

**Self-pity in Infertility:**  
**Addressing Self-pity Biblically for the Woman Facing Infertility**

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## Abstract

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Infertility affects one in six couples. Therefore, there are many couples in the church who are dealing with infertility. A common response for a woman facing infertility is self-pity. Self-pity is essentially feeling sorry for yourself. A woman in this circumstance often feels alone and that no one else could understand or knows what she is facing, especially since it is a hidden hurt. Every expectant mother, pregnancy announcement, baby shower, birth, Mother's and Father's Days are painful reminders of her situation. She faces unmet expectations, hurt, hope, and disappointment in a rollercoaster of emotions month after month. Often self-pity can spiral into despair or depression as well as many other struggles.

Self-pity in response to infertility is prideful and sinful and needs to be dealt with biblically. God's Word is sufficient to address the heart of the woman giving into self-pity in infertility. God's Word will help her to understand self-pity from God's perspective as well as grow in understanding her own heart. God's Word will help her to identify what sinful thinking, unbelief, or idol(s) are motivating her response of self-pity in infertility. Biblical repentance will be essential as she turns from herself to Christ and believing and trusting God. She will then need to continue to grow to think biblically about her circumstance, as God's Word renews her mind. In the temptation to give into self-pity she will need to choose to obey God and be thankful as commanded in the Scriptures. Lastly God's Word will help her to find contentment and true and lasting joy in Christ alone. So, whether or not her circumstances change, she can learn to glorify God in her response to infertility instead of giving into self-pity by God's grace.

## I. Introduction

### A. A Familiar Story of Self-pity in Infertility

1. One pink line; negative again. As the weeks turn into months, Anna doubts that her circumstance will ever change, that she will ever be pregnant. She feels sorry for herself, alone, and disappointed.
2. She goes to a prayer meeting that night, hoping she will feel better. Instead, she looks at the prayer list and sees 'Expecting Parents.' It stings when she realizes she and her husband may never be on that list.
3. Then her friends share praise- they are expecting again, and everyone is happy and sharing their congratulations. Anna musters up all her strength not to cry, as her eyes well up with tears, and she smiles, trying to feel happy for her friends, but instead, she feels hurt and disappointed.
4. She went to church hoping to feel better, but instead, she felt worse. This is one example of a common experience for a woman suffering from infertility that 'reopens the wound' of infertility, and they respond.
5. They hope their circumstances change each month, yet they are disappointed month after month. There is a silent pain that stings with each round belly, pregnancy announcement, baby shower, Mother's and Father's Day, and mention of children. Every questioning look or "when are you guys going to have kids?" question brings pain.
6. There are many responses that an infertile woman has, but a common one is self-pity. Self-pity is essentially feeling sorry for yourself. So how does a woman dealing with infertility stop giving into self-pity? This is what these paper aims to address.

### B. The Purpose Statement

1. This paper aims to show that God's Word equips the believing woman suffering from infertility to change biblically and no longer give into self-pity instead of being content. It will briefly explain how to grieve in the season of disappointment and in their sense of loss. However, most of the paper will focus on seeing infertility as an opportunity to turn to Christ and understand more of who God is and respond not with self-pity but joy and contentment.
2. The world and God's Word offer two vastly different counsels for women giving into self-pity due to infertility. First, God's Word provides the believing woman a reason to turn from the sin of self-pity in infertility and instead respond in trust, joy, and contentment in Christ, whether or not her circumstance changes. This biblical change process will be thoroughly explained and expounded upon throughout this paper.
3. The secular 'solution' for infertility will also be explored to contrast the hope and help offered through God's Word for the believer. If one has not done so, there will be a call to repent and turn in faith to Christ. In this area of self-pity, a lasting, biblical change is only offered to the believer, one whose trust and faith is in Christ alone for salvation (Eph 2:8-10).

#### C. Intended Audience and Scope

1. This paper is intended to be a resource for the believing woman giving into self-pity in infertility. It would also benefit her husband as he can be an excellent resource of truth, love, and support as they walk the infertility journey together. Although the biblical change process would be similar for anyone struggling with self-pity in any circumstance, this paper is written with the infertile woman wallowing in self-pity in mind. Therefore, the examples and Scriptures used throughout this paper are geared

toward women suffering from infertility and self-pity. This paper may also give insight into many infertile women's struggles.

2. This resource will extensively go through the biblical change process in putting off self-pity, being renewed in mind, and putting on what pleases Christ, which will only apply to the believer. So, although this can be shared with an unbeliever, and the Gospel of Christ will be shared, it will not apply to them until they trust Christ alone for salvation.
3. This research will show the stark contrast between the secular and biblical ways of dealing with infertility's self-pity. This will demonstrate the hope and help only offered by our kind and caring God through the sufficiency of His Word (2 Tm 3:16-17).

#### D. Understanding Infertility

1. Before continuing any further in the paper, it is pertinent to explain infertility, which is an organic medical condition many couples face. Both inside and outside the church, many couples, and women face what Anna faces daily. One in six couples face infertility, and many couples face secondary infertility.<sup>1</sup>
2. Infertility is defined as not being able to conceive in the usual timeframe, and there may be a medical reason behind this difficulty.<sup>2</sup> The medical problem may involve the male or female partner or both, or neither person, also known as unexplained infertility.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the couple has many personal questions, and various tests are performed to determine the cause of infertility.

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Monroe and Philip Monroe, "The Bible and the Pain of Infertility," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 23, no. 1 (2005), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Jani R. Jensen, Elizabeth A. Stewart, and Karen Wallevand, *Mayo Clinic Guide to Fertility and Conception* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Life Long, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015), 133.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

3. There are various reasons or causes of infertility for both females and males. There may be ovulation, hormonal imbalances, structural, and anatomical issues in females.<sup>4</sup> Male infertility may be caused by problems with sperm, structural, anatomical, hormone imbalances, ejaculation issues, or chromosome defects.<sup>5</sup> There are many tests and options for treatments for many of these issues. But there are also cases when there is no treatment or explanation as to why the couple cannot conceive.
4. Secondary infertility is when a couple is able to conceive and bear a child in a normal timeframe, but struggles to conceive again. This is very common and may be the reason behind families with an only child or significant age gaps between children. Although women who face secondary infertility are very thankful for their child, they may struggle with bitterness as others can have multiple children. They struggle with the fact that they cannot get pregnant after months or years of trying. This is a problematic situation as it is silent, and many people will brush their pain aside, encouraging them to be thankful for what the child they have. However, there is more going on in their heart and response that God's Word can address, and they can be given hope and help not to be bitter, but joyful in Christ.

#### E. Research Methodology

1. The majority of the research will be done through biblical resources, books, journal articles, and some personal interviews.

#### II. The Secular View of Self-pity and Infertility

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<sup>4</sup> Jensen, Stewart, and Wallevand, *Mayo Clinic Guide to Fertility and Conception*, 1134-149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 151-164.

This section will focus on how secular psychology understands self-pity and what help is offered to those facing self-pity as it relates to infertility.

#### A. The Secular Understanding of Self-pity

1. Self-pity is recognized and addressed in secular psychology. It is linked to stress and often focuses on one's troubles and feeling sorry for oneself.<sup>6</sup> One clinical psychologist, Dr. Wayne Parnell, explains that self-pity is often a result of not getting what one wants or not being validated for what one does.<sup>7</sup>
2. This need for validation and its connection to self-pity is explained further by psychotherapist Rebecca Mores as "Self-pity is a form of external validation that something bad has happened to us or that our circumstance is out of our control."<sup>8</sup>
3. It is agreed in this understanding that if the person can validate or pity themselves, they will not seek this from others.<sup>9</sup> So the need to experience and be self-aware of self-pity is essential to working toward the solution to self-pity, which is called self-compassion in secular psychology.<sup>10</sup>
4. Interestingly, both the problem and the solution in secular counsel focus on the self. The help to change is supposed to come from within oneself, but that is where the problem originates. This shows the circular reasoning and lack of hope to change, because both the problem and solution come from the same place.

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<sup>6</sup> Hope Gillette, "How to Recognize and Redirect Self-pity." PsychCentral, September 6, 2021, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/self-pity-to-self-compassion>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Tina Gilbertson, "The Paradox of Self-pity." Psychology Today, April 3, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/constructive-wallowing/201504/the-paradox-self-pity>.

<sup>10</sup> Hope Gillette, September 6, 2021, "How to Recognize and Redirect Self-pity."

## B. The Secular Counsel Offered in Self-pity

1. Self-compassion is an antidote to self-pity, according to psychology. One explanation of self-compassion is to accept what one is feeling, not what is happening.<sup>11</sup> It is to allow yourself to feel whatever emotions come, whether envy, jealousy, sadness, or anger, and to acknowledge these feelings as valid.<sup>12</sup>
2. According to psychology, there are many ways to grow in self-compassion to keep oneself from falling into self-pity.
  - a) One way to achieve self-compassion is by changing perspective in realizing that difficulty is a common human experience.<sup>13</sup> This is the realization that life is hard, and so not to have too high expectations for one's life or self, but to understand everyone faces trouble.
  - b) Another solution offered is mindfulness, in which when self-pity comes to mind, it lets those feelings pass rather than dwelling on them.<sup>14</sup> Not to ignore or stop the emotions or be consumed by them, but to allow them to run their course.<sup>15</sup>
  - c) According to secular psychology, gratitude is also vital for helping to form contentment.<sup>16</sup> Thankfulness is a biblical perspective and command, and so in one

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Cheever MSW, LCSW, "Self Compassion in the Face of Infertility." Donor Concierge, May 9, 2014, <https://www.donorconcierge.com/blog/the-art-of-self-compassion-in-the-face-of-infertility>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hope Gillette, September 6, 2021, "How to Recognize and Redirect Self-pity."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Cheever, May 9, 2014, "Self Compassion in the Face of Infertility."

<sup>16</sup> Hope Gillette, September 6, 2021, "How to Recognize and Redirect Self-pity."

sense, they have stumbled onto the right thing to do. At the same time, the secular world does not offer praise to whom it belongs, God alone, so they miss it.

- d) Lastly, it is agreed that self-pity can repel others rather than welcome the support of those who care. So, it is essential to connect and productively share one's sorrows, which come from having had compassion for oneself first.<sup>17</sup>
3. Overall, the secular perspective and counsel for self-pity is that self-pity is ultimately a need for compassion because of a difficult situation in one's life. This compassion is something that they can meet in themselves. This involves allowing themselves to feel whatever they are feeling due to their circumstance and pity themselves. After this, they can gain perspective, be grateful, and productively connect with others so that they can move away from self-pity toward joy.

#### C. The Secular Help Offered in Infertility

1. There are many fertility treatments offered to infertile couples as well as other means of creating a family. There are restrictions and limitations on what treatments will be offered based on age, causes of infertility, how long they have been trying to conceive, and personal reasons.<sup>18</sup> Some personal reasons may include financial limitations or moral issues with the testing or treatment. Treatments include medications, surgeries, reproductive assistance, and third-party reproduction.<sup>19</sup> All of these treatments come with various expenses, invasiveness, and no guarantees. Other options that are offered are also

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<sup>17</sup> Tina Gilbertson, April 3, 2015, "The Paradox of Self-pity."

<sup>18</sup> Jensen, Stewart, and Wallevand, *Mayo Clinic Guide to Fertility and Conception*, 183.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 183-234.

to consider adoption or child-free living.<sup>20</sup> Each of these decisions is difficult and has emotional stress, and takes its toll on a couple, and their marriage is expected.

2. Research shows that infertility often causes great stress and anxiety, leading to depression for individuals and couples, as much as for those facing diseases such as cancer or dealing with the pandemic.<sup>21</sup>
3. When a couple is infertile, they often deal with a great sense of loss and grief, and so they may respond with shock, frustration, grief, anger, decreased self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.<sup>22</sup> Also, when others around them are pregnant, they may experience pregnancy jealousy, anger, and wanting to avoid them.<sup>23</sup>
4. There is much counsel given to those facing infertility and such strong emotions to help them "maintain their mental health" and help them feel better.
  - a) One suggestion is to avoid people who make them feel uncomfortable. In addition, psychologists recommend visiting friends in the evening (to avoid seeing their children) and only stopping by or developing a headache if they do not want to stay.<sup>24</sup>
  - b) Another suggestion is to have witty comebacks for people's insensitive comments or change the conversation when necessary.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jensen, Stewart, and Wallevand, *Mayo Clinic Guide to Fertility and Conception*, 267-273.

<sup>21</sup> Alice Domar, "Maintaining Your Emotional Health During Infertility," *Psychology Today*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/world-wellness/202111/maintaining-your-emotional-health-during-infertility>.

<sup>22</sup> "Infertility," *Psychology Today*, accessed March 7, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/infertility>.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Domar, November 15, 2021, "Maintaining Your Emotional Health During Infertility."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Alice Domar, November 15, 2021, "Maintaining Your Emotional Health During Infertility."

- c) Also, to manage their feelings and care for themselves by declining events or holiday celebrations if they cause intense emotional responses.<sup>26</sup>
- d) Lastly, it is encouraged to focus on what they can control by not attending baby showers, finding hobbies, joining a support group, or a talk therapist.<sup>27</sup>

#### D. Inadequacy of Secular Counsel

1. It was challenging to find secular resources that addressed both self-pity and infertility simultaneously, showing that the secular counsel for the infertile woman giving into self-pity is insufficient.
2. There are some practical insights and hints of truth when considering the research above. Still, the counsel falls short without the biblical understanding of the inner and outer man and a sovereign and good God.
3. Much of the secular counsel focuses on looking to oneself for help and avoiding difficult circumstances. In infertility, each month offers the possibility of pregnancy. When one is not pregnant again and again, she feels as though she is drowning in sadness and disappointment. The help or hope she offers herself (that maybe this month will be different) is like a wound that never has time to heal, and she is left feeling scared, alone, and hurt.<sup>28</sup> In avoiding others, she will feel more alone and grow discontent and possibly bitter about her circumstances.
4. There is so much more in the heart of the woman facing infertility that secular counsel does not address. Secular counsel focuses on looking inward to handle life, whereas

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<sup>26</sup> Anna Goldfarb, “What to Say to Someone Struggling With Infertility,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/parenting/support-friend-infertility.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Psychology Today, accessed March 7, 2022, “Infertility.”

<sup>28</sup> Betsy Childs Howard, *Seasons of Waiting: Walking by Faith When Dreams Are Delayed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 42.

God's Word clarifies that the heart is not to be trusted (Jer 17:9). God's Word is sufficient to offer her hope and help her find true and lasting joy and contentment, not based on pregnancy or external circumstances, but in Christ.

### III. The Biblical Understanding of Self-pity and Infertility

This section will focus on the biblical explanation of self-pity and biblical examples of those who struggled with self-pity, infertility, or both.

#### A. A Biblical Understanding of Self-pity

1. If a woman struggling with self-pity in infertility looked in the concordance of the Bible for infertility or self-pity, they would not be able to find either one. Although these words are not from the Bible, God's Word is sufficient to explain these terms through the instruction and examples written in God's Word.
2. Previously this paper has briefly explained self-pity as feeling sorry for yourself. A complete definition would be a "preoccupation with yourself because your hopes, desires, or expectations have not been realized."<sup>29</sup>
3. Although it may seem that self-pity is a kind of humility, this definition shows that it results from pride in that it is focused on oneself and not having desires met.<sup>30</sup>
4. Self-pity also breaks fellowship with God and others, as it is a sin. It lacks trusting God and focusing on self instead of loving and serving others. This is the opposite of the greatest commandment to love God and love others (Mt 22:37-40).
5. There are many examples of people in the Bible who struggled with self-pity, including Naomi. Naomi faced the difficult circumstances of losing her husband and sons.

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<sup>29</sup> Phil Moser, *Dead-End Desire* (n.p.: Biblical Strategies, 2013), 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

- a) After her husband and sons pass away, she hears there is food again in Israel, so she decides to return, but stops and encourages her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab (Ru 1:6-8). She wanted her daughters-in-law to remain in a country where they would not hear or know the True God because she was not actively trusting God.<sup>31</sup>
- b) When Naomi returns, she tells everyone to call her Mara, which means bitter, explaining that she returned empty (Ru 1:20-21). She did not see God's kindness and provision of her one daughter-in-law Ruth who was determined to go back with her and care for her (Ru 1:18).
- c) Naomi's response gives a lot of insight into self-pity. She was struggling to trust God. Her knowledge of God was skewed as she focused on her circumstances, not reminding herself of the truth, claiming that God was against her. Also, in her response of self-pity, she missed God's provision through Ruth and wanted everyone to know how miserable she was and pity her.<sup>32</sup>

## B. A Biblical Understanding of Infertility

1. The Word infertility is not found in the Bible, but “barren” was the name given to women who bore no children (Gn 11:30). Barrenness is a reminder of the fall that all is not right in the world, for God had commanded men and women to be fruitful and multiply, but those who are barren cannot fulfill this command (Gn 1:28).

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<sup>31</sup> Amy Baker (2011). *I Wish I Was Dead: The Cheap Comfort of Self-Pity vs. The Deep Grace of God*. Audio recording from the Biblical Counseling Training Conference. Lafayette, IN: Faith Church. <https://store.faithlafayette.org/browse-by-topic/christian-life-and-growth/emotions-feelings/i-wish-i-was-dead-the-cheap-comfort-of-self-pity-vs-the-deep-sovereignty-of-god/>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

2. Children are described as a blessing from the Lord, a gift, and a reward (Ps 127:3). Yet God's Word reminds us that it is God who opens or closes the womb (Gn 29:31). These truths are brutal for the infertile woman to wrestle through and can lead to greater trust and confidence in God or a focus on self and what they think they deserve.
3. Many women in the Bible struggled to conceive or were barren, and they experienced great pain. Of course, these women had different responses but often struggled with giving into self-pity like women today.
4. One woman in God's Word is struggling with infertility and gives into self-pity, leading to despair; this is Rachel. Jacob had two wives, Rachel and her sister Leah. However, Jacob loved Rachel more, and the Lord opened Leah's womb, for He saw that she was less loved, but Rachel was barren (Gn 30:1-31). Rachel's response was very telling of what was in her heart.
  - a) The first description of Rachel seeing her sister's children was that she was envious (Gn 30:1). This shows that she was focused on herself and what she did not have; instead of rejoicing with her sister's blessings, she envied her. Her desire and worship of having children strained her relationship with her sister Leah.
  - b) Rachel quickly turns from self-pity to despair as she tells her husband she will die if he does not give her children (Gn 30:1-2). This shows that her trust is not in God but in herself and her husband to have children, but Jacob reminds her he is not God (Gn 30:2). Also, this is evidence of her misplaced worship, transgressing her relationship with God and causing great conflict in her marriage. So, although she had her husband's love, she was not satisfied. She wanted children so much that she would rather be dead.

c) Rachel then tries to control her circumstances by giving her servant to her husband to have children with her instead (Gn 30:3-4). This response shows that she does not trust God but is focusing and depending on herself and taking control to try to get what she thinks will satisfy her. Rachel sins in giving her husband her servant, because her desire for children is ruling her heart. She was not getting what she wanted and is willing to sin to get it. She does not humble herself and flee to the Lord; instead, she looks to herself.<sup>33</sup>

5. Rachel's response to infertility shows that misplaced worship affects one's relationship with God and others. False worship led to wrong thinking and sinful reactions as she gave into self-pity, envy, and even despair. She did not humble herself and trust the Lord. Instead, she lived according to her desires.<sup>34</sup>

### C. Another Way

1. There is another woman in the Bible who was barren, but her response is very different, and her name is Elizabeth. God's Word does not give details about Elizabeth, but how she is described and how she lived her life is evidence that she did not continually give into self-pity but instead glorified the Lord in the midst of barrenness.

a) Elizabeth and her husband are described and characterized as righteous in God's sight, blameless, walking in the commands and requirements of the Lord (Lk 1:6). Yet they have no children, for Elizabeth was barren, and they were well advanced in years (Lk 1:7).

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<sup>33</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Book of Genesis*, vol 1., (Baker Books, 2009), 131.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, vol. 1., (Hendrickson Publisher, 2009), 143.

- b) God uses an angel to reveal to her husband that they would conceive and bear a son, who would be the forerunner of the Messiah (Lk 1:13-17). Naturally, he doubts and questions this, which he is chastised for (Lk 1:18-21). Yet they conceive, and Elizabeth responds by praising God, grateful to the Lord for this miracle and removing her disgrace in barrenness (Lk 1:24-25).
2. The description of Elizabeth and her husband makes it clear that although they were not sinless, they lived lives that were characterized by obedience.<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth would have faced the temptation often and for many years to give in to self-pity, yet she continued to trust the Lord and lived uprightly before Him. Her response to being pregnant also shows her trust in the Lord, for she responds with praise, adoration, and thanksgiving to the Lord (Lk 1:25). Her responses indicate what was in her heart, trust and contentment in God and His plan for her life.

#### D. The Importance of Lament

1. Barrenness is heartbreaking and painful, as evidenced in the pain expressed by many women in God's Word (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, etc.). Some of them sinned, giving in to self-pity and not running to or trusting in God, yet others continually entrusted themselves to God (Elizabeth). Trusting God does not indicate a lack of sorrow or ignoring the pain. Instead, the process of sharing or expressing one's pain to the Lord but resolving to trust Him or recount His faithfulness is called lament.<sup>36</sup>
2. God's Word has many examples and pictures of lament (over a third of the Psalms, Lamentations, and Jesus in the final hours of His life), which is when the believer to

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<sup>35</sup> John MacArthur, *Luke 1-5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Moody Publishers, 2009), 25.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Vroegop, "Dare to Hope in God: How to Lament Well." *Desiring God*, April 6, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/dare-to-hope-in-god>.

pours out their fear, pain, and sorrow to the Lord, but with the goal of renewed confidence and trust in Him.<sup>37</sup> One writer explains four aspects of lament based on Psalm 13; turn to God, bring your complaint, ask boldly for help, and choose to trust.<sup>38</sup>

3. The believing woman facing infertility, would benefit greatly from taking time to lament before the Lord about her circumstance. Infertility is painful, yet God is good and sovereign. May she use the examples mentioned to write and pray a lament to God about her situation and run to Him instead of anyone or anything else.
4. God's Word is sufficient to help infertile women understand infertility and self-pity through the examples given. These women in God's Word also remind the infertile woman that she is not alone and God hears. God's Word offers her help and hope for her to learn a better way of lament, ultimately trusting in the Lord. To turn from preoccupation with herself and her desires to being content in Christ, loving God, and loving and serving others. This process will be expounded on in the rest of this paper.

## VI. Biblically Addressing the Put-Offs of Self-Pity

This section will begin to explain the biblical change process. This process begins with identifying sinful actions, thinking, and heart idols associated with self-pity.

### A. Explanation and Background

1. Although infertility is harrowing, heartbreaking, and a reminder of the fall, the believing woman does not want or need to sin in response. Yet this is the very thing she finds herself doing when she continues to give in to self-pity.

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<sup>37</sup> Mark Vroegop, April 6, 2019, "Dare to Hope in God: How to Lament Well."

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

2. A response of self-pity is focusing on herself and her circumstances, feeling as though she has been denied something that she deserves or is facing a difficulty that she should not have to face.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, she is putting herself in place of God and not trusting Him. This does not need to remain her pattern, though; she has a choice to continue in self-pity or not.<sup>40</sup>
3. God's Word explains that those who turn away from the Lord are cursed (Jer 17:5). Jerry Bridges explains, "...all our sin is sinful, only sinful, and altogether sinful. Whether it is large or small in our eyes, it is heinous in the sight of God."<sup>41</sup> Self-pity is a sin; therefore, the believing woman needs to take it seriously and address it biblically. Then she will learn to live for God and no longer stay focused on herself.
4. The infertile woman will be tempted to give in to self-pity after knowing she is not pregnant or after negative pregnancy tests. This will be a temptation that she will face at least each month. She will also be tempted by every pregnancy announcement, baby shower, the baby aisle in the store, and seeing every round belly and new baby or family. Therefore, she will have regular opportunities to learn to trust God rather than give in to self-pity.

#### B. Idols of the heart

1. Biblical change is not just in behavior and thinking but at the core of one's person, which God's Word calls the heart. God's Word explains that the heart is deceptive and that none can know it except the Lord (Jer 17:9-10). Jesus clarifies that out of the heart is where

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<sup>39</sup> John D. Street, *Passions of the Heart* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2019), 123.

<sup>40</sup> Phil Moser, *Dead-End Desire*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 29.

evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness come from is what defiles a person (Mk 7:20-23). The heart is central, and only when the heart is addressed can actual, lasting change occur through God's power and His Word.

2. As difficult as infertility is, it is not the cause of the sinful response of self-pity. God's Word clarifies that infertility is only exposing what is in the heart through one's thinking and behavior.<sup>42</sup> This sinful response results from loving, worshipping, and serving something other than God, who alone is worthy of heart worship.<sup>43</sup>
3. Idolatry is explained in many ways but is simply "...anything or anyone that captures our hearts, minds, and affections more than God...Idolatry is who or what you worship, what you long for, what your heart is set on."<sup>44</sup> When anything is ruling the heart rather than God, that is an idol leading to sinful thinking and sinful actions.
4. It is critical for the woman suffering from infertility to take the time to prayerfully consider what idol or idols may be ruling her heart. A good prayer to pray is found in the Psalms "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me; and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Ps 139:23-24).
5. One way to consider what is an idol in her heart is to these three questions from Pastor and biblical counselor Brad Bigney:

1. Am I willing to sin to get this?
2. Am I willing to sin if I think I'm going to lose this?
3. Do I turn to this as a refuge and comfort instead of going to God?<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2008), 113.

<sup>43</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 67.

<sup>44</sup> Brad Bigney, *Gospel Treason* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2012), 24.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

There are some common idols in infertility that she ought to consider.

- a) A Child. Children are a gift from God, but have you become more focused on the gift than the Giver?
- b) Being a Mom. Are you pridefully pursuing being a mom or thinking that you are or would be a good mom and so you ought to be?
- c) Control. Are you seeking to control your circumstances, and when you cannot, do you respond sinfully?
- d) Fairness. Do you desire for life to be fair and find that God is not being fair to you in not being able to have children?
- e) Other people. Do you constantly look at other families with children and think they are happy or have it better than you?

### C. Sinful Action

1. Biblical change continues as the woman giving into self-pity identifies what sinful responses specifically look like in her life. She will need to identify what actions or attitudes she has in responding with self-pity or how self-pity is manifested in her life.
2. Sinful actions of self-pity will not be pleasing to God, self-focused, and often cause unnecessary strain to her relationships, both with God and man. There are many manifestations of self-pity, but only a few examples will be given to help the woman begin to think of what it looks like for her personally.
3. The example of Rachel's response to her barrenness may be helpful to recall. The desire for children ruled Rachel's heart so much that she sinned against her husband with her words, in seeking control, in anger, and despair. These responses were all stemming from a heart that lusted after children above all.

- a) Often self-pity leads to moodiness.<sup>46</sup> For example, after not being pregnant (again), she responds negatively towards her husband or friends, seeking for them to suffer also. If she cannot be happy, then everyone should be miserable.
- b) Self-pity may continue into feelings of despair and constantly focus on the questions of why and why not. However, the most important is where she brings herself or to whom she brings herself when she begins to feel this way.<sup>47</sup>
- c) Looking for others to sympathize with her and finding comfort in their pity is also evidence of self-pity. But, on the other hand, looking to others to validate how she feels somehow helps when they feel sorry for her.<sup>48</sup>
- d) Self-pity can quickly lead to anger.<sup>49</sup> First, sulking and then lashing out at others and God for how she feels forgotten and rejected. After that, anger permeates her and often in her interactions with others.
- e) Isolation is often a result of self-pity.<sup>50</sup> Everything hurts, so she thinks it would be easier if she just did not spend time with other people. This may bring temporary relief, but numbness comes from ignoring the pain and feeling sorry for herself as she is left alone with only her thoughts for company.

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<sup>46</sup> John D. Street, *Passions of the Heart*, 274.

<sup>47</sup> Edward T. Welch, *Depression* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2011), 5. Depression also may have organic biological factors, please see your doctor with any concerns.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with woman who struggled with infertility, March 27, 2022. (“All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement”)

<sup>49</sup> Phil Moser, *Dead-End Desire*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

4. It is vital for the woman giving into self-pity to take time to identify specific examples in her own life. To identify actions that do not please the Lord and are not in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:16-21).

#### D. Sinful Thinking

1. God's Word explains that God does not just want to change behavior, but He has a much more thorough process in transforming lives. There is often sinful thinking that is fueling sinful actions. This is why God's Word emphasizes the importance of renewing the mind, by which one is transformed (Rom 12:2, Eph 4:23).
2. God's Word commands the believer to take one's thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). The Psalmists also give examples of asking questions and instructing oneself what to think (Ps 42:5,11). For instance, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asks, "Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?"<sup>51</sup>
3. Therefore, it is necessary for the woman struggling with self-pity in infertility to take time to realize what sinful thinking is motivating the response of self-pity. This thinking will not be based on the Scriptures and may oppose what the Scriptures say. Also, this thinking may include wrong thoughts about God and His character.
4. After considering all this, it may seem alarming, and it is, but the good news of Christ will be even sweeter when one truly takes time to think, ponder, and see how desperately they are in need of a Savior.<sup>52</sup> There is hope for the woman facing infertility and giving in

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<sup>51</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids, MN: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1965), 20.

<sup>52</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, 26.

to self-pity, for a great Rescuer has come to transform and redeem what otherwise would seem hopeless.

## V. Repentance, Faith, and Action

This section aims to continue to explain the biblical change process by describing and calling the reader to repentance and faith in the person and work of Christ. Also, specifically, what needs to be transformed in mind and what God-honoring actions are to be pursued instead.

### A. The Good News

1. When the infertile woman considers her specific sinful actions, sinful thinking, and idols of her heart, she may be left feeling overwhelmed by her sin in response to infertility. Many women who may be reading this may already consider themselves believers. Yet, when they struggle with self-pity in infertility, their answer is the same as the unbeliever: to repent and believe the good news of Christ.
2. When they take time to consider that they genuinely deserve hell, they will be humbled and amazed by their gracious and kind God who has rescued and redeemed them. And so, their struggle with infertility will fade somehow as they are reminded of the kindness of their Heavenly Father. May they cling to the truth that "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32).

### B. Biblical Repentance

1. These incredible truths of God's great salvation ought to bring the infertile woman to humble herself before the Lord. As she considers God's character, especially His holiness, righteousness, and justice, and the horrendous offenses she has committed against God, she will begin to see her desperate need for forgiveness.

2. God's Word explains that if she confesses her sin to God, He will remain faithful and just, to forgive her of her sins and cleanse her from unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9). In confessing sins, one agrees with God and admits their fault without excuse. She needs to confess the sinful actions, sinful or wrong thinking, and idols that she has turned to instead of Christ.
3. Repentance ought to accompany confession, as repentance is turning from idols to Christ, renouncing worship of idols and having a change of mind about sin, and living in a new way.<sup>53</sup> First, the infertile woman needs to consider what idols she has been living for in responding with self-pity in infertility. Then, she needs to repent of these idols and turn to Christ. Christ alone is worthy and so much more than she was living for before. Consistently turning to Christ and finding her contentment in Him needs to become her focus and aim as she learns to see Him as supreme.
  - a) A Child. Turn to Christ as a greater good than a child, for He is better than life, much better than a child (Ps 63:3).
  - b) Being a Mom. Turn to Christ to find true peace and satisfaction, trusting His good plan, and He is not withholding, but working for her good (Ps 84:11; Rom 8:28-29).
  - c) Control. Turn to Christ as sovereign, wise, and good. He does not make any mistakes, and He has not forgotten; He is working through this circumstance and for her ultimate good (Rom 8:28).
  - d) Fairness. Turn to Christ as the righteous and just judge that He is and entrust herself to Him and do good (1 Pt 2:23). Remember that what she truly deserves is hell and so remember and cling to His abundant provision of grace (Rom 5:17).

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<sup>53</sup> John D. Street, *Passions of the Heart*, 217-218.

- e) People. Turn from elevating others to exalting Christ, her Great High Priest, and find mercy and grace in her time of need (Heb 4:14-16). Also loving and serving others instead (Mt 22:39).

### C. Turning in Faith

1. May the infertile woman see that this is a continual turning to Christ, day by day and moment by moment, as she continues to look to and behold Him, being transformed into His likeness (2 Cor 3:18). She needs to continue to humble herself before the Lord and ask for His help. She needs to remind herself of the gospel truths. She needs Christ.
  - a) It is important to note here that, at first, this will probably not be what she will want to do or feel like doing. Jerry Bridges explains, "...we must choose whether to believe the truth about God, which He has revealed to us, or whether to follow our feelings. If we are to trust God, we must choose to believe His truth. We must say 'I will trust You though I do not feel like doing so.'"<sup>54</sup>
  - b) And so she must go to God, pray in faith, and take the step of obedience. Reminding herself of the truths from God's Word about who God is and His ways and love for her. Then, ask God for help, for God hates the proud but will give grace to the humble (Jas 4:6).
2. The infertile woman needs to continue to grow in her faith. Dr. Stuart Scott explains, "Exercising your faith means that belief, thankfulness, dependence, and/or confidence concerning the realities of Christ and the Gospel are present."<sup>55</sup> Instead of giving into self-pity in infertility, each reminder of hurt can be an invitation for her to go to Christ.

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<sup>54</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 209.

<sup>55</sup> Stuart Scott and Zondra Scott, *Killing Sin Habits* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2013), 20.

He has invited her to come to Him (Mt 11:28-30). In Him, she will find mercy and grace (Heb 4:14-16).

#### D. Action

1. God's grace in Christ has not only saved her but is her daily rescue, as, by it, she will be trained to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and instead live a self-controlled, upright, and godly life now (Ti 2:11-12). This is the transformative power of biblical change, not just behavior modification or positive thinking, but Christ-centered, Gospel-powered new life in Christ!
2. Renewing the Mind
  - a) Realizing what sinful or wrong thinking is behind self-pity will take some time and effort on behalf of the woman struggling, but it will make a tremendous difference as she learns to take her thoughts captive and renew her thinking. The wrong or sinful thinking needs to be addressed and changed according to God's character and His Word. The infertile woman must take time to identify the lies she believes about God and seek the Scriptures to change her thinking and her focus on herself.
  - b) The infertile woman should take time to learn and grow in her understanding of God and His character continually. She will want to write out a renewed thought or prayer so that she can intentionally work to renew her mind when she is tempted to go back to her old way of thinking in self-pity.<sup>56</sup>
  - c) There is hope for change as she continues to turn from her old thinking to her renewed embracing of the truth; in time, even very ingrained thought patterns and responses can be replaced.<sup>57</sup> Again, these may not feel true to the infertile woman at

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<sup>56</sup> Stuart Scott and Zondra, *Killing Sin Habits*, 39.

first, but as she continues to remind herself of what is true, her faith will grow, and as she walks in obedience, her feelings will often follow.

### 3. Actions to Pursue

- a) Self and a preoccupation with self are central to self-pity, and therefore one obvious step in putting it off is to stop preoccupation with self.<sup>58</sup> The infertile woman can grow in practical and specific ways in loving God and serving others. As she takes more and more time to pursue what honors the Lord, she will have less time to focus on herself.
- b) Thankfulness is a command and God's will for the believer in Christ (1 Thes 5:18). There are so many truths and spiritual blessings that the infertile woman can be thankful for in Christ (Eph 1:3-14).
  - 1) She should consider beginning a praise journal.<sup>59</sup> First, write down all she is thankful for about God, Christ, her circumstances, etc. Then, review this often as a means to cultivate gratitude.
  - 2) Milton Vincent explains, "As for my specific earthly circumstances of plenty or want, I can see them always as infinite improvements on the hell I deserve."<sup>60</sup> And so she can give thanks in all things.
- c) Stewardship is when the infertile woman moves from being the victim of her circumstances to accepting and seeking ways to serve the Lord in them.<sup>61</sup> This is

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<sup>57</sup> Stuart Scott and Zondra, *Killing Sin Habits*, 39.

<sup>58</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Faith on Trial* (repr., n.p.: Christian Heritage, 2008), 50.

<sup>59</sup> Phil Moser, *Dead-End Desire*, 63.

<sup>60</sup> Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2008), 48.

<sup>61</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, 75.

when she begins to look for and seek what opportunities she has to glorify the Lord in this season of her life without children.

- 1) She can consider what opportunities she has that families do not have because of the flexibility she can have right now without children. For example, maybe there are mission trips she can take or people she can take into her home to love and serve?
  - 2) When she begins to be tempted towards self-pity, intentionally look for ways to serve other people, invite a widow for tea or send an encouraging note to a missionary. She must stop focusing on herself; instead, look to Christ and love others, especially her husband.
- d) Spiritual Children are another way the infertile woman can grow in pursuing what pleases the Lord. It may be through spiritual children that the Lord may remove infertility while on earth, simply nurturing faith in others to encourage spiritual offspring.<sup>62</sup> Love children as Jesus did (Mt 19:14).
- 1) She can consider what children the Lord has placed in her life, whether nieces and nephews or others. Then, she can look for ways to reach out and invest spiritually in their lives. Buy and read books to them that challenge their faith. Pray for them and with them.
  - 2) Also, she should not avoid opportunities to invest in children in her church. Instead, seek them out—volunteer for nursery, Sunday school, or youth group with her husband. Take time to encourage these little ones and tell them about Jesus intentionally.

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<sup>62</sup> Betsy Childs Howard, *Seasons of Waiting*, 46.

- 3) Also, consider hosting international students as a means to serve and point to Christ those who need a safe temporary home. Prayerfully consider and pray about this with your husband.
  - 4) Prayerfully and in unity with her husband consider and move forward either with foster care or adoption. These are both callings, not to be rushed into or seen as solutions. They must be prayerfully considered after one has grieved infertility and pursued only after much training and understanding of the unique hurdles both foster care and adoption present. This is an opportunity for her to love the orphan in many ways (Jas 1:27).
4. This section scratches the surface of what to pursue when seeking to put off self-pity and put on contentment. First, remind yourself often of Christ, be thankful, and pursue serving and loving others. This will make much of God as others see you reflect Christ, who did not live for Himself but gave Himself up for many (Mk 10:45).

## VI. Conclusion

- A. Christ tells the believer that life will be full of trouble, but encourages them that they can take heart because He has overcome the world (Jn 16:33). Christ alone offers contentment and joy for the woman suffering with infertility.
1. Through Christ's strength and grace contentment is possible for the woman facing infertility (Phil 4:11-13). This inner, sweet, quiet, and gracious spirit, which is submitted to but also delights in God's wise care in every circumstance is the result of being satisfied and contented in Christ.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, rev. ed. (East Peoria, IL: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 19.

2. As the Psalmist explains, after working through very difficult circumstances that God allowed for his good, “But as for me, the nearness of God is good for me; I have made the Lord God my refuge, so that I may tell of all your works.” (Ps 73:28). May the infertile woman learn to see the hard as an opportunity to run to God as her refuge because of Christ. To learn to see each reminder as an occasion to recall God’s goodness, nearness, and eventually learn to tell others of His work even in the hard.
  3. The woman facing infertility who continues to remain in Christ, yielding to Him in obedience will find true and lasting joy (Jn 15:9-11). This joy will not be based on her circumstances or lack, but on Christ and His goodness and fullness for her. May she realize that she has the choice to rejoice. A child or motherhood is not where true joy is found, instead may she choose to rejoice constantly in God her Savior (Hb 3:18).
  4. May she experience the joy of the Lord as her strength, as she faces another day, holiday, Mother’s Day, with an empty womb and no children (Neh 8:10). As she frequently experiences reminders of her infertility, may she pray and seek the Lord for strength, grace, and help. Remembering that in His Presence there is fullness of joy (Ps 16:11).
- B. It is necessary to emphasize to the woman struggling with infertility that not giving into self-pity but glorying God instead will be a process, something that must be learned and practiced.
1. After walking through the biblical change process of put off, renewing one’s mind, and put on what pleases God, she will be tempted and will most likely give into self-pity again (Eph 4:22-24). May she turn to Christ faster for the goal is not perfection, but growth in not giving into self but trusting Christ. Intentionally walking by the Spirit and doing what pleases the Lord.

2. Again, this is only possible because of Christ and so may she focus on Him and depend on Him each moment of everyday. Learning to see infertility, not merely as something that is difficult, but as a gift of God's grace to remind her to run to Christ and continually depend on Him.
- C. God's Word is sufficient to offer help and hope for the woman suffering with infertility, unlike secular counsel. Though there are elements to secular counsel that are reminiscent of the biblical change process, true and lasting is only possible because of Christ and through God's Word and work. May she look to Christ to change, no longer giving into self-pity but living for God and making much of Him. All by His power and for His glory (Eph 3:20-21)!

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