow – God's promise that it won't rain forever. Someday, the infertility journey will end, and whether that's with children or without I want to have walked with God through it and come out more like Jesus on the other side.

**Q: What's your best piece of advice for those struggling with infertility, physically, emotionally, and spiritually?**

**A:** Physically, I'd advise not to waste time being treated by your local OB/GYN. Once you've tried to get pregnant for a year and not been able to, go straight to a specialist – a reproductive endocrinologist. They're up on the latest technology, are specially trained, and deal with infertility all day, every day.

Emotionally, I'd say live your life to the fullest now. Do the things you enjoy. Don't put things off "just in case" you might get pregnant. Infertility can consume you. And it's going to be emotionally taxing, so try to make time to do things that you find refreshing.

Spiritually, don't be afraid to go to God with your doubts, fears, and even your angry accusations. Yell, scream, pound on his chest if you have to. Just go to him. He can handle your frustration. What he can't do much with, however, is your silence.

**Q: Can couples have a fulfilling life without children?**

**A:** Absolutely! One of the very neatest couples I know is childless. They wanted and tried to have children, but were never able to. Yet God has used their lives in powerful ways to help others. Through their ministries and through the faithfulness of their lives, God has allowed them to be spiritual parents to many hurting people.

So, my best advice to childless people is to seek out God's path for their lives. Follow him. Trust him. He won't let your life go to waste. Whether you end up with or without children, God can make your life into something incredible.

**Q: How do you answer the question, "When are you going to start a family?"**

**A:** I hear this question all too often, and I always say the same thing: "We already have. We just don't know if God is going to add to it with children or not." It's a huge misconception in our society that children make a family.

When God created Adam and Eve, he pronounced his creation "very good." It was complete. A husband and wife *are* a complete family. Children only expand that family.

I like to encourage childless couples to think of themselves as a family of two and do family things together – bake cookies and decorate the tree together at Christmastime, hide Easter baskets for each other – whatever their family traditions were as a kid, continue them as a family of two.

**Q: How can friends or family support someone who's dealing with infertility?**

**A:** Great question! So often family and friends don't know what to do and end up saying just the wrong things. I have four basic rules that will help people be a support to those struggling with infertility:

**ONE:** Don't start any sentence with "at least." There is nothing you say after "at least" that's going to be helpful. All that does is trivialize the other person's pain. What I like to remember is that you can't lessen someone's pain by talking it away, you can only lessen it by sharing it.

**TWO:** Don't offer all kinds of excuses for God not giving someone a child. One of my friends was actually told by someone in her church "Maybe God knows you'll be a bad mother and that's why he hasn't given you any children." We have this desire to get God off the hook, but he can stand up for himself. Our job is just to be there for hurting people – pray for them, remember them with notes or little cards on difficult days like Mother's Day, understand that it hurts to yearn for a child and not have one. Be someone they can come to to vent frustrations and hurt.

**THREE:** Don't give advice unless you're asked for it! A person going through infertility has heard it all before. I got to a point where I thought if I heard "just relax" or "you should adopt and then you'll get pregnant" one more time I might just punch the person in the nose. Besides, relaxing just isn't going to cure ovarian cysts, open blocked fallopian tubes, and get rid of endometriosis. Stress may affect consistent ovulation, but there are a whole host of other medical problems that could be causing someone's infertility. As for adoption, adopted children are a beautiful and special gift all on their own. They aren't a means to getting a biological child. So instead of giving advice, ask how they're holding up. Say things like "This must be really hard for you, how can I help?"

**FOUR:** Be sensitive that things like baby showers, dedications, baby baptisms, and mother's day or father's day, are tough for people going through infertility. Sometimes, I just can't endure going to a baby shower. It's too painful.

**Q: With the number of abortions, teen pregnancies, and unwanted pregnancies, how do you deal with the issue of God's justice?**

**A:** I think that just about everyone who goes through infertility at some point wants to turn to God and say, "What are you, crazy?" And when you look at things on a grand scale – people who don't want children get pregnant while wonderful couples can't – it doesn't make a lot of sense. So, for me, it helps to look at the smaller picture – my life and what God wants for me. The blessings he chooses for me shouldn't be compared with those he gives to others, and vice versa. So, I try to focus on what He's doing in me, in my life.

Also, I believe that every child is a precious and undeserved gift from God. So, if he chooses to give that gift to others, even those who don't appreciate it, and not to me, that's his prerogative. God doesn't owe me a child. I hope he'll give me one, but it's his choice.

**Q: Is infertility a punishment from God?**

**A:** Let me answer that with a resounding NO! For some reason as human beings we have the need to answer this question of WHY. Why is this happening to me? Why do I have to go through this when so many others don't? "God is punishing me" often becomes a simple answer to that question.

A good friend of mine really struggled through this issue. She asked, "Am I being punished because I was sexually active before marriage, because we didn't try to have children right away after we were married, because I'm not a good enough wife, or did

this, or didn't do that?" But plenty of people are sexually active before marriage, or use birth control, or whatever, and they have no problem conceiving.

So, the real question is not so much "is this a punishment," but rather, "why do I feel so badly about myself that I have to believe that I somehow deserve this?"

My friend finally realized that maybe God had just chosen this path for her for reasons she couldn't fathom. Maybe there wasn't a "why" that she could know. And if that was the case, could she trust God, and His love for her, enough to not make up a bunch of "why's" to get him off the hook?

**Q: Is it a sin to get treatment for infertility?**

**A:** No! It's no more a sin to seek treatment for infertility than for any other physical malady. When I got bronchitis, I went to doctor and got an antibiotic. When my husband broke his arm, he went in and got a cast. When my Grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, she had chemotherapy. When a child falls down and skins his knee, we put medicine and a band-aid on it. We don't think of these medical interventions as sin. Nor should we label infertility treatments as sin. They too are simply a means of trying to fix something's that's gone wrong.

As a scientist myself, I believe that science is the study and discovery of God's works, his incredible creation. Therefore, medical discoveries and advances, are a gift from God – a revealing of part of the mystery of his creation. We may use that knowledge for good, to fix what has been "broken" – in the case of infertility, to hopefully repair the reproductive system – or for bad, destructive purposes.

Seeking treatment for infertility does not mean a person is not trusting God. Rather, it is simply opening another path through which God may work.

**Q: Is using medical means such as IVF and fertility drugs against God's will?**

**A:** Typically, no. I do suggest, however, that people seek God's will for themselves – go to him in humility and ask what he'd have for their lives personally – rather than relying on what someone else says.

Beyond that, it's important to point out that God created people to have children. "Go forth and multiply," he said to Adam and Eve. Treatments such as drugs and IVF are simply ways that God has given us to help that process when it's not working right.

Treatments such as IVF do not create children – that's God's work. Treatment only helps to overcome physical obstacles that hinder conception. The miracle of life is still in God's hands. For example, IVF puts eggs and sperm together outside the womb, but the doctor can't force those eggs and sperm to grow and develop into a baby. Drugs may increase the number of mature eggs a woman develops in a cycle, but drugs don't create life. Whether we use IVF or another means to have children, the miracle of life still lies fully with God.

One word of caution, however: We must be careful not to make medical treatments into our gods, believing that they will give us the children we desire. Treatment is only a means by which God may work. The idols the ancient Israelites worshiped were fertility

gods – Baals and Asherah poles. We think these people were silly to worship wooden statues, but we do the same when we put all of our hope in medicine and believe it alone can give us what we want.

**Q: And is there a limit to how far you should go in the effort to bear a child? (surrogate mother, etc.)**

**A:** Yes. I believe the line should be drawn at the point where others begin to be hurt or where life is destroyed. For example, I don't see any problem with using a surrogate mother any more than women used to use wet nurses when they were not able to nurse their babies themselves.

However, I do see a problem with selective reduction, where many embryos are placed within the womb and then some of the fetuses are aborted later. In that case, the lives of some of the babies are sacrificed for the others. For me, that is a line I do not want to cross.

**Q: Mother's Day is said to be the hardest day of the year for women dealing with infertility. How do you face Mother's Day?**

**A:** Mother's Day was the worst day of the year for me until three years ago. Usually, I'd stay home from church on that day, huddle on the couch, and try to forget what day it was. But that year I had to go to church to help with the sound system. I had to try to be a "normal person" on Mother's Day. I didn't think I could do. After all, church was the same as every Mother's Day – roses for the mothers, signs everywhere, happy mother's day all over the bulletin, a million reminders of my pain. And of course, I was miserable, as always.

But that year, something different happened. In the middle of the worship, they began to sing, "My Jesus I Love Thee, I know thou art mine." The last line of each verse of that song says, "If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now." And that line struck me powerfully. That now, on the one day that is most painful, that most represents all that God has not given me, if I could declare my love for God in the face of that pain and loss, then it would really mean something special.

So I sang that song, sang it with all my heart. And ever since that day, Mother's Day has meant something special to me. It's become a day for me to declare my love for God irrespective of what He's given me. To proclaim a love that's not based on gifts but on who he is. And to tell Him that no matter what, I want to follow Him.

**Q: Lots of women had trouble conceiving in the Bible – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth. God gave all of them children. So isn't having a child just a matter of having enough faith?**

**A:** Sometimes we like to think that it's our lack of faith that keeps us from having children. After all, that gets God off the hook. It's not his fault we're not having children, it's ours. That way we don't have to deal with all those tough questions of faith like "if God really loved me, then why doesn't he give me a baby?"

But when we take a closer look at these Biblical women, we find that God didn't give them children because of their super faith. Sarah even laughed at the prospect of God giving her a child so late in life – that doesn't sound like miracle-making faith to me.

Rather, what's interesting about these women is that each of them had their own unique place in God's plan.

That's what I think we need to focus on when we look at these women. I've found that faith isn't working up enough "belief power" to get God to do what you want him to do.

Faith is trusting God enough to follow him down the path he chooses for your life even when that path isn't what you want. It's trusting his love, believing in his goodness, even in the darkest times. Faith doesn't get you a child, it makes you a child of God. And that's what matters most.

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