

PERSPECTIVE

OCTOBER 2019

CHILDLESS TO THE GLORY OF GOD

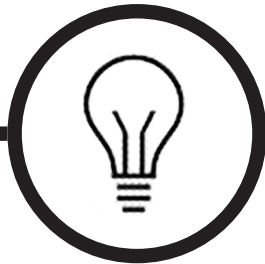
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Andrea Lee	



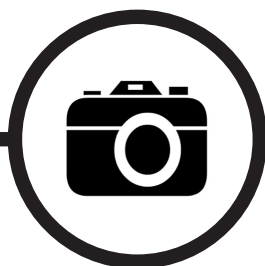
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Childless to the Glory of God

Childless couples live with longing. They long to snuggle babies. They long for little faces around the table at Thanksgiving and school plays and soccer games and bedtime stories. They long to teach their own children about God. They long to have answers about why they can't conceive. They long to know how long they will have to wait. They long to know if something is wrong with them spiritually. They long to know who will care for them when they get old. Childless couples long for a whole variety of experiences and joys and hardships that are routine for others.

Not all childless couples experience the same pain, of course, but as image bearers of a creative, life-giving God, we long to extend the love of his life into the world. And yet it's hard to miss how God uses childlessness in the lives of many of his people: Abraham and Sarai. Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob and Rachel. Samson's parents. Elkanah and Hannah. Zachariah and Elizabeth.¹ These couples begged God for children, and God heard their prayers and answered by granting their requests. But you may still be waiting and grieving and hoping, wondering what God is doing when your arms are empty and your heart is hurting. The word infertility and infertile aren't in the Bible. The Bible uses the words "barren" and "childless." Thankfully "childless" and "barren" don't have to mean the same thing in a spiritual sense. Singles and couples without children don't have to live barren spiritual lives: a childless life is not a barren life. Our fruitfulness comes from God, who graciously enables us to bear fruit by His Spirit. Whether childless for a season or for a lifetime, families without kids can find purpose and joy as they join the one family of the church to glorify God.

God speaks clearly about the blessing of children and the ache of childlessness in his word. Through centuries and cultures, God's people have valued children. In fact, some of the Bible's sweetest promises about God's grace were given with the backdrop of childlessness. Although our cultural moment in many ways marginalizes and undervalues children, married (and yet to be married) followers of Christ often deeply long for this blessing. How can the church encourage these couples and how can childless couples embrace the church as one family? God uses his people to comfort childless couples and to provide them the opportunity to function as one family with the church to show the next generation the way of Christ.

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHILDLESSNESS

Discussing childlessness reaches some of the most intimate places in people's lives. Many couples plan a season of childlessness at the beginning of their marriage. For financial or career or health reasons, they delay having children. And sometimes, when they are ready for kids, they run into a painful surprise: having children is a gift, not a right. Some may not be able to get pregnant while others may experience the tremendous grief of miscarriage.

Couples who can't have children suffer in different ways. Some people struggle deeply every day. It's a constant ache that tempts them to despair. Some people suffer when they see birth announcements, Little League fields, back to school sales, or strollers at the park. These things are reminders of a good gift they don't have—a gift God has withheld. Some people think about it and are often sad but have not found the grief to be overwhelming. There is a huge spectrum of experience around childlessness. Regardless, not having babies when you desperately want them is very hard.

OUR STORY

Darien and I do not have a dramatic story of infertility. We have not prevented pregnancy for over a decade. We have never been pregnant. We have chosen for several reasons not to pursue aggressive forms of fertility treatments. We have had moments of deep grief and longing. At this time, we have chosen not to pursue the beautiful gift of adoption.² But we have seen God grow contentment and trust in our hearts through his word and his family, the church.

THE GOSPEL

God has used our experience of childlessness to show us himself and to sanctify us. We have come to love and treasure the truths of the gospel more deeply. Let us give you three ways this has happened. We want to encourage your heart and stir in you a new perspective of God's providence in your life.

First, our physical inability to have children reminds us of a much deeper inability, our inability to be fruitful spiritually. Our sin and rebellion render us helpless and hopeless apart from Christ. The Bible is stunningly clear that God is sovereign over the barren womb and the spiritually dead heart. If you have children, God has sovereignly given them to you. If you are a follower of Christ, God has sovereignly regenerated your heart to give you repentance and faith. We breathe the air of efficiency, productivity, and autonomy from our secular culture. Couples who are following Christ can unwittingly import this achievement mentality into their walks with God so they believe their personal efforts

earn them the fulfillment of their desires. Our infertility points us to the reality that apart from Christ, we can do nothing (John 15:5). We are much less in control than we imagine. And that's a great thing.

The story of Abraham's faith in Romans 4 has been an important encouragement to us. God promised Abraham that he would be the (biological) father of many nations (Rom. 4:17). But after years of waiting and a messy surrogacy situation, the promise remained unfulfilled. God lovingly sustained Abraham, and Abraham did not "weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead...or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb" (Rom. 4:19). Abraham's faith is a picture for all believers: he believed God could do the impossible. But because of Jesus and his new covenant with us, God promises new hearts that are able to bear spiritual fruit. We have asked ourselves: Does considering our own bodies or the barrenness of the womb weaken our faith? Does it make us doubt God's power or goodness? Or do we believe and embrace God's promise of salvation, that comfort and spiritual fruitfulness will be fulfilled whether we have children or not?

Abraham's faith in God's promise was counted to him as righteousness. God does not promise his people the gift of physical children (biological or adopted). But believing that God counts us righteous when we repent and put our faith in God's promised Son and his atoning sacrifice is where real life, hope, and fruitfulness begin. God places all his people in a beautiful family called the church where everyone has the privilege and responsibility to help parents and children know the way of Christ. God promises to sanctify us and to enable us to bear spiritual fruit. (See Phil. 1:6, 1 Thes. 5:23–24; John 15:5, 2 Peter 1:8) This promise is not dependent on the fertility of our physical bodies. That is such good news! Abraham is a great example to us: "*No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*" (Rom. 4:20–21).

Second, childlessness has tested our hearts to expose whether we trust God and treasure his glory more than we trust ourselves and our desires. The line between desiring a good gift (children) and idolatry (demanding and craving the good gift in a way that eclipses God) is sometimes blurry. We have wrestled with whether we are seeking our identity and fulfillment in a created thing or in our Creator. Remember Rachel, Jacob's wife? She voices what the idolatry of children can sound like: "Give me children or I shall die!" (Gen. 30:1) Jacob was

understandably angry at this demand, but he points his sorrowful, sinful wife to the Person behind her painful circumstances: "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"

Childlessness can sometimes be the occasion for marital conflict like it was for Jacob and Rachel. James 4:1–2 captures their dynamic perfectly: they quarreled and fought because their passions had mastered them, and they were willing to attack to get what they wanted. But marriage can also be a sweet haven of peace as spouses point each other to the grace, comfort, and wisdom of God.

Not being able to have children brings us face-to-face with God's sovereignty. Just as Jacob so clearly knew, God controls the womb. Wrestling with childlessness means holding several biblical truths in a godly tension: *God really is in control of our fertility. God is utterly good and loving. We have a rich purpose in Christ. Joy and hope are possible.*

We don't perfectly see how all these truths come together. But we are convinced they do. God has brought us to a place of joy and peace as he reminds us of truth. God owes us nothing. And yet, he has given us the best gift we could ever imagine. And it's not children or even a spouse. The lack of the very good gift of children has made us appreciate the greatest gift (God himself) even more.

So we ask ourselves questions to see where idolatry may be lurking: Will we trust that God knows best how to sanctify us and how to bring glory to himself? Will we trust that God has loving, perfect purposes for answering our request for kids with "no"? Can we say with joy that God is better than any gift he gives or withholds?

Third, childlessness, just like every providential suffering in our lives, has purpose. "Suffering is not for nothing," as Elisabeth Elliot liked to say. Our purpose is rich and real, even when it doesn't include the elements we would prefer. We must die to some cherished dream in order to follow Christ on the path of love.³ And that path is to show God's glory—the all-satisfying joy of living to make him known. We are alive to love God and to love others. That's the purpose. And that purpose cannot be thwarted by anything (Job 42:2). Even though the expression of this purpose will look different in every person's life, God is teaching us to embrace the truth that the love of Christ is to control us. Christ died so "those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:15).

EMBRACING THE CHURCH

What does it look like to “no longer live for ourselves but for Christ” in the context of the church as one family? This year at Mount Vernon, we’ve heard about partnering with parents to show the next generation the way of Christ. Here are some ways that childless couples can actively embrace the role (and comfort) God has given them in the church:

- ✦ Let others in the church into your pain. Don’t suffer alone. Find a godly discipler and open up about your struggle. They will listen to you, love you, and pray with you.
- ✦ Love the children in the church by building friendships with parents and kids; offer to give parents an evening or weekend away while you care for their children.
- ✦ Celebrate birth announcements, attend baby showers; rejoice with those who are rejoicing (you may need to ask a special friend or the person who discipled you to pray with you before events that are difficult) AND be willing to honestly share your struggle with your church family when they ask.
- ✦ Engage with biblical teaching on parenting and child-raising. You have a role to disciple others and the more you learn from God’s word about parenting, the better able you will be to help.
- ✦ Cling to God’s promises to fuel your own hope and to be ready to share those promises with the next generation.
- ✦ Embrace the flexibility you have to engage in more time-intensive opportunities in the church, such as serving in Clarkston with refugees, opening your home to international students, going on a short-term mission trip, or investing deeply in relationships with missionaries.

There are many ways to glorify God with the time, energy, and flexibility you have!

As childless couples work to embrace the role God has given them in the church, here are some ways the church family can encourage them:

- ✦ Consider including childless couples in birthday parties and family gatherings. It’s a sweet gift for us to enjoy the children of the church and to see godly families in action.
- ✦ Check in with childless couples on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. Consider ways to celebrate their spiritual influence in the lives of others.
- ✦ Don’t feel guilty for having children or for seeing

the tears of childless couples. Listen to their fears and longings and pray with them. Seek to comfort them by pointing them to Christ. Your love and gentle questions are a tangible expression of God’s love.

- ✦ Embrace the privilege of discipling those without children. Childless couples are wrestling with how God’s character connects with their experience. They are making interpretations about who they are and who God is. Your biblical reminders of truth will be a means of God’s comfort in the trial of childlessness.
- ✦ Help childless couples think carefully about artificial reproductive technologies. There are lots of theological and ethical decisions to consider. They need your help to carefully think about if and how they will pursue having children.⁴

When God withholds the gift of children, he is ordering our steps according to his perfect design. The writings of John Newton have brought enormous comfort to our hearts as we contemplate the ways God chooses to work. John, and his wife Mary, were childless but adopted a young girl later in life. They had suffered deeply and experienced the pain of a cherished desire not being fulfilled. And yet John Newton’s fruitfulness for the Lord is simply astonishing. He pastored a church, wrote hundreds of encouraging letters, and counseled deeply troubled people. He wrote, “All shall work together for good: everything is needful that He sends; nothing can be needful that He withholds.”⁵ God knows the best way to sanctify us and to produce fruitfulness in our lives. When he chooses the path of childlessness for us, he meets us with his comfort and peace and promises—with his very self.

— Andrea Lee

¹ Gen. 15:2, 16:1; Gen. 25:21; Gen. 30:2; Judges 13:2; 1 Sam. 1:5; Lk 1:7

² Please see Aaron Menikoff’s article on adoption in the *August 2019 Perspective* to cherish the glory of our spiritual adoption.

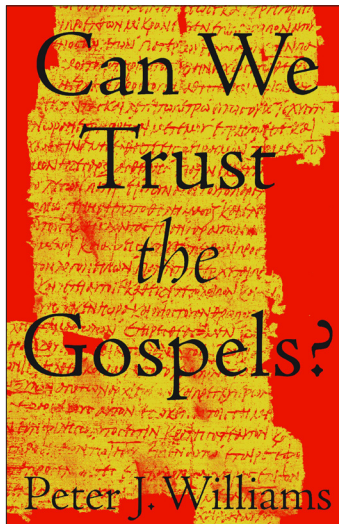
³ Please see *A Loving Life* by Paul Miller for more.

⁴ A great resource is *Walking Through Infertility* by Matthew Arbo.

⁵ *Newton on the Christian Life* by Tony Reinke; p. 195

Can We Trust the Gospels?

Written by Peter J. Williams



Can we really trust the gospels? Specifically, is there historically reliable evidence that the gospels are trustworthy accounts of Jesus' life? Peter J. Williams seeks to answer this fundamental question in his book *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Williams does not attempt to convince the reader that Jesus is *worth* following but rather demonstrate that the simplest and most rational explanation of the gospel accounts is that they are *true* accounts of the life of Jesus.

Williams accomplishes this in a relatively short introduction to the topic through a variety of compelling arguments. He begins by examining how many reliable non-Christian sources from the first century confirm the events and details of the biblical accounts. Accurate geographical information, familiar use of naming conventions, and intricate knowledge of Judaism collectively prove that the gospel writers must have been locals living in Palestine at the time of Christ. They were not outsiders. They were contemporaries. He also notes how the existence of both precise similarities and yet slight differences between the gospel accounts prove there was no collusion in writing amongst these eyewitnesses.

Williams intentionally leaves the issue of miracles until the last chapter, pointing out that this is typically the biggest problem for many skeptics. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book, and his argument here is penetrating. Were it not for the presence of miracles; historians would unanimously accept the gospel accounts as reliable history. If the details in the gospels are true, there would be no reason to believe that the miracles recorded in them were fabricated. From here, Williams jumps into a wonderful explanation of the biblical gospel. He argues that the simplest explanation is that Jesus really is who He says He is: the Son of God crucified for the sins of the world. The trustworthiness of the gospels then is not merely a historical question, but a life-changing reality we all must consider. For any Christian or skeptic, I would highly recommend Williams' book as a readable, well-reasoned, and thought-provoking introduction to the topic.

– RECOMMENDED BY KALEP KANODE

Excerpts From
the Book

1

"It may thus be concluded that Jesus has more extended text about him, in generally closer proximity to his life, than his contemporary Tiberius, the most famous person in the then-known world."

– Chapter 2, p. 41

2

"There are many particulars in the Gospels that the authors would be unlikely to have invented. Although one can usually think of complex reasons why someone might invent them, those are not the simplest explanations. The simplest explanation is that these reports are true."

– Chapter 8, p.129

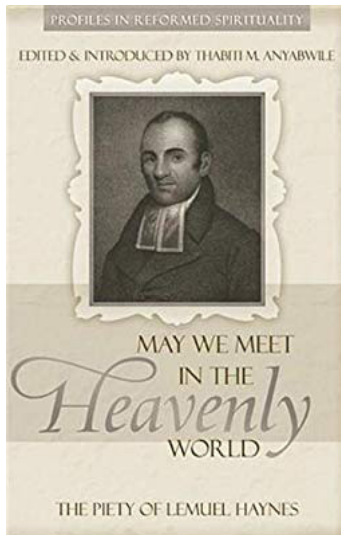
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"If the presentation of Jesus in the gospels is wrong, one faces many intellectual hurdles to explain why so many historical details are right and plausible."

– Chapter 8, p.137

May We Meet In the Heavenly World

Written by Lemuel Haynes



May We Meet In the Heavenly World is a brief compilation of excerpts from sermons and personal writings of Lemuel Haynes. Born in 1753, Haynes was the first African American ordained as a minister in the United States. The book, edited by Thabiti Anyabwile, covers roughly 30 chapters dedicated to topics ranging from regeneration to slavery to death. Additionally, Anyabwile includes ten chapters of personal letters Haynes had written to Timothy Mathew Cooley and Elihu Atkins.

After becoming acquainted with Haynes and his writing, two consistent themes appear. *First, Haynes was a man that continually led his church with eternity in mind.* Throughout multiple sermons shared in the book, Haynes clearly pointed his congregation to Christ by proclaiming the bold truth found in Scripture. He continually taught as a pastor who would one day give account for his flock and not as a man looking to garner the praise of man. It appears that Haynes never succumbed to the pressure to grow his church by catering to the preferences of the body, but rather by pointing them to the reality of eternity.

Haynes consistently modeled a robust prayer life. In much of his correspondence with Cooley and Atkins, Haynes reminded his friends that he was interceding before the “throne of Grace” for them. Furthermore, Haynes humbly asked for prayer for himself. For me, this practice was incredibly encouraging to read. We are often quick to ask others within the body how we can pray for them and deprive our brothers and sisters of the privilege of going before the Lord on our behalf. As we strive to live as one church family, we should share in the gift of praying for one another.

We live in a world that is constantly longing for the new and instant. Thankfully we are bound together as a church by a gracious God who has given us his timeless Word. As a church that remembers the Puritans of New England with great fondness, I would expect a reader from within our body would be pleased to discover and be encouraged by the writings of Lemuel Haynes.

– RECOMMENDED BY GARRY HILL

Excerpts From
the Book

1

“He will not entertain his audience with empty speculations or vain philosophy, but with things that concern their everlasting welfare. Jesus Christ, and Him crucified will be the great topic and darling theme of his preaching”
– *How Eternity Affects Daily Ministry*, p.53

2

“We live at a great distance, but would it be too much boldness for me to suggest that, should we spend one quarter of an hour every Saturday evening at the throne of grace, to intercede for our own souls and the souls of our people and for Zion in general, we might thereby be peculiarly present in the spirit?”
– *To Timothy Mather Cooley*, p.76

OCTOBER

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

October 1	Matthew 4:1–17	October 17	Titus 3
October 2	Matthew 4:18–25	October 18	Daniel 9:1–19
October 3	Matthew 5:1–12	October 19	Matthew 5:13–16
October 4	Isaiah 61:1–7	October 20	Matthew 5:13–16
October 5	Matthew 5:13–20	October 21	Ezekiel 25
October 6	Matthew 5:1–12	October 22	Ezekiel 26–28
October 7	Ezekiel 12–13	October 23	Ezekiel 29–30
October 8	Ezekiel 14–16	October 24	Ezekiel 31
October 9	Ezekiel 17–19	October 25	Mark 13:1–13
October 10	Ezekiel 20–22	October 26	Ezekiel 32
October 11	Mark 8:11–21	October 27	Ezekiel 29:1–6
October 12	Ezekiel 23–24	October 28	Exodus 19
October 13	Ezekiel 16:59–63	October 29	Exodus 20
October 14	John 10:32–42	October 30	Leviticus 16
October 15	Acts 9:36–42	October 31	Romans 6:1–14
October 16	Ephesians 2:1–10		

***Sermons in bold**

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



Alex & John
Camp
Abigail (3),
Robert (1)



Ashley & Jesse
Farris
Marleigh (2),
Harper (1)



Jack Marlowe



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH