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The Pains of Natural Childbirth: Eve's Legacy to Her Daughters

TAMMY DITMORE

About twelve hours after I had given birth to Jonathan, my second son, his pediatrician stopped in our hospital room to examine him for the first time. It was very early in the morning, and I was sore and tired from labor and a sleep-deprived night but elated that the baby appeared healthy and the birth had been relatively free of complications.

Dr. Starzak, who had been my older son's pediatrician for almost four years, looked at the charts and the sleeping baby and then turned to me and said, "There's no such thing as natural childbirth, is there?" The comment made me bristle; I had delivered a nine-pound, one-ounce baby with no pain medication and was fairly proud of the accomplishment, and I responded a little defensively: "Well, I did have my labor induced, but I didn't have any other drugs."

"No," the doctor said, trying to clarify. "It just isn't natural that a baby like this comes out of you." My irritation immediately dissolved into profound appreciation for this pediatrician who saw newborns every day and yet had not lost his own sense of wonder at the process, the sense that something so commonplace is not natural at all but supernatural, perhaps divine.

His words captured my own sense of wonder and astonishment. I had just completed months of pregnancy, months of feeling the baby turn and kick, months of watching my body grow beyond recognition, and hours of labor as pain wracked my body. I had witnessed my son make his entrance into our world and had held him while he was still wet with fluids from my own body. And yet, even then, even as I marveled at his tiny toes and fingers, I couldn't help but wonder, "Where exactly did you come from?"

I am certain that my reaction was not unusual. In fact, I think most mothers marvel at their babies, amazed at what they have produced, amazed at how well their bodies have performed but also amazed and a bit dazed by the physical toll demanded of them in pregnancy and delivery. How can a process that is so "natural"—in the sense that childbirth is dictated by common bodily functions—seem so "unnatural"—a new life delivered from the depths of a commonplace body?

What did God have in mind when he dictated that human creation would be carried on in this way? When he turned to Eve in the garden and told her, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children" (Gen 3.16), what message was he delivering to her and all the generations of women to follow? A curse? A promise? Biblical scholars have debated these verses and their meanings for centuries and still do not agree on all aspects. But what do the words mean to women who live through the pain and the delight of childbirth? What do they hear God saying?

After bearing two children; discussing pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing with countless women; and reading numerous biblical passages, books, articles, and memoirs on the same topics, I feel certain that most mothers do not believe God delivered a curse to all women in his words to Eve. In fact, I think most women look on childbirth much more as an opportunity—a chance to participate with God and through God in the very act of creation. But they also understand that in the process they experience in a very direct way the aftermath of Eve's actions in the garden—not as a curse or a punishment from God—but as the

consequence of the fruit she chose to eat. Experiencing pregnancy and childbirth opens a mother's eyes to know both good and evil in a way that cannot be duplicated in any other experience.

NOT A CURSE

*He settles the barren woman in her home
as a happy mother of children.
Praise the LORD (Ps 113.9).*

From all accounts given to us in the Bible, women never looked upon childbirth—even with its “greatly increased pain”—as a curse. When Eve gave birth to Cain after being cast from the garden, she did not say, “The Lord’s curse has been fulfilled and I have suffered in childbirth.” She did not say, “My sin is before me and now I have suffered because of it.” Instead, she said, “With the help of the Lord, I have brought forth a man” (Gen 4.1).

Many of the most familiar stories of the Bible are of women who desperately desire children and pray for the blessing of experiencing the pain of childbirth. Indeed, throughout the Bible, a woman who is barren is much more likely to see herself and be seen by others as cursed than the woman who suffers in childbirth. When Elizabeth became pregnant with John, she said, “The Lord has done this for me . . . In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people” (Luke 1.25).

Sarah and Rachel illustrate that it was not just a desire to carry on the family name that drove their desire, as heirs born through their proxies did not end their longing for children. Rachel grew so desperate (telling Jacob, “Give me children, or I’ll die!” [Gen 30.1]), that she decided to “build a family” (Gen 30.3) through her servant Bilhah, who delivered two sons Rachel claimed as her own. But those sons seemed to have been discounted when “God remembered Rachel . . . and opened her womb.” After giving birth Rachel said, “God has taken away my disgrace” (Gen 30.22–23).

In mainstream U.S. society in the twenty-first century, it is no longer considered a disgrace for a woman to be childless. But even as thousands of women each year take advantage of laws and techniques that make abortion easily available, thousands of others pay exorbitant amounts of money and endure painful and invasive procedures in an attempt to end their barrenness. Scientists continually refine and revise treatments and techniques to give women the chance to bear children, creating options that could not have been imagined even a few generations ago—artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, and even treatments to allow post-menopausal women to bear children. All such procedures testify to a woman’s desire to bring forth children.

And it is not just in our Western societies, where childbirth is “safe” and children are born into relative prosperity that women welcome pregnancy and babies. A recent article in the Los Angeles Times told the story of Dr. Hawa Abdi, a sixty-year-old gynecologist in Somalia, one of the world’s most desperately poor countries, which has been blighted by war and anarchy for years. Since the early 1990s, Dr. Abdi has operated a clinic for anyone who can get to her, treating victims of shootings, malnutrition, and epidemics. More than 20,000 people now live on her land, where she offers treatment, clean water, and whatever food she can even though few can pay. She sees the worst cases of disease and trauma, watches babies die in their mothers’ arms, and treats dozens of malaria patients daily. But for her, “the miscarriages are the hardest to bear,” Dr. Abdi says. In a society where survival is fragile, in a place where existence is almost unbearably hard, a woman who sees the worst of what life can bring mourns most deeply over the babies who are not born and the women who cannot bring them to life.¹

1. Edmund Sanders, “A Doctor Bound by Humanity,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 1, 2007): A1, A4.

A ROLE IN CREATION

*And when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree
was good for food and pleasing to the eye,
and also desirable for gaining wisdom,
she took some and ate of it (Gen 3.6).*

Why would a woman mourn a baby not born—either not conceived or not brought to life at birth? Why do women go to incredible lengths to ensure that they will endure the “greatly increased pain” of childbirth? Perhaps it is because most women recognize the half-truth in the snake’s words to Eve when he enticed her to eat of the forbidden tree. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3.5). In childbirth—more than in any other earthly experience—Eve and her daughters become like God, participating in the very act of creation and knowing the good of bringing new life into our world.

Most women find the months of pregnancy exciting and mysterious as they watch their bodies take on unfamiliar shapes and roles—feeling sometimes like a bystander but at other times an active participant. For most women, the butterfly flutterings in her abdomen are the first concrete sign that life is growing in her innermost depths. I was sitting in a movie theater the first time I could positively identify movement coming from within, and I was electrified by the certainty of that growing life. In the next few weeks, no matter where I was or what I was doing, I was always tuned in to those movements, feeling that my baby and I were sharing a secret communication and communion. As my son grew bigger and stronger, his movements made clear that even while he was completely dependent on my body for his existence, he was developing a life of his own apart from me, a concept that never ceased to astonish me.

Through all the discomfort and pain of the final weeks of pregnancy, I reveled in the idea that I was playing a vital role in the mysterious process of creation. I cannot honestly say I felt any joy during the pain of labor and delivery, but I did feel awed by the power of the process—by the intensity of the pain, and by the physical changes demanded of my body. I’ve never been an athlete of any kind, but after giving birth, I knew the exhilaration of a marathon runner: I was thrilled with what I had accomplished and amazed at my own strength and stamina.

And in front of me was the literal fruit of my labor: a tiny human, helpless and crying, wrinkled and red but so fearfully and awesomely made. He had come from me and through me and yet was a separate being with his own body, mind, and soul. It was a miracle in which I had played a vital role.

Jesus knew his listeners at the Last Supper would recognize the emotions of that moment and drew on that time to offer them words of comfort for the time ahead. “You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world” (John 16.21).

A PROMISE OF PAIN

*“I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;
with pain you will give birth to children . . . ” (Gen 3.16).*

Of course, when the snake assured Eve that the forbidden fruit could make her like God, he failed to elaborate on what she would face when her eyes were opened and she came to know evil. So God spelled it out when he addressed her in the garden: in order for Eve to “be like God” and know the good of creation, she would also be forced to know greatly increased pain and danger in the process.

Throughout most of human history, childbirth has been the leading killer of women—and it still is today. According to a recent story in Newsweek,

Somewhere in the world, one woman dies every minute of every day from causes related to pregnancy and birth . . . In sub-Saharan Africa, the lifetime risk of maternal death is 1 in 16, compared with 1 in 2,800 in developed countries. Those who survive may still suffer. For every woman who dies during childbirth, it is estimated that another 30 are injured or become sick.²

The sobering statistics provide a very different view of childbirth to those of us used to picturing greatly increased pain as waves of contractions displayed on an electronic monitor in a woman's labor and delivery room. But women throughout history, and in many places in the world today, know that the very process that brings life has a very real chance of bringing death. Even in our time and place, pregnant women understand that, although the threat of death or serious injury is small, the threat remains.

Women also know that even the "easiest" pregnancy and labor will bring pain and discomfort—and not just during delivery. When men—and women who have not experienced pregnancy and childbirth—see God's words, they most often think of labor and delivery. In fact, in recent centuries, Genesis 3.16 was used as a justification to deny pain-numbing drugs to women in labor to ensure that God's promise to Eve would not be circumvented.

But women who have borne children know that the pain and discomfort of childbirth doesn't start with contractions. For more than nine months, a woman's body is not her own and the baby is in charge—laying first claim to all nourishment, vitamins, and minerals, even to the point of depriving the mother's body. From the very first days of conception a mother's hormones change in ways that affect everything from her sleep to how her fingernails grow. When I needed to have my eyeglass prescription changed shortly after my first son was born, I asked my optometrist if my pregnancy could have possibly affected even my vision. He laughed at me. "Pregnancy changes almost every function in a woman's body—often permanently," he explained.

Most diagrams of fetal progression depict the development of the baby as it grows from a few tiny cells to multiple pounds, so I do not think I got a good picture of how that growth would affect me until I was about six months pregnant with my first child. When my Lamaze instructor posted life-size diagrams detailing what happened to the mother's body as the baby grew, I felt a sense of panic. How would it be possible, I wondered, for my vital organs to be squished into such a small space as the baby took up more and more of my body? What would happen to me?

The reality was not much prettier than the pictures. As my son grew, my internal organs were essentially shoved out of the way, affecting seemingly all of my bodily functions, from breathing to digestion to blood circulation. In addition, my growing belly caused my back to ache and frequently knocked me off balance; I was plagued by a sense of awkwardness, and I searched in vain for a comfortable position to stand, sit or sleep.

So, by the time I reached my ninth month of pregnancy, my thoughts of the coming childbirth dwelled less on how much pain would be involved in labor than on the relief promised through delivery. But even with modern medicine—and attitudes—about pain relief for women in childbirth, labor is never pain-free. I have heard very few first-time mothers say they were prepared for the intensity of the pain of labor, no matter how many books they had read or classes they had attended or pain management techniques they had practiced. And most are astonished at how much hard work is involved: labor is not a misnomer; a woman has to work with her body in ways she did not know were possible in order to bring a child into the world.

2. Barbara Kantrowitz, "What Kills One Woman Every Minute of Every Day?" *Newsweek* (July 9, 2007): 56.

A DIVINE DELIVERY

*But Mary treasured up all these things
and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2.19).*

It is a cliché to say that a woman is never the same after pregnancy and childbirth, but it is true nonetheless. Through nine months of physical, mental, and emotional turmoil, a woman surrenders her very body so that another might live. And although the physical burden may decrease after delivery, for most mothers the mental and emotional ties to that new life intensify. Her whole world—for the rest of her life—is permanently reordered by this new creation made in her image. Decisions forevermore will be made based not just on her own best interests but on the best interests of that child, just as her own joy and sorrow will be inextricably woven into the fortunes of the child she carried in her body.

In that experience she has come to be “like God” who gives so much of himself in and through and to his creation. Why do we tend to believe that creation is effortless for God? In childbirth a woman comes to understand that creation involves sacrifice, and the intense love and protectiveness she feels for her new offspring can open her eyes to God and his desired relationship with the creatures who have been made in his image.

God showed his great esteem for the role women play in creation when he chose to enter our world through Mary, through the natural/supernatural process of pregnancy, labor, and delivery. In the birth of Jesus, the human and the divine were joined in an even more powerful way than is present in every birth.

Eve delivered to her daughters the bittersweet fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, giving us greatly increased pain and danger in childbirth but also a path to participate with God in his creation. Mary, when she surrendered herself to God and bore his son, delivered to all a way of deliverance, giving us a path to participate with God in his salvation.

And, although no other woman’s birth experience will ever approach the significance of Mary’s, the chance to be involved in this most natural, most divine act of creation gives a mother many opportunities to reflect on life and God’s role in it. For the rest of her days, a mother will remember her pregnancy, labor, delivery, and newborn child in much the same way as Mary did, “treasuring up all these things and pondering them in her heart.”

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