

Jake and Alyssa's Story

“Coming from two large families, Jake and I both envisioned having a large one of our own. We were high school sweethearts and at 17, we started joking about marrying one day and having a bunch of kids. At 22, we got married and quickly began planning our perfect family scenario. We wanted five kids, beginning our journey exactly 1 year after our wedding. We were bright-eyed and hopeful when we began sharing our plans with family and friends. As the months went by, those bright eyes slowly turned to confused ones, then concerned ones, then worried, and finally panicked.

After about 6 months of negative pregnancy tests, my gut told me we should get checked by an infertility specialist even though it really had not been that long. After multiple tests, the doctors confirmed some concerns for both of us and said, ‘You’ll need assistance getting pregnant.’ Jake had issues, I had issues. It wasn’t looking great. The previous joy I had when seeing newborns and bulging bellies became almost painful for me. Those accidental pregnancies, clever Facebook announcements, and young parents having their second or third babies already were a constant reminder I was still not pregnant and may never be pregnant.

I began to question what God was doing here. I knew he loved children and told us, ‘Be fruitful and multiply,’ so why would he withhold this from us if we were following the desires of our heart and trying to do something good by starting a family? I started having some wrong thinking and incorrect theology going on in my head. I started believing I must have some major sin in my life God was trying to reveal to me by bringing me through this trial to punish me. I would cry and pray and wonder to myself, ‘Lord, am I holding the thought of having children too highly in my life? Am I not being joyful enough for those around me? Would I be a bad mom? Why are you withholding this from us?’

The painful months turned into painful years for us, but in hindsight, we know our Good Shepherd was always near. While my wonderfully fertile family lived here in Illinois, our circumstances kept us in Iowa where we were provided another family that could better understand what we were going through. Although I loved coming back home to visit all the little blessings the Lord had made, a season of separation was good for us. Our church family from Iowa had an uncanny amount of infertile couples who were able to understand and lead us through the pain and struggle we were facing.

One friend reminded me what I had been believing was a lie, saying, ‘God is not punishing you as a sinner. He took the punishment of every one of your sins and erased them when he sacrificed himself on the cross.’ God was allowing me to experience this trial so we could grow in our faith and character and one day, walk alongside others facing similar circumstances. This realization was surprisingly very comforting for me. I no longer had to beat myself up for sins of my past and rack my brain about why I was being punished. I’d already been set free.

Another considerable part of our story came from living in Iowa and the enormous heart for adoption our church had. They took it seriously and even provided thousands of dollars to adopting families in the church to help alleviate the financial burden and encourage couples to consider it. We grew close to families who encouraged adoption for us too. We loved the idea,

but I continued to have a strong desire to carry a baby, go through childbirth, and experience wonderful things I might not be able to fully experience through a typical adoption. I wanted the bulging belly, to see my baby on an ultrasound screen, to breastfeed them after birth.

During the holidays one year when we were visiting family, one of Jake's aunts mentioned another option I had briefly considered a few months prior called embryo or snowflake adoption. She said, 'Couples who have gone through in-vitro fertilization because of fertility issues often have 'leftover' embryos.' We learned fertility doctors make extra embryos to freeze for later pregnancies and multiple attempts if they did not initially result in a pregnancy, or if the couple wanted more children. Often there could be up to fifteen embryos created at once, and couples who didn't have the financial or physical ability to have that many pregnancies were left with extra embryos cryopreserved in freezers, not knowing what to do with them next.

I did some research and found an adoption agency, (Embryo Adoption Services of Cedar Park) helping these families who wish to give their frozen embryos a chance at life. There are estimated to be more than one million currently in the United States alone. After much consideration and prayer, we decided to pursue embryo adoption. As with other adoptions, it required a home study, background checks, and a portfolio about us as a couple. We were also able to decide the openness of the adoption and we chose semi-open. After a matching process and reviewing the medical history and personal portfolio of the biological parents, we accepted a group of seven embryos! We were ecstatic and humbled by the amazing gift God had provided to us.

After months of preparation, medications, and hormone injections, I underwent our first embryo transfer in Des Moines and transferred two embryos. Transferring two was typically the recommendation at the time to have the best chance at one surviving and resulting in a pregnancy. Heartbreakingly, those two did not implant and did not survive the transfer. We were crushed by the loss of life and the realization my body may not be able to carry a baby at all. After months of grieving, questioning our decision, and a lot of time spent in prayer, the adoption agency director contacted me and gently encouraged us to try again.

We had recently moved back to Illinois to be closer to our family, including now six nieces and nephews. From the beginning, we committed to implanting all seven embryos barring any major medical complication. so we knew without a doubt we were going to take every chance. I started the hormones and medication all over again, preparing myself for the next attempt. We transferred our next two 'best looking' embryos in December of 2013 and found out, just before Christmas, I was pregnant! I praised God and surrendered the pregnancy to him. No matter the outcome, I knew these babies were his, if he allowed me to carry them with me for 1 month, 3 months, or have a full-term delivery, I would be grateful for the privilege.

A week or so after my positive pregnancy test, and very high subsequent beta tests, I went in for an ultrasound to see if one or two of the embryos survived. I remember telling the ultrasound tech, 'I think they both survived, based on the beta tests.' As she scanned my stomach, she happily confirmed, 'Yep, I see them both on here! Congratulations, Mom and Dad... oh, wait.' My heart sank. Was there not a heartbeat? Were they not growing well? 'How many embryos did you implant?' I managed to squeak out, 'Two.'

'Well, I see three here! These two twinned! Look!' There, on the screen, we saw THREE

flickering heartbeats of our triplet baby girls. One of the embryos had split in utero, resulting in a set of identical twins, plus our other sweet redhead made it too! It was a one in 10,000 chance and we are the lucky ones.

Throughout the pregnancy, the Lord continued to protect those baby girls. Ainsley, Evangeline, and Claire were delivered at almost 36 weeks without a single complication. They didn't even need to spend a day in the NICU. How great is our God!

Later, with three remaining embryos, we experienced another failed attempt at transferring a single embryo. Again, saddened by the loss of life, we knew God had these lives in his control and knew we needed to be faithful to give our last 2 embryos a chance. In late February 2016, we transferred our remaining embryos, one of which had a lower grade and theoretically lower chance of survival. Again, we prayed for them fervently. Both survived the transfer, and I gave birth to our twin boys, Abram and Hudson. One dark hair, and another redhead to match our little girl!

We thought our redemption story was over. My cup was full and so was our home, as well as every last laundry bin in the house! Shortly after the twins turned 1-year-old, I remember feeling extremely overwhelmed and totally unable to deal with decorating for Christmas, something that typically brought me so much joy. So I called my best friend for an emergency Starbucks date to debrief and help level my head. Unfortunately, the coffee wasn't tasting great, and I could barely drink it. That's when I knew something was up.

I rushed home and immediately took three pregnancy tests in a row. All positive. All on our own. All seemingly impossible. I hadn't told Jake I was taking the tests, so when I called him into the bathroom and showed him the sticks, he confusingly asked, 'What does that mean? How did that happen?' I returned both questions with a slightly sarcastic explanation.

What a wonderful surprise and undeserved gift our last son, Elias, is. He's been such a fun little brother for the other five to love on and laugh with, it's so cool watching them all grow up year after year together, creating bonds only brothers and sisters can.

We are still in contact with the biological mother of the first five children. We are forever grateful for her selfless act and the absolute gift she gave to our whole family. She is an incredible woman and I am eternally grateful for her. I am humbled every time I look at their messy little faces and remember so vividly the hard, hard days, and the dark nights I felt so hopeless while I walked through infertility. But looking back on it all, I have become fully aware God was with me all along. He is a God of healing, renewal, and patience, and He knows exactly what is best for his children in his perfect timing."

This story was submitted to Love What Matters by Alyssa S.