

The Bible and the Pain of Infertility



By Kimberly Monroe and Philip Monroe

I. From Hope to Despair

(Kimberly Monroe)

Have you had your appendix removed? Did you go through counseling to work through your issues about losing that body part? Have you counseled anyone about losing his appendix?

Probably not. You can live your whole life without your appendix. You can go to work, mow your lawn, go to the grocery store, and live a normal life. Why then is it so devastating when your reproductive system doesn't work, but you can still do all those same things?

In one study, 63% of women who experienced both infertility and divorce rated their infertility as more painful than their divorce. In another study, women who experienced either chronic or life-threatening diseases ranked the emotional pain of infertility at similar levels to that of terminal illness.

Dealing with infertility is hard. Your God-given desire to have children is thwarted. As

you grow up, people say to you, "When you get married and have your kids...." Everyone assumes fertility.

Infertility shatters your identity. You have a picture in your mind. You are married. You have a house with a white picket fence. You have a minivan and a big dog. But where are the children? Infertility shatters this rosy picture.

Infertility is often misunderstood. People take it lightly. A person with a chronic disease or terminal illness gets support from all those around them. But to a couple struggling with infertility, these same people offer platitudes. "Count all your blessings." If one couple says they want kids, another says, "Take mine!"

One in six couples struggles with infertility. One in four couples over the age of thirty-five struggles with infertility. In your church, in your workplace, in your circle of friends, couples struggle with infertility. These couples need your support and care.

Infertility is a Form of Suffering

We live after the Fall. Our bodies don't always work the way they're supposed to work. Hannah, Rachel, and others in the Bible testify

**Kimberly Monroe is an at-home mom to two (adopted!) sons.*

Philip Monroe is the director of the MA Counseling Program at Biblical Seminary in Hatfield, Pa.

to the deep anguish and heartache of infertility. Infertile couples today suffer that same intense anguish and heartache. Treat them with compassion and care.

Hope-Despair Cycle

One unique thing about infertility is the hope/despair cycle. At the beginning of her monthly cycle, a woman has great hope. *I'm going to get pregnant this month. I know it.* The month ends. No pregnancy. She despairs. The next month comes. Great hope again. But no pregnancy. Hope careens down to despair. When she's in treatment for infertility, the woman has hope. She forces herself through the process, trying more things, doing more things. She hopes. But, the higher the hope, the deeper the fall. The despair side intensifies after each failure to conceive.

I got married when I was thirty-six. My husband, Phil, was still in seminary. We decided not to try for a baby for almost a year. After that, we tried to conceive. In seven months, nothing happened.

I assumed my fertility was intact. I had no idea that fertility drops off precipitously as you age. I assumed that if you menstruate, you can become pregnant. Not true. After seven months of trying to become pregnant, I went to my gynecologist. He reassured me. "Chart the daily variations in your body temperature. When you are about to ovulate, your body temperature blips up one-half to one degree. You're fertile then." The doctor also advised having a hormone levels test. An office nurse called to give the unsettling results: "Your hormone levels are normal for a woman entering menopause."

Menopause! I was 37 years old. Menopause is for fifty-year-old ladies! Menopause isn't for me! How could this be happening? I hadn't had my chance to be pregnant yet! I panicked. But my doctor was unfazed. "Don't worry. You'll cycle in and out of menopause. You'll get pregnant during one of the months you're not in menopause." I had hope again.

We waited two agonizing months to see a fertility specialist. This specialist reviewed our blood work, took an elaborate history, did an exam, and asked extremely personal questions about our sex life. Then she sat back and said, "I think it's very unlikely that you can have your own biological child." I could barely speak. In

one hour, I went from extreme hope to extreme despair. "But," she said, "You can try some fertility drugs when you're not in menopause." We started tests, treatments, and fertility drugs. Nasty, horrible tests. Personal marital privacy vanished with this process. Life became more complicated. I needed nightly injections. Every morning I drove from the suburbs to the specialist's office in the city. They took blood and did an ultrasound, checking my ovaries for ripening eggs. Another doctor did an endometrial biopsy to see if I could sustain a pregnancy.

We followed the procedures the first month. Nothing. We did it the second month. Nothing. After a while, I started to look like a drug addict because they took blood out of one arm one day and the other arm the next day. We started a third cycle, but then my dad died. I went home to New England to be with my family, ending the treatment for that cycle. I started to have fantasies. I started to bargain with God. "You took my dad, but maybe you're going to put a new life in me, right?" For a few weeks that's how I was thinking. *C'mon. I know this is it. This is going to be it.* Any little feeling (nausea, dizziness) brought more positive self-talk, followed by bitter disappointment.

Medical and Physical Experiences

Infertile couples go through common experiences and frustrations in their quest to have a child: Probing questions about their sex life from doctors. Countless medical procedures and tests. Sex on a schedule. Some other issues include:

Hormone crazies. On the upside of your cycle, when you have estrogen, you're moving along, thinking clearly, and acting with purpose. You're on top of things. But on the progesterone side of the cycle, you react in a different manner. It's hard to think, easy to get stuck, and easy to be depressed.

Expenses. It depends on what your medical insurance will cover. Ours was very good. All of our exams and tests were covered but not the drugs. We spent about two thousand dollars on drugs. More elaborate procedures not covered by insurance can cost a great deal more. Expenses can add to the stress of an already stressful situation.

Decisions. How long are you going to try

this? How many cycles are you going to do? How long can you stand it? Then there are ethical issues. What are the options? Use donor eggs? In vitro? Couples need to discuss and agree on these decisions.

Emotional Experiences

For the couple experiencing infertility, the range and depth of emotions is vast.

Anger. I didn't shake my fist in the air, although some people do. This is a difficult area for a Christian. You know that having a child is more than the meeting of sperm and egg. It has to do with God, His blessings, and His will for your life. But when you don't get pregnant, you question God. *Why God? We're happily married. Why not us?*

Anger is ever present. It erupts at anything that reminds you of your infertility. Babies. Pregnant woman. Diaper ads on TV. A woman in my church, who was about my age, went through two pregnancies while we went through these infertility procedures. I resented her. I'm

hard. Christmas is very child-centered. Relatives with sweet babies come to family dinners. Baby showers? Impossible! A good friend is having a baby. Do I go to the shower? Do I not go? How do I show that I love her, yet I don't want to be there?

Feeling uncomfortable at church. The church we attend has three hundred children. They announce new births. People hold their kids during worship. I cried every Sunday in church for about a year. I felt guilty over my anger, over my envy of others, over my lack of joy for their blessing.

Isolation. If God wasn't answering my prayers, I must be a substandard person. Theologically that's not true, but that's what I thought. I felt isolated. We had a major problem and we couldn't do anything about it. We tried to be sociable, but we wanted to pull away from people.

Marital stress. All those decisions. What are we going to try? How long are we going to try

You know that having a child is more than the meeting of sperm and egg. It has to do with God, His blessings, and His will for your life.

ashamed of my anger towards her. But that's how I was feeling at the time.

Feeling defective and broken. "I should be on the bargain rack. I am not a complete woman. I can't do the very thing that women are supposed to do." I think a husband would have similar feelings if he were the infertile one. His masculinity is questioned. He can't father a child. He can't carry on the family name.

Helplessness. Other couples decide to start a family and in a couple of cycles, they are pregnant. They seem to have control over their lives. With infertility, you feel totally out of control. You do what you're told to do and you hang on for a bumpy, chaotic ride. Sometimes, you almost stand back and watch what happens, as if you are an outside observer.

Sadness. Difficult holidays and special occasions. Mother's Day. One year in our church, they asked all the mothers to stand up. Everyone applauded. There's nothing wrong with that, but it crushed me. I wanted to stand up too. Instead, I just dissolved. Holidays are

it? You have expenses, a lot of disappointment, and a lot of stress. I was afraid that Phil resented me because I was the infertile one. Did he regret marrying me? That question came up one day. He said, "You're not infertile. We are infertile." His response was very comforting to me.

Family members' pain. Your parents hurt with you. They want grandchildren. They want you to be happy. They feel helpless. My mom kept saying, "Can't the doctors do something for you?" Your in-laws might resent you if you're the infertile one. You married their son and you can't give them a grandchild. My sister-in-law had a little girl in our first year of treatment. A couple years later, they called to say, "We're pregnant again. It's a boy." I remember thinking, "Wow! They get two babies. They get a boy and they get a girl. They have the perfect family." If I had lived near them and had to see them every day, I might have had a hard time being joyful for them. I had to work through those feelings.

Friends' reactions. People create a lot of stress for you with unhelpful reactions,

thoughtless remarks, or unwanted advice. At the same time, they can be the most supportive to you. If your friends are pregnant, you might be tempted to avoid them. They might not understand how you feel. They ask, "Why are you so upset?" Then they tell you bluntly, "Get over it!" People don't mean to hurt you, but they do.

Stories. People relate stories to you. "I had a friend who adopted a child, then got pregnant. You need to adopt a child." Your response: "Right. Great plan. I'll go through an adoption so I can get pregnant." You want to say that; but you don't. Remember, you face a level of stress and despair that's equal to facing a chronic or terminal illness.

Reactions of Christians. People have very definite ideas about what reproductive technologies are acceptable. Are you going to do in vitro? Is that right to do? Right for us? People will very likely render their opinion about a wide variety of methods. This may seem like an invasion of your privacy.

Your level of faith. "If you have more faith, God will bless you with a child. You just don't have enough faith." "You are not responding to your suffering correctly." "Trust God! He knows what's good for you. He has good things for

you." People say these things to you very casually and they are not helpful. They are handing you another burden to carry—you don't have enough faith!

In the midst of our infertility, I cried a million tears. I cried out to God. I read the Bible. I read about Hannah. I read about Rachel. I read about Sarah. I read about Elizabeth. But they all had their babies! I read these stories over and over again thinking it would help. It did help in one way. It validated how hard infertility is. Hannah cried, "Give me a baby or I die." In my own anguish, I ranted and raved. If I saw a story on TV about a baby thrown in a dumpster, or a child who had suffered abuse, I screamed at the television. That was part of the way I processed my anger.

Grief. No funeral. No burial. No flowers. No cards. Yet there is a death: the death of hopes of the wonder of a child emerging from your love.

How would a counselor work with me? I'm angry. I feel defective. I'm trying to figure out where God is in all of this, but can't. I come to you. What are you going to say to me? How does your own experience with childbearing relate to my experience of infertility?

II. Moving through the Pain of Disappointed Desire

(Philip Monroe)

The Bible is filled with the cries and groans of God's people. You will find these in the narratives, poetry, and prophecy. Fifty-two psalms are lament psalms, mostly written by David. He says, "God, You've got to save me! I'm going to die! What are You doing? Why don't You answer?" Sometimes he cries out because of his own sin. But many times, he cries over the results of someone else's sin.

Though the Bible is filled with these cries, pastors and biblical counselors sometimes have a hard time allowing people to grieve in that manner. We see the hope that God has for them in their sorrow. We want them to experience God's blessings. We want to pull them out of their despair. And we're afraid to hear their groans because we feel uncomfortable hearing them. Their desperate cries test our own faith. We get impatient. We throw "Bible bullets" at them. We give them verses but say them from afar, devoid of human compassion. When we do that, we take away the hurting person's privilege of having someone grieve with them. We're unsettled by the untidy, messy, maybe even angry, cries that people have. If God spends so much of His canon on these kinds of cries, can't we, as His ambassadors, spend that time as well?

I want you to consider for a moment some of the biblical expressions of faith during suffering caused by unrealized desires. Remember, the cravings you and I have are not necessarily sinful. Though we sinners often distort worldly comforts and seek them apart from God, desire for worldly comforts isn't wrong. James 4:1 reminds us that the problem with desires is that they set up battles within us. The bible recognizes that faithful living includes mourning losses, crying out for understanding and deliverance, Godly anger, and Godly despair.

Expressions of Faith in Suffering

1. Mourning Losses

People of faith mourn as they express their faith while suffering. We cry out for relief, for escape, for understanding, for perspective. "God, help me to understand this." We desire something we don't have. And we mourn.

A friend grieves the loss of his wife of twenty-five years. He desires to see her, to touch her, to smell her, to love her. We were born with these cravings and desires. When desires like these remain unfulfilled, pain will result.

Do you know the chorus "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after You"? (Ps. 42:1) It has beautiful melody. But the melody doesn't fit that passage! Groaning, panting. "I have no water. I'm dry." If I were in the desert three days, without water, like the Israelites in Exodus, I wouldn't sing that melody. I would be groaning, "I'm not going to make it! I am in pain."

What do you do when your counselees express powerful desires that remain unfulfilled? Squash them? Tamp them down? You might interrupt their pursuit of the desire, but you won't block it. I like to eat sweet things. With self-control, I can stop eating them. But my desire does not go away. You can't stop desire by trying to shut it off.

But God uses our desires to draw us to Himself. "You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted. You encourage them and You listen to their cry" (Ps. 10:17). Mourning losses is an acceptable and faithful response to suffering. Jesus mourned when He looked over Jerusalem. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem. How I long to gather you like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (Luke 13:34). He mourned for Lazarus. Even though He knew He would raise Lazarus from the dead, He mourned. You, too, can be faithful to God and still mourn.

2. Godly Anger

What does godly living look like when I am angry? Without violating the fruit of the Spirit, Godly anger is directed at the real problem—the results of the Fall. Sin has destroyed the peace we have with God and the peace we have in our world. It's okay to be angry about that.

When I get angry about things, I don't want to be around people. I don't want to be with the person with whom I am angry. I want to get away from him. I even want to punish him a little. That's not godly anger. Godly anger brings people together through reconciliation. In Godly anger, people move toward God. Godly anger talks about injustice and tries to correct it.

3. Godly Despair

Godly despair acknowledges the vanity of this world. We long for so many things that our culture, friends, and family tell us we should have. But in the end, these things won't bring hope and happiness. The book of Ecclesiastes

in ways entirely incomprehensible to us.

Think about examples from the Bible. He told Joshua, "March around Jericho's walls seven times. Sing. Play trumpets." Isn't that odd? But the walls of Jericho fell. God ordered Gideon to significantly reduce his fighting force before going on to conquer the Midianites with just three hundred men. God told Jehoshaphat, "Go into battle but send the singers out first." But, the most amazing example is this: God brings the suffering servant as king. Is that the way to bring in the kingdom of God? Not in our thinking. God doesn't always deliver what we want, when we want, or how we want it. We need to see with new eyes to see how and what He delivers.

God hears your cries and groaning. He is close to the brokenhearted. He saves those crushed in spirit (Ps. 34:18). Godly groaning is remembering, even reminding God, of His promises. The psalmist does that repeatedly. He reminds God of His promises to be with him, to

Sin has destroyed the peace we have with God and the peace we have in our world. It's okay to be angry about that.

describes the vanity of life. "I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving for the wind" (Eccl. 1:14). In despair, we can quickly become demanding, embittered spirits. But Godly despair is not demanding. It allows other people to provide comfort. It remembers God's faithfulness even when we do not feel it.

4. Godly Crying Out For Relief and Understanding

Throughout Scripture, God's people cry out when they suffer. Ever wonder why God uses up so much space in Scripture to point out these cries and guttural groans? To point out that the world is broken? Partly. God tells us our sufferings are very dear to Him. He records our every tear (Ps. 56:8). Cry out as men and women of faith have cried out to Him throughout the centuries.

God is our deliverer. But He doesn't always deliver the way we hoped He would, or the way we thought He should. Sometimes He delivers

guide him, to provide for him, to give him a future.

Godly groaning is not passive. It looks for ways of escape. If you are ill, go to the elders of the church (James 5:14). Have people pray over you. Prayer anoints you. It is not wrong to look for ways to get away from suffering. Godly groaning is a communal thing. It allows others to join us in our suffering.

Men and women of the Bible cry out for understanding. Many of these cries in the Bible are messy. Consider how many verses in the book of Job are rich, guttural cries for understanding. God didn't rebuke Job like He rebuked the counselors. Did Job repent for crying out for understanding? No. He repented that he, a righteous man, demanded that God give him an answer for his suffering.

In Lamentations, Jeremiah laments events in Jerusalem. He asks God, "Are you going to forget us forever? Why are you using the Babylonians (those heathens) to punish us?"

How can you stand to let them get away with their sin? Will you ever save us?" In the middle of Lamentations, after twenty verses of saying how God has crushed him, made him eat dirt, broken his bones, ripped him up like a bear would rip up somebody, Jeremiah says, "But my hope is in You because I'm alive. You are with me."

We ask the same questions Jeremiah asked, "God, are You ever going to remember us? Are You ever going to save us?" We know the ending of our story, but we don't know what's going to happen in this life

Bill Smith, a wise friend, said, "The Christian life is more wilderness wanderings than it is Promised Land." We're not in Egypt anymore. God is with us and has brought us out of our misery. He saved us and redeemed us. But we are not yet in the Promised Land.

What did the Israelites do in their wilderness wanderings? They complained. They groaned. They demanded to go back to Egypt. God did not respond to their cries. But God did respond to the cries of Moses. Faith made the difference. Cries of faith. "God, I know Your character. I don't understand what You're doing. But I know You are my God."

5. Godly Waiting

Christians who suffer also wait. This is not the passive waiting of stoic endurance. It is an active resting in the goodness of God with the hopeful expectation that someday one's trials will come to an end. Phil Ryken, pastor at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia said, "We cry and groan in this life. But while we mourn, we also wait."¹

Waiting safeguards our hearts. It helps reorient ourselves. We wait actively, not passively, not fatalistically. We don't demand, "God, do something." We don't sit back and wait until He does what we demanded. Godly waiting meditates on God's character. His goodness. His holiness. His justice. His mercy. His grace. His majesty. Godly waiting cherishes the comforts He does provide. Godly waiting asks, "Lord, let me see those unexpected blessings that You've been giving me all along."

¹ Paraphrase of Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001).

That is waiting. That is worship. Active waiting also requires self-examination. You notice the places where you love things too much, where things have become a lust, like fertility treatments. You spend so much of your life centered on it that it controls your whole life. But you can wait and say, "No. I want to cherish God for who He is, for what He has done for me. I want to examine my heart. I don't want to be consumed by this fertility quest."

Too often, biblical counselors jump right to this self-examination and so depict Godly waiting as peaceful.² When we do this, we circumvent people's opportunity to express their faith in a godly manner through mourning and crying out to God. People need to mourn and cry. It's the way to communicate with God. Waiting is worship. We take comfort in His truths when we wait. God provides mercy in the midst of suffering. He does not delight in suffering. He has promised deliverance. We wait, even though we continue to look for answers to our problem.

Essential Counseling Goals.

How should counselors work with couples who struggle with infertility? Three areas demand the most attention.

1. Assessment

As those you counsel tell their story, ask yourself, "What am I hearing as my counselees talk about their pain?" For instance, what was the couple's relationship prior to fertility issues? How did they communicate and minister to each other? Do they know God? Who is He to them? Who was He before the fertility treatments? Where are they stuck now?

2. Education

If the couple has been through fertility treatment for a while, they probably know everything there is to know about the latest advances in treatments. But they may need education on other issues.

Emotional and Hormonal Cycles. Counselees often don't know about the female monthly emotional and hormonal cycles. When estrogen builds, the woman is more likely to feel happy and energized. She likely has greater hope

² This reveals a subtle, but unbiblical, theology that suggests that if we hope in Christ, we will not suffer.

in getting pregnant. Then progesterone kicks in. She gets her period and crashes, physically and emotionally. Does the couple understand this cycle and consider the needs that arise at various points along the way? Have they considered how long will they try fertility treatments? Which treatments will they try or not try?

Stress. Although you can't just say, "Relax," some research suggests that couples who have less stress in their lives and have a hopeful outlook are more likely to get pregnant. As a counselor, ask yourself, "How can I help this couple reduce the stress that comes with fertility treatments?" Suggest times for meditation on God's word, and times for doing things that are fun together. Suggest the couple

worship God through their waiting and crying and to allow God to examine their hearts

Counselors need to understand how they respond to their own suffering and grieving before they can help others. If counselors don't do this, they will pass their biases and mistakes on to their counselees. How do you, counselor, respond to trouble and loss? How do you grieve? Are you a fatalist like me? "Oh, well. There's not much we can do. There will be another cycle next time. Don't be so upset, Kim."

Sometimes we offer a default response to those who grieve. We go into advice mode. "Have you tried this? Have you tried that?" But this approach only tries to fix a problem. It does not develop a relationship with the couple. How about the Pollyanna response? People say,

Counselors need to understand how they respond to their own suffering and grieving before they can help others.

not talk about infertility all the time. They need time to be mindful of the other things God has given in this moment.

3. Grieving Well

What does godly living look like when I'm mourning? When I'm angry? When I'm crying out? Look at how God's people do these things in Scripture. When they grieve well, they give voice to their pain. Look at Lamentations. "I feel isolated. I feel alone. I feel crushed." The laments also express anger at injustice and ask God to bring a way of escape. Help your counselees to give voice to all these things as well as thanksgiving and hope for the future. However, when they're angry or hurting, they have trouble thinking clearly. They're can't read a deep theological essay to find help. So give them one simple thought to hang onto. Maybe one passage or verse of Scripture. They need to fight but they must also wait. Encourage them to

"Don't worry. It's going to work out for you." My first response to this is irritation. "How do you know that?" But instead of responding, I shut down. I just don't listen to them.

Do you tell an "I have a friend who..." story as a way to avoid the discomfort of the situation? Don't do this. It does not provide comfort. We often respond in negative ways to our counselee's suffering. Be careful.

Consider your own experience with fertility. Maybe you don't have any children and you are hurting. Or you may have several children but wish you didn't. You might say, "Hey, take my kids!" Your own experience with fertility will impact your interactions with your counselees.

In any case, think carefully before you respond or give advice to a couple struggling with infertility.

III. To A More Lasting Hope

(Kimberly Monroe)

After a number of failed cycles, our doctor simply told us, "It's not unethical for you to continue with fertility treatments, but I don't think you should. We have tried all the treatments. There's nothing left to try. You have gone into menopause prematurely." We agreed with this doctor's advice and stopped treatment.

In Part I, I left you with a question: "How would you counsel me? We didn't seek counseling. It just never occurred to us. We were tired of the whole thing and just wanted to rest. But God does heal. Time helped—time to mourn, time to get over it. I thought I would never want to hold a baby again. But I did. We were in a small, supportive, church group. They understood and loved us. The leader often gently asked, "How should we pray for you?" That was helpful.

One day I thought, *God has so many promises for us. But one thing He didn't promise. Nowhere in Scripture did He promise me a baby. He has not let me down. It's good to desire a baby. But I cannot demand it of Him. Children are a blessing, but they are not promised to us individually. You do not receive blessings because you're a good person or because you earn them. They just come.* That was a revelation to me. Gradually I stopped feeling defective. I started to believe that "all things work together for the good" (Rom. 8:28). God is

good and He wants good for me. But that good does not include biological children. I had to wait and trust Him.

Four years after we stopped fertility treatments, we started adoption procedures. But then, Phil's grief kicked in. In the adoption process you realize, "That baby will not look like us." I was finished with grieving. I knew no baby would ever look like me, but Phil wasn't finished grieving. We had to work through his grief. People grieve in different ways at different times.

We finally received a different blessing than the one we originally wanted. And this blessing is very sweet and very precious. Through this trial and trouble, God was at work. He blessed us with a clearer picture of who He is, what the Christian life is really about, and what to put our hope in. This is our lasting hope. Peter says, "In His great mercy He has given us a new birth into a living hope and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade" (1 Pet. 1:3).

God is glorified by relieving our suffering, and God is also glorified by not relieving our suffering. In either case, God is always seeking to bestow His greatest blessing upon you: Himself.³

³ Paraphrase of Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1978).