

Jennifer Saake

# hannah's hope

Seeking  
God's Heart  
in the  
Midst of  
Infertility



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*For Rick, who knows my heart and  
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# contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	13
Prologue: My Story	17
1 Family Ties	23
2 Envy, Jealousy, and Rivalry	33
3 Is God Punishing Me?	43
4 Because He Loved Her	53
5 Put Yourself in My Shoes (Before You Put Your Foot in Your Mouth)	63
6 How Long Does It Hurt?	71
7 Two Hearts Beating as One . . . Sometimes	81
8 Fill My Cup, Lord	91
9 Bitterness of Soul	99
10 <i>Anything</i> for a Child?	109
11 Prayer, Faith, and Compassion	123
12 When Churches Add to Heartache	135
13 Anguish and Grief	145
14 Ministering Peace in the Body of Christ	161
15 Worshiping While Waiting	171
16 In the Course of Time	181

Epilogue: Hannah's Prayer Ministries	199
Appendix A: Resources	205
Appendix B: Seminal Collection Devices	213
Appendix C: Reproductive Terms	215
Notes	221
About the Author	223

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## introduction

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

PSALM 23:1-4

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

ROBERT FROST

Allow me to introduce you to my dear friend Hannah, whom I've never met. How did I come to call Hannah my friend without even meeting her? She is my companion because we share a common heartbeat. Hannah's heart pounded with a mother's love long before she was blessed with a child to mother. Through the years of waiting and longing, her gentle heart was nearly crushed under the weight of grief. Find her story recorded in 1 Samuel 1–2.

In today's terminology, we would say that Hannah was either *infertile* (unable to conceive within one year of regular marital relations without the use of birth control, or unable to carry a child to live birth) or *sterile* (permanently unable to produce the genetic materials required to conceive a child). By simply describing Hannah as *barren*, the Bible does not give us many specific details about her medical condition. What we do know is that

Hannah suffered heartache, anguish, and grief because of her empty arms. Are you a “Hannah” too?

If motherhood is your goal and you are disillusioned in trying to reach this destination, keep reading! This book is written for every family that longs for a child yet-to-be-conceived, that grieves for a baby too-soon-passed from the womb into heaven, or that has lived through the no-man’s-land of failed adoption. It is intended as a guide to assist you in decisions as you struggle through grief. By the end of this journey, God may surprise you by the methods He uses to answer your heart’s cry.

Or perhaps you are a “Burden Bearer” for a loved one on such an odyssey. If you are a pastor, friend, or family member who desires to help someone else through this valley, I offer my most sincere gratitude for your compassion, and I will offer suggestions to you.

When yearning for motherhood, years become measured in months and cycles. Of the first eleven years of my marriage (that’s over 140 chances for pregnancy if counting twenty-eight-day cycles), more than ten years were spent actively striving to grow our family. If my husband, Rick, and I weren’t aggressively trying to conceive or longingly seeking to adopt, we were anxiously praying to sustain troubled pregnancies and grieving our many losses along the way. What a long, weary journey it has been.

I must admit to finishing this book “from the other side” of the infertility expedition, now with two living blessings to fill our lives with all the laughter, dirty fingerprints, scattered toys, and bedtime hugs we so longed for. But before you stop reading and walk away, feeling me to be disqualified to address this tender topic, please know that this book has been actively in the writing process for many years.

Much of what I share on these pages is pulled directly from my private journals, recording all the anger, grief, longing, isolation, questions, struggles, tears, sorrows — and even joy — relief, excitement, and answered prayers along the way.

While we are now parents, it was a life-altering battle that led us

here. Hormonal imbalances, reproductive abnormalities, immune system dysfunction, and the desire for a larger family remain our realities. As founder of a ministry called Hannah's Prayer, I have learned much from thousands of amazing families who have trusted me with their pain as they have grieved for children. Am I qualified to guide you on this exploration of Hannah's heart? I pray that you will find it to be so.

While it was indeed a road less traveled, this winding way of childlessness was one I did not *choose* to tread. I often limped along this uphill trail, kicking and fighting my way through the dense underbrush of discouragement. But through the journey, God provided green pastures where my aching soul could draw comfort from the recognition that my loving heavenly Father approved the course before allowing me to take my first step.

When I first met Hannah, I defined myself exclusively as *infertile*, leading a barren life, without hope. With my course on this less-frequented path plotted against my will, there was one fork in the road that did require my decision: Would I choose bitterness and self-destruction, or growth and renewed hope? The seemingly easier path was anger with God, but I needed to choose the trail that would truly make all the difference. In slowly finding kinship with Hannah, I have realized that my fertility challenges need not destroy me. Intense anger and bitterness have been replaced by a peace that comes only from God.

I want to bring the historical account of Hannah's life alive for you, as it has been for me. Each chapter begins with a brief fictionalized look at a portion of Hannah's story. I've taken the liberty of imagining some of the details of Hannah's infertility journey, basing them on the historical context in which she lived and on my own experience with barrenness. While reflecting on Hannah's heart I will also share pieces of my story, along with the stories of other families facing fertility challenges.

Through all of this I've found that, when I shift my focus from my human *inabilities* and infertility and seek God's strength to surmount fertility challenges according to His guidance, hope is rekindled. In getting to know

this woman of old, I pray that the reflections of Hannah's heart will direct you to the Source of her strength, whose name is the God of All Comfort.

## my story

Since early childhood, I had imagined I would grow up to raise eight kids! Our August 1992 wedding was quickly followed by the active pursuit of parenthood. By then, Rick and I dreamed of “at least four,” through birth, adoption, or both, however God might provide.

In April 1994, we hadn’t become pregnant yet, but received our first serious adoption lead. For thirty-six joyful hours we prepared our hearts and home for the preschool-aged son and daughter we believed could soon be joining us. But God had another family planned for these children, and we had to let them go.

After two years of medical fertility assistance, we stepped back from treatments in October of 1994, having exhausted our insurance, finances, and emotional reserves. We refocused our energies and began forming *Hannah’s Prayer Ministries*, a Christian infertility support network. Though I rarely ovulated even on fertility drugs, my body experienced a “rebound” reaction to the cessation of monthly rounds of Clomid. To our surprise, we conceived our first biological child in early December. Noel was miscarried December 26/27.

God brought many adoption possibilities into our lives over the following years. Sometimes we easily saw that leads wouldn’t work out. But we believed parenthood to be imminent with each of five more children, only to reap shattered hope and empty arms at the end of each encounter.

A young woman with a history of past abortions was able to carry her baby to live birth in 1995 because she knew adoption was an option. Just weeks before birth, we learned of her ultimate decision to parent her daughter.

In 1996, God called us to a painful season of supporting a friend through a pregnancy that would eventually allow her to place her son in the arms of another family. After the emotional drain of that experience, we stepped back from any adoption attempts for the next couple years.

We dabbled in fertility treatments again, but didn't have the financial resources to pursue the aggressive treatments doctors recommended. By now several medical conditions that inhibited our fertility were also significantly impacting my overall health. I underwent my first surgery for endometriosis (where we discovered my uterine deformity, a bicornate or "heart-shaped" uterus that can cause pregnancy complications and loss). About this time, I also found a doctor who was willing to prescribe groundbreaking medication to address my PCOS (polycystic ovarian syndrome), failure to ovulate, acne, excess weight gain, and overall health decline, by dealing with underlying issues of insulin resistance.

In January of 1999, we learned of a young mother in the next state, in labor at that very moment, wanting to meet us. I had been ready to pursue adoption again for quite a while, but this was the first time Rick shared my desire after the scars of previous losses. Hope sprung as we packed our bags to meet our daughter. But the next phone call never came.

A few months later, a single woman I had previously supported through high-risk pregnancy and infant death called to explain that she was again pregnant and would like us to adopt her new baby. Soon thereafter she learned "the baby" was *twins*! As I'd prayed specifically for twins since I was only three years old, this seemed like a dream come true! Our dream shattered the moment her state's social services brought to light her history of mental illness and ongoing adoption scams. She had never been pregnant, even when I had previously supported her during "pregnancy complications" and "infant death." At the same time she was telling us we were the "only family" right for her children, she was leading along at least five other families in as many states.

I felt used, angry, hurt, lonely, and lost in a sea of grief. We had been

praying to grow our family for six and a half years and faced the “deaths” (emotional or physical) of our first eight children!

Through a series of God-ordained circumstances, we headed into higher levels of fertility treatment and began injecting my body full of hormones. Three IUI cycles later, we received the phone call of our lives — a positive pregnancy test! While my initial hormone levels were excellent (even indicating the possibility of multiples), pregnancy got off to a rocky start with early bleeding and cramping. It was a bittersweet relief to find one, but only one, beautiful heartbeat on the ultrasound screen.

I struggled with severe “morning sickness” the entire pregnancy, only gaining a net total of six pounds. By the Lord’s exceeding grace, Joshua was born on December 22, 1999, full term and healthy, but weighing under five pounds. It took three more pregnancies before we learned the reason for his low birth weight was not due to my lack of weight gain, but caused by an immunity issue that, untreated, results in an 80-89 percent gestational mortality rate.

Since it had taken so long the first time, we didn’t take any break from trying to conceive after Joshua’s birth. This time it only took a year to conceive, using over-the-counter progesterone supplements but no other infertility interventions. However, Joel’s miscarriage began about three days after we realized I was pregnant. LPD (Luteal Phase Defect, a shortened post-ovulation phase of the monthly cycle and progesterone levels insufficient to sustain pregnancy) was the diagnosed cause of his death.

I started monthly prescription progesterone treatment and was shocked by another positive pregnancy test just three months later. This baby shared Joshua’s due date from two years prior, the exact timing I had hoped for between children! When bleeding started two days later, my progesterone dosage was increased, but not in time to save Hannah’s life.

More than a year passed without another conception, and the Lord began to soften our hearts toward adoption yet again. We felt led to investigate

international adoption and were in the early stages of working with an agency to find a daughter in China. When other two-year-olds were watching *Blue's Clues* and *Thomas the Tank Engine*, Joshua's favorite was our orientation video with all the faces of children in Chinese orphanages.

In January 2002 I landed back in the operating room for what was expected to be a simple, forty-five-minute laparoscopy to remove mild endometriosis. Instead, during the three-and-a-half-hour procedure, my doctor found severe adhesions and asked Rick to allow him to remove a tube and ovary. Rick refused to make that decision without me, so I came out of anesthesia to learn that I would have to return to surgery within the next three to six months, probably three.

I now had less than a 5 percent chance of ever again conceiving. I received this startling news with uncommon peace. With at least three of our biological children in heaven rather than on earth, pregnancy was a fearful prospect. Though I grieved that I might never carry another child, it was a relief to think that the struggle and month-to-month wondering would soon be behind us. My heart was already in China, and I was willing for my body to be done with this long journey.

When I wasn't feeling well a couple weeks before my next surgery date, I attributed it to my recent stop in progesterone supplementation. I took a pregnancy test on a whim and actually threw it away, thinking it defective, when a second line popped up! But God had done what doctors could not do. With only minor medical intervention, we were expecting the child who statistically should never have been conceived nor carried.

Early testing revealed my elevated IgM levels, the factor we now believe to have caused IUGR (inter-uterine growth retardation) for Joshua. I took blood thinners on a daily basis for the rest of the pregnancy, accompanied by monthly ultrasound growth checks. Pre-term contractions caught us by unhappy surprise in my twenty-fifth week. I was put on a combination of activity restrictions and bed rest for the next thirteen weeks, along with medication to arrest labor as the pregnancy progressed. Ruth weighed in at



nearly six and a half pounds when she was born on January 25, 2003.

After twelve years and with two living children, is our family complete? We honestly don't know. For the first time in our married lives, we are no longer actively seeking to grow our family, yet we are open to God's will if His plan is otherwise. Expecting that childbearing will only grow continually harder for my body, we aren't planning on any more biological children (but then, we weren't expecting to conceive Ruth either). Adoption still holds a tender spot in our hearts, and we wonder if God may yet lead us back down this path sometime in the future.

## family ties

There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite.

1 SAMUEL 1:1

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. . . . God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

GENESIS 1:27, 31

*Hannah had been nervous to meet her betrothed, unsure of this man with whom she was to share her life. But her family had chosen well. To Hannah's delight, Elkanah proved to be a godly man whom she was quickly learning to love.*

*A gentle blush crept over her face as she thought of the words of blessing confidently shouted by merrymakers on their recent wedding day: 'May your descendants be like the sands on the seashore and the stars in the sky. May you be fruitful like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel.' Hannah dreamily pictured herself holding Elkanah's son in her arms by the following year. And if not yet in her arms, then surely within her womb.*

*But that first year passed, then another, then yet another. Discouragement, grief, and fear silently stole away innocent hope. To avoid looks of pity, she lowered her eyes each time she entered the marketplace. But the whispers still reached her ears as she passed. In place of the glow of new love, Hannah's cheeks now burned with shame at her seeming inability to carry on her husband's name.*”

“When are you two going to start a family?” The innocent-sounding question seemed to cut a little deeper into my breaking heart each time it was asked. I knew this woman was simply trying to be sociable; yet rather than curiosity about when we might want to have kids, all I heard was condemnation that our marriage was not measuring up to her definition of family.

I wanted to answer that we *started* our family the day we took our wedding vows, becoming one in God's sight. I wanted to tell her of our months and years of wanting and waiting. Why must our union be validated by the addition of children before we can be counted as a family? When God created Adam and Eve, He called this family of two “very good” long before they became parents, so why couldn't I feel complete when facing these social settings?

I longed to tell her of our daughter—the one who had taken us two years to even conceive. Had Noel lived, I would have been several years a veteran of that cherished role of motherhood by now. I wanted to explain about the children who had each carried away pieces of our hearts when they did not join our family through adoption as we'd hoped.

Because I knew she was just making small talk, I chose not to allow her to glimpse the distress of my soul. I didn't want to see the stunned silence on her face. Or worse yet, to hear another round of unsolicited advice about how we should “just relax,” go on vacation, or change our sexual technique. I didn't want another sarcastic offer of “Please, take my kids. They are such monsters!” along with the admonition to be thankful for my freedom.

Instead, I plastered a half-hearted smile on my face, gave a vague answer about “someday,” then quickly tried to mingle with a new group of partygoers in hopes of regaining my composure before being confronted by more of the same questions another half-dozen times through the course of the evening.

In the center of the room, a throng of women swarmed the newborn in attendance with her youthful mother. Pregnant bellies seemed to fill my vision in every direction. A group of dads stood nearby, proudly boasting of their sons’ recent sports victories. A coworker’s snapshots of his three kids circulated through the gathering. Overwhelmed by my crushed hopes, I blinked back tears, swallowed the hard knot in my throat, and went to find my husband. My throbbing head and waves of grief-induced nausea were the perfect excuse to go home early.

---

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick.*

PROVERBS 13:12

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Any discussion of infertility is incomplete unless we explore the importance of how we define *family*. A family is the most basic group in which people have always lived, and it’s one of the ways in which we define ourselves and see ourselves in the context of the society around us. If we don’t have a family, it is easy to feel lost or alone when surrounded by others who do. The Bible takes for granted the importance of families, with many pages spent recounting family histories and explaining who was related to whom.

Hannah’s story begins with a look at her husband’s family history. According to the extensive table of nations found in 1 Chronicles, Elkanah was of the priestly line. As the Levites were granted no land of their own when Israel was divided between the twelve tribes of Israel, 1 Samuel explains that Elkanah’s family made its home among the Ephraimites, the descendants of Joseph. Elkanah and his family specifically lived in Ramathaim (later in the

story simply called Ramah; in chapter 13 we will discover the significance of this place).

If we climb through the branches of Hannah's family tree, we learn that the Jewish nation had a tentative start. Infertility took center stage in God's account of history as the establishment and continuation of the Israelites seemed to be in question. Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah ninety when their child of promise was finally born (see Genesis 17:17). Isaac, in turn, prayed for his barren wife, Rebekah, before God placed twins within her womb (see Genesis 25:21). One of those boys, Jacob, also went on to taste fertility challenges. While he had twelve sons, only two came from his beloved wife, Rachel, who struggled through years of infertility, both "primary" (never giving live birth) and "secondary" (unable to conceive or carry to live birth after at least one prior successful pregnancy).

I've often wondered if Rachel's first son, Joseph, might also have battled to become a father. The Bible records only two sons for him, something rare in an age without birth control, when a large family was a sign of prestige. When this beloved son of Jacob chose to name his second son Ephraim, he pronounced, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering" (Genesis 41:52). I find it ironic that Hannah's story, perhaps the most famous infertility story in history, is staged in the hill country of Ephraim, the land of the "twice fruitful."

The Jews took to heart God's words about children being a blessing; thus they inferred that the lack of children could only be a sign of God's disfavor. Realizing that her ancestors had also known her pain might have offered Hannah great comfort. But these same stories could have just as easily added to her burden and grief. As it became obvious to the world that God was not opening Hannah's womb as He ultimately had for her foremothers, Hannah's inability to bear a child made her a social outcast. Knowing her nation's history without seeing God answer her own pleas for a baby could well have been more discouraging than helpful.

Having children was imperative to a woman in Hannah's time. Raising

sons not only provided preservation of traditions and heritage but also offered assurance and security in the event of widowhood. Without a child, there was little to no hope for a woman to be supported in her old age. Unless she was surrounded by her family, her culture gave no value to her life. Living in an industrialized nation where life insurance, Social Security, education, and job opportunities are all available to women, I cannot begin to grasp the urgency Hannah must have felt over her inability to produce heirs.

What I can relate to are many of Hannah's dreams: the desire to feel a tiny hand holding her own. The knowledge that the love expressed through her touch might bring more healing to a fevered body or a broken heart than any herb she might give. The longing to hear "Mommy, I love you" whispered in her ears, with that same voice shouting out praise songs to the Lord, delightfully off key, bringing just as much joy to her heart. The desire to be the one person who could make things "all better" for her children when the world was painful or unfair. She yearned for the taste of sweet, slobbery kisses planted on her lips in childish abandon. She longed for a family to call her own.

In those days, motherhood was an assumption and an expectation rather than something to be chosen, but dreams of bearing children likely engulfed Hannah just the same. Like any good Jewish girl, she had been raised to anticipate motherhood her entire life. When she had played with the neighborhood kids, she probably fought to have the part of "Mom" as often as she could. To raise children was her occupation of choice, with no backup plan arranged. When grown-up reality didn't measure up, her definition of *family*, her very understanding of life itself, was shaken to the core.

In her book *The Ache for a Child*, Debra Bridwell explains the devastation this way:

God had the desire to create new life; and He wanted to create it in His own image. If He, being perfect and complete had this desire to create, how could it be selfish or wrong? And because

He created us in His image, with many of His attributes, it should come as no surprise that we share His desire to create.

If we yearn to take part in the miracle of creating a new life “in our image” with attributes like our own, and want the intimacy of nurturing our child to maturity, that is only natural. This yearning is God-given and a part of how we are created. It’s no wonder that we can feel jarred and confused when we are unable to fulfill it.<sup>1</sup>

## Seeking God’s Heart Through Infertility

One of God’s first instructions to the human race was to be fruitful and multiply. Scripture speaks highly of the role of parenthood. If children are a mark of God’s blessing, what does infertility mean? Questions about families (growing our own, or God’s view of them) seem to mount much faster than answers. As we start this journey together through Hannah’s life, striving to answer some of these piercing questions, I want to be brutally honest with you about the struggles through this deep, dark valley called infertility.

While I want to be realistic, I fear painting such a bleak picture of fertility challenges that you will be left without hope. God can work great miracles, and I’m not *just* referring to the miracle of conception. If you are looking for assurance that God will give you a baby at the end of the journey, I am sorry, but I cannot offer you that promise. While He may indeed plan to add children to your life, I honestly do not believe that every couple seeking hard after God’s heart is guaranteed a child. But God is a big God, big enough to heal every bitter, broken heart.

A few months after my wonderful husband first planted the idea in my mind to write this book, a close friend gave me an intriguing challenge. Julie proposed that I read through the entire Bible, looking for every passage that could in any way, directly or indirectly, relate to infertility. It seemed an overwhelming task at first, but soon I started on an exciting adventure

through Scripture that would last fourteen months. There were times when the study was very painful and hard to continue — so many passages were laced with generational records. I would pray:

Lord, one of my greatest fears is that our family tree will stop growing here. I don't want to be an old stump, cut off and cast away. The psalmist wrote, "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table" [Psalm 128:3]. Father, reading of your faithfulness to countless generations serves only to discourage me more. You were faithful to them — what about us? Will my husband ever have a "fruitful" wife? Will our family tree ever produce new shoots? These passages carefully explaining who begat whom, all the way back to Adam, are very painful for me.

While the shock of infertility affects each woman in a unique way, I know I was the type of woman for whom this was especially difficult. Unlike many of my friends, my career goal had always been motherhood. My earliest memories all include playing Mommy to my family of dolls, changing their diapers, serving them at tea parties, pushing them in strollers, dreaming of the day when I would have real babies to fill my arms. I adopted every stray puppy or kitten I could get my hands on, even dressing the cat in doll clothes to imagine myself one step closer to the reality of motherhood.

I've since met many, many women whose paths were different from mine. Some always thought of future motherhood as a given, yet had never focused on it until it was "time." Others had not particularly wanted children until they were surprised by this desire at age thirty, thirty-five, or even forty. But we all shared the assumption that the ability to bear children was within us, within our grasp if we chose it. We all came to a point in our lives at which our definition of *family* included children. Like Hannah, when our realities did not align with that expectation, we were all at a loss to know how to cope.



Imagine Hannah's growing grief as she began to realize that those evenings of passion shared with her sweetheart were not producing within her womb the expected results. As her childhood playmates went on to produce children of their own, Hannah continued to keep house for only two. Then the children she herself had cared for as a girl, helping out the neighborhood moms to get her "baby fixes" as often as possible, started growing up and having their own babies as well. And somewhere in the midst of this isolation and grief, her beloved Elkanah, perhaps desperate to carry on his family name, brought home a second wife. This was definitely not the definition of *family* Hannah had bargained for!

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*But I cry to you for help, O LORD: in the morning my prayer  
comes before you. Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide  
your face from me?*

PSALM 88:13-14

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### *For Further Thought*

How do you define *family*? Does your current family circumstance meet your definition? Does your definition agree with God's definition?

I can remember having terrible nightmares, waking up sobbing, dreaming that my husband had died and left me childless. These dreams demonstrated my fears and isolation of feeling that our family was far from complete. List your fears about your family as it currently is designed, then ask the Lord to help you trust Him with your worries.

### *Heart Treasures*

The Heart Treasures sections of this book offer God's authoritative Word on aspects of each topic. Use these passages for on-your-own or group study, allowing you to dig deeper into God's heart on the matter.

Genesis 1–2

Genesis 15:1–18:15

Genesis 21:1-7

Genesis 25:19-21



### *Burden Bearers*

Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. (Mark 2:3-4)

These friends very literally demonstrated what it means to “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). They met their loved one in his place of need and went out of their way to offer both practical aid for physical needs and emotional support to help him seek God through his accompanying spiritual crisis.

While the body of each chapter in this book is primarily addressed to those personally in the midst of fertility challenges, the Burden Bearers sections at the end of each chapter are created specifically for friends, families, church leaders, coworkers, and all near and dear to families facing such heart-ache. You are encouraged to fully read every chapter to gain understanding and then explore these special concluding portions for helpful insights.

While only some ideas may be applicable to your situation, the feelings expressed here are not uncommon to this journey and thus are written from a first-person perspective, as if told to you directly by your loved one. You

may even notice a few places where your loved one has added her own notes or highlighted issues where she feels acutely vulnerable. No two people or circumstances are identical, so please use these suggestions as a springboard for thought and discussion rather than a strict guideline.

And now for the first Burden Bearer . . .



When you are meeting someone new, don't start your conversation with "So, do you have any kids?" While innocent enough, such questions can make me feel like a deer caught in your headlights. Instead try something open-ended such as "Tell me a little bit about yourself." Anyone in a less-than-ideal life circumstance (unfulfilled desires for a spouse, unemployed, and so on) will appreciate such an approach.