

# What Not To Say When Someone is Grieving

Last week my dear friend Sandi Glahn wrote another boffo [blog post](#) about the myths of infertility, which included some of the dumb things people say.

It may be insensitivity or a lack of education that spurs people to say things that are unhelpful at the least and downright hurtful much of the time. I still remember my own daggers to the heart after our first baby died nine days after her birth. And for the past several years, I have been collecting actual quotes said to those already in pain.

So here's my current list of What Not To Say when someone is hurting:

## **Don't start any sentence with "At least. . . ."**

- "At least you didn't have time to really love her."
- "At least he's in heaven now."
- "At least you have two other children."
- "At least that's one less mouth you'll have to feed."
- "At least it didn't have to go through the pain of birth."
- "At least you've had a good life so far, before the cancer diagnosis."

## **Don't attempt to minimize the other person's pain.**

- "Cancer isn't really a problem." (e.g., Shame on you for thinking that losing your hair/body part/health is a problem.)
- "It's okay, you can have other children."

## **Don't try to explain what God is doing behind the scenes.**

- "I guess God knew you weren't ready to be parents yet."
- "Now you'll find out who your friends are."
- "This baby must have just not been meant to be."
- "There must have been something wrong with the baby."
- "Just look ahead because God is pruning you for great

works.”

- “Cancer is really a blessing.”
- “Cancer is a gift from God because you are so strong.”

**Don't blame the other person:**

- “If you had more faith, your daughter would be healed.”
- “Remember that time you had a negative thought? That let the cancer in.”
- “You are not praying hard enough.”
- “Maybe God is punishing you. Have you done something sinful?”
- “Oh, you're not going to let this get you down, are you?”  
(Meaning: just go on without dealing with it.)

**Don't compare what the other person is going through to ANYTHING else or anyone else's problem:**

- “It's not as bad as that time I. . .”
- “My sister-in-law had a double mastectomy and you only lost one breast.”

**Don't use the word “should”:**

- “You should be happy/grateful that God is refining you.”

**Don't use clichés and platitudes:**

- “Look on the bright side.”
- “He's in a better place.”
- “She's an angel now.” (NO! People and angels are two different created kinds! People do not get turned into angels when they die.)
- “He's with the Lord.”

**Don't instruct the person:**

- “This is sent for your own good, and you need to embrace it to get all the benefit out of it.”
- “Remember that God is in control.”
- “Remember, all things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28 is powerful to comfort oneself, but it can feel like

being bludgeoned when it comes from anyone else.)

**What TO say:**

- “I love you.”
- “I am so sorry.” You don’t have to explain. Anything.

**What TO do:**

- A wordless hug.
- A card that says simply, “I grieve with you.”
- Instead of bringing cakes, drop off or (better) send gift certificates for restaurants or pizza places.

And pray. Then pray some more. It’s the most powerful thing we can say or do.

This blog post originally appeared at [blogs.bible.org/what-not-to-say-when-someone-is-grieving/](https://blogs.bible.org/what-not-to-say-when-someone-is-grieving/) on January 20, 2009, and you can read the many comments there.

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# “What is the Biblical Perspective on Childlessness?”

## What is the Biblical Perspective on Childlessness?

I would suggest that God’s design and intention for most married couples is the blessing of children. So first, it starts with the foundational premise that children are a blessing from God.

The Old Testament and New Testament both indicate that there was shame connected to not being able to bear children. This is not necessarily God-given shame, but the natural outflow of

knowing that usually, children are produced at some point(s) in a marriage. Shame is about sensing something is wrong about ourselves. But now that we know more about conception, we can know that sometimes things just don't go right for a variety of reasons on a purely biological level, such as a wife whose body is allergic to her husband's sperm, or hormone levels not conducive to maintaining a pregnancy. In that case, it's helpful to recall the biblical concepts of:

- Stewardship of the earth, which leads to medical science. There are procedures and medications that may assist in reproduction.
- The sovereignty of God. No one can conceive unless He calls that child into being.
- Trust in the goodness of God.

With the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases that result in the infertility of one or both partners, the consequences of premarital or extramarital sexual sin may include childlessness. In this case, a biblical perspective sadly includes the principle of sowing and reaping, where infertility is the result of sinful choice.

When couples try to have children and cannot, then the biblical call to trust God means following His leading. It may mean pursuing medical treatment. Or building your family through adoption. Or choosing to live without children to free up energies for Kingdom work. (I am thinking of several couples I know who now recognize that their childlessness was the doorway to great spiritual fruitfulness of a different kind.)

A childless couple may not experience shame over their childlessness, but it would be important to give voice (and tears) to the grief, disappointment and deep sense of loss over it. David wrote in Psalm 51, "I know that You desire truth in my inmost parts," and we know that mental and spiritual health means being honest about what's going on in

our hearts.

It is my privilege to share with you the deep wisdom of my friend [Sandra Glahn](#), author of *When Empty Arms Become a Heavy Burden* and *The Infertility Companion*:

***What the Bible says directly about infertility:***

*If you read the Bible cover-to-cover, you will find lots of stories about infertile couples from Abraham and Sarah to Samson's parents to Hannah and Elkanah in the Old Testament and Elisabeth and Zechariah in the New. In each of these stories the couple goes on to conceive. That's because the Bible is not a textbook on infertility. The stories are select histories included as part of a bigger story, the story of God's redemption of humankind. And infertility is often the way God uses to demonstrate His ability to do the impossible.*

*In the Old Testament we also find promises that God will curse his people with infertility if, as a nation, they do not obey him. A problem arises when we read these sections and wrongly conclude that infertility is a curse from God.*

*The curses God outlined involved entire populations, including humans and livestock all infertile at once. He was not talking about individual infertility. Michal, David's wife who laughed at him for dancing before the Lord, is said to have never had children, but that does not necessarily mean she was "struck" with infertility. It may be that David just never "summoned" her again.*

*In one other instance in the Law we see that an adulterous woman was cursed with infertility. But overall, infertility is more an affliction of the righteous than the unrighteous. And the infertility as a curse is at a national not a personal level. In the New Testament when Elisabeth conceives, she rejoices that God has removed her shame in the eyes of the people.*

## **How to think biblically about infertility:**

**Reproducing.** The first commands given to humans were to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion over the plant and animal kingdoms and the earth itself. The last command is to make disciples. So while reproducing physically is a wonderful part of being human, it is not the only way God has ordained and blessed for leaving a lasting legacy.

**Longing.** In Proverbs 30 we read that when we look around and observe the natural world as God made it, we see that it's normal for an infertile person to have deep, unfulfilled longing. Infertility can cause a lot of grief, and it is not "unspiritual" to feel a profound sense of loss.

**Gifted living.** The apostle Paul called celibacy a gift (1 Cor 7). And in one translation of the Psalms (NASB), children are called "a gift." (Though in the context, Psalm 127, the actual phrase is "sons are an inheritance/heritage"; at that time children were the means to economic success and many sons assured military protection). A wife is called a gift. So one way to think biblically about infertility is to recognize that while the gift of children has been withheld, children are only one of many gifts through which God gives his blessing. If Aquilla and Priscilla ever had children, they are not mentioned.

**Limits on dominion.** If you read Genesis 1-2, you will notice that while God gave humans dominion, he put limits on what they were to manage/subdue. They were given stewardship of the earth and its animal and flying creatures. But notice that they were not given dominion over each other. Humans were made in the image of God, so all humanity, even at the one-cell stage, is precious to Him. One of the ways of thinking biblically about infertility is to recognize this and to tread carefully when considering advanced reproductive technologies (ARTs). There are ways to use ARTs that honor human life at the one-cell stage and there are ways that do

*not. We are also called to be good stewards of our bodies and our resources. That being said, infertility is only a symptom of a problem such as a malfunctioning thyroid or hormone imbalance. Many couples pursue treatment both to have a child and also to find out the source of what is wrong.*

I hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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## **“How Do We Know God’s Will About Infertility?”**

I have a few questions. First, does God cause everything to happen or does He just allow most things to happen? I know that He can make good results out of things that seem bad to us, but did He make the thing happen because it was what was best for us, or did it just happen as a result of free/human will? I know that God certainly CAN make things happen, but I just wonder how often He does. It seems that we thank God for the good things that happen in our life. And we should! But is it then right to “blame” Him for the bad in our life? Or maybe not so much blame, but just thank Him for the bad too because we know it’s ultimately for the best? Or maybe we shouldn’t thank Him or blame Him for every little thing, because maybe some things just happen. But typing that out – it just doesn’t sound right.

Many things make me wonder this, but on a personal level, it’s in regards to my and my husband’s infertility. Did God cause this to happen because we must learn something from it, or did

it just happen because we live in a fallen world where things like disease, infertility, and bad things as a result of sin and our free will are just going to happen?

Also, in regards to our infertility problem, how do we know what God's will is for us? We have been trying for 2 years now. We've had advanced and expensive treatments that have failed. Sometimes people tell us to "just trust God." But what do they mean, that we should stop pursuing treatments and just let it happen naturally? I mean, we have medical diagnosis that need treating... one would do the same for a cold, or flu, or cancer right? They would seek help. I feel the same way about infertility. Do you have an opinion on that? Now, maybe by saying "Just trust God," they mean not to worry so much. And that I can understand. I know that God has a plan and that it will be perfect for us. So I do need to not worry so much. It's just a very emotional issue!

But as far as knowing God's will... I mean, I just wish I knew if His will for us was to never be parents, or to adopt, or to keep trying for a biological child. We pray for guidance, but it's hard to tell if we're "hearing" God or just doing what we want to do. If I ask God to "speak" to me, will He always? How will I know it is God rather than just myself telling myself, "it's a sign?" Does that makes sense?

Oh, and I don't know what your thoughts are on fertility treatments. We have done in vitro fertilization but we do not believe in destroying any embryos. We also only put in as many as we'd be willing to carry and froze the rest to use in another cycle. We would never do selective reduction or kill an embryo. So I hope if you have time to reply, that you don't automatically say that we should stop fertility treatments because they are immoral... unless you think they are for another reason that I have not mentioned and that you might enlighten me with.

Thanks for your trust in us to help you think through these



important issues.

*I have a few questions. First, does God cause everything to happen or does He just allow most things to happen?*

Ultimately, I think it's really a matter of semantics because of the biblical teaching that God is sovereign. Bottom line is, nothing happens to us without His permission, so whether He proactively caused it to happen or He allowed it to happen, it still has His fingerprints all over it and He has a purpose in it before it ever reaches us to begin with.

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"Just happening" sounds a lot like "accident" or "coincidence." And in a universe where God is sovereign, there are no accidents. Nothing "just happens" apart from His permission. God is big enough to use both things He directly sends to us, as well as indirectly such as through people's choices, to accomplish His purposes. The "how often" part is a shrouded mystery that He doesn't let us in on. There's no way to know that, only to speculate.

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Absolutely! And that's why God calls us to always give thanks for everything (Eph. 3:20). From our very limited perspective,

we don't always know the difference between the good things that happen in our lives, and the bad things. The biggest example of that is the horror and pain the disciples experienced when Jesus died, which devastated them because they thought it was a bad thing, but it was the very best thing that ever happened-until right around the corner, an even better "best thing" happened, when Jesus was raised from the dead. When we give thanks for what feels like a bad thing, we are relinquishing it into God's hand and affirming our trust in His goodness and His sovereignty. (By the way, this is one of the major lessons God has taught in my Christian walk. I invite you to read my story, which I call "How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change" here: [www.probe.org/how-to-handle-the-things-you-hate-but-cant-change/](http://www.probe.org/how-to-handle-the-things-you-hate-but-cant-change/))

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Unfortunately, God often doesn't let us know the "why" of our trials. But when you consider that He calls us to honor him in the midst of our suffering (1 Peter 2), then the reason behind them doesn't matter as much as our response to them.

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*that? Now, maybe by saying "Just trust God," they mean not to worry so much. And that I can understand. I know that God has a plan and that it will be perfect for us. So I do need to not worry so much. It's just a very emotional issue!*

Yes, I think that God's command to Adam and Eve to exercise dominion over the earth was the overarching principle that resulted in modern science. So, if there's something that can correct infertility, it makes sense to do what we can (and what we can afford, while still remaining good stewards of the money God has put in our hands). Of course this is an emotional issue for you. . . it's much more than just a command to "be fruitful and multiply," it's also the desire of your heart which God put there as an element of your femininity and your husband's masculinity!

*But as far as knowing God's will.... I mean, I just wish I knew if His will for us was to never be parents, or to adopt, or to keep trying for a biological child. We pray for guidance, but it's hard to tell if we're "hearing" God or just doing what we want to do. If I ask God to "speak" to me, will He always? How will I know it is God rather than just myself telling myself, "it's a sign?" Does that makes sense?*

Boy, it's hard when we're trying to discern God's leading, isn't it?

Here's one way to look at it: God will not open a door that violates His will for you. Which is how fertility clinics can put all the right chemicals in a Petri dish, add eggs and sperm. . . . and the stuff just sits there and no baby is made. Only God can create life. (And yes, we can theoretically force a clone, but we can't control whether or not a healthy baby makes it to full-term delivery.) Which is why you have to go with the biblical principles, which are to be fruitful and multiply. If you try in vitro and God doesn't bless it, He is speaking His will to you. You can try to adopt and if God

doesn't allow an adoption to go through, He is speaking His will to you.

I think the best route is to commit your desire for children to the Lord, ask Him to guide you, and then move forward, trusting Him to take care of the details. If you have submitted yourselves to the Lord about this issue, then you can rest in Him and in His love for you that He will be faithful to lead you. (My guess is, that describes how you've been living already. . .??)

I do think that often, God leads us through His peace (consider Col. 3:15, "Let the peace of Christ rule [act as umpire] in your heart. . .") or the lack of it. I often counsel people, "Go to where the peace is." After praying much about it, you probably don't have any peace about the idea of never being parents, for example, which would constitute direction to continue to seek His ways of getting His children into your family, whether by adoption or biology.

*Oh, and I don't know what your thoughts are on fertility treatments. We have done in vitro fertilization but we do not believe in destroying any embryos. We also only put in as many as we'd be willing to carry and froze the rest to use in another cycle. We would never do selective reduction or kill an embryo. So I hope if you have time to reply, that you don't automatically say that we should stop fertility treatments because they are immoral... unless you think they are for another reason that I have not mentioned and that you might enlighten me with.*

Nope, we don't think they're immoral; we think that using the criteria you specified, that is the God-honoring and life-honoring way to do it.

I hope this helps. I don't have a crystal ball to tell you what you should do, but I CAN encourage you to daily give thanks for your fertility problems, give thanks for your

desire for a baby, give thanks that God is in control, give thanks for His faithfulness in guiding you in the process, and give thanks by faith for the baby He has for you, however He chooses to do it.

(And by the way, we experienced secondary infertility after our first baby died, so I have prayed these prayers myself. We have two sons.)

Blessings to you!

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## **“Is It Wrong to Be a Sperm or Egg Donor?”**

Dear Sue,

**Quick question. What is your view on sperm/egg donations? Do you think it is wrong to be a donor? Why or why not? This is an interesting topic.**

Quick answer. Yes, I think it's wrong to seek—or be—a donor. Because the creation of a new human being is supposed to be the product of love and commitment in a marriage relationship, not a consumer commodity that we produce simply because we want a baby. Any time there is a sperm or egg donor, that means people are going outside the marriage relationship to get what they want, which means a type of adultery.

In the case of infertility, this is a difficult and emotional

issue, but I think we should remember that no one has the “right” to have a baby. It’s like saying, “OK, God, You’re not cooperating to give me what I want, so I’m going to get it my way.” Same thing for people who want to be parents but aren’t married; having a baby is about getting what they want, not about what’s in a child’s best interests (which is always going to be a mother and father in a stable marriage).

This is a great example of why the “technological imperative” is wrong; simply because we CAN, doesn’t mean we SHOULD.

Thanks for asking.

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