

Childless on Mother's Day  
by alicia britt chole  
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**“Barren,” the doctor said.**

The room was small and sterile. Tightly holding hands we took our seats in the two sticky, avocado green plastic chairs. Then we waited, again. This journey had begun years earlier. We thought for sure we would become pregnant within the month, well, maybe in two months, perhaps three? At six months we called our doctor who was not worried, yet. A year later he arranged appointments with specialists. Hundreds of miles, several humbling tests, and two surgeries later, we sat bracing for the verdict.

Happily in love with his work, Mr. Fertility Expert breezed through the door and (in a voice that should be reserved for saying “Happy Birthday!”) he announced, “Well, it’s impossible for you two to conceive a child. But in this day of advanced technology, there are other exciting alternatives...”

His mouth kept moving but I no longer heard his words. “Impossible. He said impossible. That means I’m barren. I—am—barren,” I thought as my eyes began to sting. While Mr. Fertility Expert talking with enthusiasm about the other options on his menu, emotions rushed to the front of my life. Taking the lead, they began offering rather uncomplimentary suggestions about the character of God and His opinion of me. But in that very moment, I heard another Voice in my soul.

“What do you believe about God, Alicia?” the faithful Spirit of Truth asked, “Is He good or is He not? Choose, child.” Though my emotions countered, I knew three truths deep within.

1. God IS
2. The God who IS is good.
3. If the God who IS is good, then ALL things that happen in my life take place under the banner of His goodness.

## The desert of disappointment

“Barren,” the doctor said. Childless on yet another Mother’s Day.

Webster defines *barren* as *sterile, unfruitful, incapable of producing its kind, unproductive*. The word appears almost thirty times in my study Bible translated from one Greek and seven Hebrew words. Throughout the scriptures, *barren* is used in reference to both places and people. Figuratively, the word can mean *empty* or *desolate*. When applied to individuals, barren most often means, *unable to conceive*. Other words and phrases carry the same meaning: *childless, sterile, having no children, without young*.

Seventeen men and women are specifically identified as barren in the scriptures including Rebekah, Michal, Elizabeth, Sarai, Abram, Selad, and Jether. Many others could be added to the list of the childless, not the least of whom were John the Baptist and Jesus.

Some know the loneliness of an empty, barren womb. But all are familiar with empty, barren places of the soul: dreams unattained, questions unanswered, and pain unceasing. Male, female, young, not-so-young, married, single, single again—we are all acquainted with the ache of unfulfilled longings.

Barren places are the deserts of our spiritual journeys. In the dry, uncomfortable heat, our faith is actually purified. Every year I go on a prayer retreat in the Arizona desert. Is it barren? Yes, it is barren but beautiful. It is empty? Yes, it is empty but still. In that beautifully barren, empty yet still place, my faith is uncluttered. And as my faith is uncluttered, Biblical hope is renewed.

When dreams are delayed or denied, our faith—like grapes—is pressed and whatever is really within comes bursting out. Painful? Yes. Essential? Absolutely! Because what we really believe about God is revealed in the desert of disappointment. And what we really

believe about God will determine our destiny.

In *Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer said, “Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes into your mind when you think of God?’ we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.”<sup>i</sup>

Unfulfilled longings bring us face to face with this core question of faith: What do I believe about God? Is He good or is He not? When my land is fruitful or barren, when my prayers are answered or fall into silence, when my body is healed or broken...Do I or don't I believe that God is good? Choose, child.

God knows that what we believe about Him affects how we spend today and where we spend eternity. He guides us through barren places that reveal our thoughts about Him as our God and ourselves as His children. In the place of pain, faith is sifted: our beliefs are thrown in the air and the fluff is blown away.

### **Back to the doctor's office**

Politely—well, Barry was polite, but the man was beginning to annoy me—declining Mr. Fertility Expert's “other exciting options,” my husband and I unstuck ourselves from the sticky green chairs and quietly walked to our car.

Once inside, Barry turned to me with tears. Barry is the most gentle, strong man I have ever known. He has more character than I will have in a lifetime. As the pain pressed down on our hearts, we held each other close and simply tried to breathe. Did we grieve? Yes. It was healthy to grieve. We mourned safely in the arms of Jesus who also lives each day with unfulfilled longings for those He lived and died for.

### **Swimming in the ocean of advice**

Returning home, we continued our attempt at graciously navigating through the ocean of advice we received from well-meaning, well-wishing people. Seems like EVERYONE had a cousin who “used to be infertile BUT” or a sister who “started to explore other options

and THEN.”

Most folks (safely in the hundreds) explained to us that we “just needed to relax” and then we would become pregnant. (Believe me, I am RELAXED!) Once a totally sincere woman told me to purchase maternity cloths, put them on, and walk around the house “in faith believing.” Then there were the more natural friends who encouraged us to “drink more raspberry tea” and “nightly rub Aloe Vera on your tummy” (which was really rather sticky).

People tell their stories and offer their thoughts to encourage us because they hope that one day we will know the joy of parenthood. But I also believe there is another reason why barren women swim in an ocean of advice: Christians are more than a little uncomfortable with the whole concept of barrenness. We are not sure what to say to those who have longings that God does not seem to be fulfilling. We are at a loss for words when the single woman’s hopes for marriage dissolves, the long-awaited promotion vaporizes, the medicine stops working, the womb is still empty. Surely if someone had a dream that God was not planning on granting, He would at least do them the courtesy of changing their desires, wouldn’t He?

But then we read in the Hebrews 11 hall of faith of those who administered justice and those who were chained and imprisoned; those who conquered kingdoms and those who were destitute, persecuted and mistreated; those who saw visions fulfilled and those who died in faith never seeing but still believing. Reading the lives of the truly great it becomes clear that longing and trusting can walk together; hope and pain can coexist.

If we understand that it is possible for faith and grief to hold hands, our words can be soothing. Here are a few of the more helpful and healing offerings I received:

“I’m sorry and I’m here—available to sit, pray, or cry.”

“How are you and your husband processing this as a couple?”

“Are there days or seasons or events that are more difficult for you?”

“Are there ways I can be a support for you during these times?”

“Did you hear about the shoe sale?”

And let us remember that married, childless women are not the only ones who feel the ache of barrenness. Many amazing single women long to have children but the path of God has not led them into marriage or motherhood. They too weep as they listen to the loud ticking of their biological clocks sweeping years away. Others have held a child in their womb or their arms and then had to commit their child to God’s eternal embrace. Through miscarriage, accidents, disease, and disaster, these women know the constant pain of irreplaceable loss.

Some brave women faithfully nurtured life and then in love committed their child to the care of another. Even if they know that baby is in the best of hands, their arms still ache longing to hold their child once again. Others, in fear and confusion, made different choices with their pregnancies and perhaps this is the most paralyzing form of barrenness. These too desperately need grace-filled support.

### **The rest of the story**

Through the smoke of a small fire, Jonathan and I were having a serious discussion about life and death and life after death. Pausing thoughtfully, six-year old Jona turned to me and said, “Mommy, when you are dying and Jesus comes to take you to heaven, I will carry you. I will hold you.” This is my tender son—the son God led me to through the path of barrenness. In fact, many of God’s most beautiful treasures lie on the other side of the desert of disappointment.

Today I am the mommy of the two most fabulous children in the world.<sup>ii</sup> Though my arms are now full, I am still no stranger to barrenness. My womb no longer aches, but every season has known questions that are unanswered, dreams that are unattained, and aches that are unceasing. My faith is still being purified by the uncomfortable heat of unfulfilled longings.

There is hope for the barren. But that hope is not found in a five-step plan that maps out an escape route from pain. True hope is never found in a place. True hope is always only found in a Person—the One, True, Living God. His name is Jesus.

Over two thousand years ago, there was a barren place that Jesus embraced. From a splintered cross, His eyes pierced the future and His love for you and me held Him fast as nails split His veins. Hope lives because Jesus did not avoid the place of barrenness.

He sought no short cuts.

He refused all alternate paths.

In that beautifully barren, empty but still place called the cross,  
pure faith moved mountains for us.

Such is the work of a God who is good.

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<sup>i</sup> A W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God, Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978, ©1961), 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Our youngest, Louie, was born in 2006 after this article was written.