

Healing the Pain of Childlessness

✖ *What do you say to a sister in Christ who can't get pregnant?*

I said something stupid today. Trying to offer a word of wisdom without casting false hope to a woman with a high-risk pregnancy, I made a comment that went over like a lead balloon. Although Maria has two children, she has also lost two babies to the same physical complication currently endangering her unborn child, and she is afraid to bond with the seven-month-old baby in her womb because she knows the baby could die during childbirth.

"I have another friend who lost three babies," I told her, "and when they learned during one of the pregnancies that their baby wouldn't make it, they just decided to love that child for whatever time they would have her in the womb." That couple's love for their unborn child provided some meaning during their time of grief, but it wasn't exactly a word of encouragement to Maria, whose legitimate fears have robbed her of any joyful feelings about her pregnancy.

It's not as though my statement was out of context; we were talking about the painful emotions associated

with infertility. I sensed an instant bond between us because I've walked down a similar path. But of all people, I should have known better than to try to console her with someone else's story.

As I apologized for my dispiriting comment, I assured Maria that her guarded heart is a normal human reaction to the grief she's already experienced. I call it the wall of sorrow.

The Bible gives us an inside look at another woman's sorrow in the story of Hannah (see 1 Sam. 1). Hannah felt dejected and ashamed because she was unable to have children.

Her husband, Elkanah, loved her very much, but he had a second wife, Peninnah, whom he apparently married to bear him offspring. Peninnah provoked Hannah to bitterness year after year by reminding her of her barrenness.

During one of Hannah's annual pilgrimages to Shiloh with Elkanah, she was so consumed with sorrow that she wept and could not eat. When she went to the temple, her anguish was so great that she couldn't even verbalize her prayers. Eli, the priest, judged her weeping as drunkenness and scolded her (see vv. 13–14).

Later, realizing he had misjudged her,

Eli pronounced a blessing over Hannah, saying, "May the God of Israel grant the request you have asked of Him" (v. 17, NLT). To Hannah, this was a spiritual breakthrough. It meant that God had heard her prayers. She soon composed herself and went on her way.

Eventually, Hannah conceived and gave birth to Samuel, whom she took to the temple at the age of 3 to live out his life in service to the Lord. Later, she gave birth to five more children.

Not every infertility story has an ending like Hannah's. But this account does show the gut-wrenching struggle of a woman who entrusted her wounded heart to the Lord and awaited His loving answer to her cry.

It's not shameful to be childless in our culture, but it can be devastating when it's not by choice.

Almost 5 million couples in the United States experience infertility at some time in their marriage.

Yet most often, couples who struggle with this trauma are met either awkward silence or inappropriate advice, even in the church. Comments like "Just relax, honey" are both an insult and a trivialization of what is usually a muddle of medical, emotional and spiritual mysteries.

So what can we do or say to help someone who is struggling to overcome the pain of childlessness?

Here are some general guidelines:

1. Be a friend. Genuine, supportive friendship is the greatest gift we can offer to anyone dealing with infertility. A childless wife sometimes feels like a misfit, even in today's society.

She may have more spontaneous lifestyle than woman with the responsibility of a family, but she may be too old for the college crowd and too young to be a companion of women whose child-rearing days are behind them. Yet with her peers—young mothers—she can be painfully aware of the “survivor's guilt” that new moms sometimes feel around women who are struggling just to conceive.

2. Communicate. While it's good to be sensitive to a childless women's feelings, don't assume she is jealous or unable to rejoice in your happiness with your children. She undoubtedly will have days when she would love to attend your daughter's school play, and other days when just seeing a baby could send her into tears.

The key is honest communication. Allow her to freely accept or decline your invitations. If she is uncomfortable around your children, plan a ladies' night or couples-only event.

For a woman in your community or church who is struggling with infertility, your physical presence and availability may fill a barren place in her day-to-day routines that even her family can't. If yours is a long-distance relationship, phone calls and letters during this season of life will be priceless, and they will undoubtedly come at just the right moments.

3. Acknowledge her spiritual state.

Don't be surprised if this friend displays a pessimistic outlook on life or seems obsessed with having a baby. Realize that the month-after-month disappointments she experiences or the hormonal changes that take place with each pregnancy, along with the grief of lost babies, only heighten her wall of sorrow.

A woman who continually experiences disappointment and death may find it hard to have a positive outlook. Conversely, if she masks her sorrow, it may be because she is afraid to reveal her pain lest she seem unspiritual. She may also be angry at God or feel that He is punishing her.

Help your friend work through her spiritual confusion. Let her know that she doesn't have to understand God's plans and purposes in order to trust Him. Provide a safe place where she can wrestle with her spiritual questions.

4. Recognize the uniqueness of her experience.

Realize that husbands and wives may deal with

their questions and grief differently. Despite Elkanah's deep love for Hannah, his question, "You have me—isn't that better than having ten sons?" (1 Sam. 1:8) shows his inability to understand her pain.

This kind of marital dynamic is not unusual. The guilt and blame that can emerge from infertility are enough to set many couples on the road to divorce. A supportive, accountable relationship with another couple may help, but because infertility issues seem to be (and sometimes are) so permanent, couples may not take the initiative to seek others out.

In addition to struggling with guilt, couples going through infertility workups are often paying high medical expenses and living in "limbo," always leaving room for the possibility of pregnancy. The ongoing plan for a family affects everything from career decisions to vacation choices and the kind of automobile to buy. The tentative nature of their existence and the insecurity of "not knowing" may be more difficult on the wife than on her husband.

In general, a little understanding and a lot of honest dialogue go a long way toward healing the pain of infertility. The goal is to walk with your friend until she finds a

solution to her situation. God's answer may be a miraculous pregnancy, the building of a family through adoption or foster parenting, or the peace to live a childless, yet fulfilling lifestyle.

Until the answer comes, don't be like Peninnah who provoked Hannah to bitterness. Don't be like Hannah's husband who trivialized her pain or like Eli who misunderstood her anguish. Don't be too quick with your words, like I was with Maria. Even encouraging words can be received as a prophecy, so don't be push or presumptuous.

Instead, be like Jesus, the friend who sticks closer than a brother, who wept at the tomb of Lazarus and then raised him from the dead. And when you don't know what to say, just remain silent, shedding an empathetic tear or giving your friend the opportunity to share her heart. Your presence alone can speak volumes, resurrect her faith and help break down her wall of sorrow.

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