



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Faith and Infertility  
(Cloning, pp. 65-74)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

# Faith and Infertility

Facing the fact that one will never bear children is not just an experience of profound disappointment, but a kind of “dying,” a loss of a longed-for relationship. Can we develop a Christian spirituality for growth through infertility? Can worship become a context for acquiring the grace to live into involuntary childlessness with hope and dignity?

### Prayer

In peace we pray to you, O God.

For our friends and neighbors whose lives are touched with sorrow as they yearn for a child but cannot conceive, (*silent prayers*), Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer. Amen.**

### Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 1:1-20

### Responsive Reading†

We shall walk through the valley and the shadow of death,  
we shall walk through the valley in peace.

**If Jesus Himself shall be our leader  
we shall walk through the valley in peace.**

We shall meet God’s children there,  
and there’ll be no weeping there.

**If Jesus Himself shall be our leader  
we shall walk through the valley in peace.**

### Reflection

“If we are to say that there are limits to what ought to be sanctioned in the pursuit of parenthood (either limits to the sort of technologies we allow or limits to the medical resources we commit to addressing infertility),” Maura Ryan asks, “how are we to respond to the very real losses experienced by those who are infertile or unable to carry a child to term?” Too often we are tongue-tied and unable to help infertile believers cope with their suffering. Or, trusting in a loving God, we may simply confess with them that infertility is “a mystery to be lived obediently.”

Though this may be all that we say to infertile couples in church, the culture seductively lures them to believe “suffering is not something to be understood but rather something to be conquered,” Arthur Greil fears. “Explanations that rely on such concepts as ‘God’s will’ cannot be convincing when we believe as strongly as we do in the human ability to pull ourselves out of our condition through technical knowledge.”

To offer a healing spirituality to infertile believers, we should

- ▶ *Provide a worship context in which they feel visible and significant.* “Attention to the language and symbols we use in the public rituals and sermons marking religiously important moments of family life...and an effort to listen from the perspective of those who are currently struggling with some aspect of family could go far in easing the pain of those who experience those events as excruciating,” Ryan writes. Some churches even make a day for a special blessing for infertile couples. “Although many people come to such a service to pray for a miracle, it also provides a context for exploring the challenge of living faithfully in the absence of miracles.”



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

► *Help them move from spiritual crisis to spiritual quest.* Healing will begin with reconceiving the self. The object is not to deny their suffering or distract themselves with other activities, but to “tap into the vital energy which all human beings possess and of which the ability to impregnate or give birth is only one small manifestation.... From denying and hating a body that will not make babies, they come to embrace a body as rich as ever in capacities for love, recreation, passion, and courage, only grown wiser now through suffering.”

► *Reframe the place of procreation in our theology of marriage.* We should (1) highlight “mutual self-giving of the partners” rather than procreation as central to marriage; (2) see not only family life, but also “single life or marriage without children as a unique and valuable context for ministry”; and (3) stress caring for children rather than acquiring them so that “we can commend adoption or other ways of relating to children as attractive paths to resolving the infertility crisis.”

We owe those struggling with infertility “an inviting witness to the ‘something more’ that lies beyond the limits of their loss.”

### Study Questions

1. Scripture mixes “judgment, blessing, and mystery” in stories about barrenness. How can Hannah’s story (1 Samuel 1:1-20) seem insensitive to infertile couples? How can it be helpful?
2. “Infertility is an invisible reality in most congregations,” Ryan notes. How can it be visible and significant in worship?
3. Discuss Ryan’s view: “When hope is...an awareness of God’s redeeming work within our experiences of illness or loss or despair, when it is not mistaken simply for a commitment to a certain outcome, infertility [can] be the catalyst for a new and deeper relationship with God and the community.”
4. How would Ryan’s ideas for reframing our theology of marriage help infertile believers be more included? What specific steps should your congregation take to carry out each idea?

### Departing Hymn: “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go” (verses 1, 3, and 4)

O Love that will not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
that in thine ocean depths its flow  
may richer, fuller be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
and feel the promise is not vain,  
that morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,  
I dare not ask to fly from thee;  
I lay in dust life’s glory dead,  
and from the ground there blossoms red  
life that shall endless be.

*George Matheson* (1882), alt.  
Tune: ST. MARGARET (Peace)

<sup>1</sup>From “We Shall Walk Through the Valley,” traditional.

# Faith and Infertility

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan	Dual Session (#1)	Dual Session (#2)
Prayer Scripture Reading Responsive Reading Reflection (skim all)	Prayer Scripture Reading Responsive Reading Reflection (all sections)	Prayer 1 Samuel 1-20 Responsive Reading Discuss Hannah's story and <i>spiritual quest</i>	Prayer Psalm 113 Responsive Reading Discuss congregation's response to infertility
Questions 2 and 4 Departing Hymn	Questions (selected) Departing Hymn	Questions 1 and 3 Departing Hymn	Questions 2 and 4 Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider why many infertile believers find little solace and usable wisdom in church.
2. To outline a Christian spirituality for growth through infertility.
3. To discuss how congregations can make infertility more visible and infertile couples more included in church life.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Cloning (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go," locate the tune ST. MARGARET (Peace) in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

Bill Shiell writes, "'We do not choose our families,' as the old saying goes, or what our families will be like. We welcome the gift of creation in God's image and enjoy the relationships that are provided for as long as we have them. We see the pain that accompanies the limits of our humanity not as a difficulty to be managed or a problem to be avoided, but as a part of life to be received. Our problems—caused biologically or otherwise—are stations along the journey that will draw us even closer to the one who suffered for us and suffers with us today...."

"In *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris describes a visit to see her physician for treatment of her bruised knee. In the waiting room she meets a group of monks who are also awaiting appointments and have their fair share of broken limbs. When two eighty-year-old monks notice Norris walk in with a cane, they begin telling stories about the various accidents they have suffered in life. They have fallen off roofs, out of trees, into quicksand, and into lakes. As their stories keep growing in a game of one-upmanship, the men correct one another about the facts behind them. Soon a younger monk interrupts to ask Norris if she is all right. 'Look at the company I'm in,' she replies, 'I'm not only fine; I'm in heaven.'

"Norris understands the grace of the Christian life. We share life with individuals who have fallen so often, and we are grateful for the ways that God continues to sustain us on the journey" (*Cloning*, pp. 63-64).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Using the prayer in the study guide, pray silently for friends and neighbors who grieve because they cannot conceive children. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Samuel 1:1-20 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

After reviewing why many Christians who are struggling with infertility feel invisible and marginalized in church life, Maura Ryan suggests three steps toward a Christian spirituality for growth *through* infertility: (1) to stop ignoring infertility in our worship; (2) to help infertile believers reconceive themselves as on a spiritual quest from which God can bring redemptive good from their suffering; and (3) to present the Christian view of marriage in a way that is more sensitive and helpful to infertile couples.

Ryan's essay is in the *Cloning* issue because human reproductive cloning has been promoted as a medical response to infertility. We would be amiss to deal with the morality of human cloning, but ignore the deep suffering of infertile couples who have been promised so much from this technology. Nevertheless, since your study group may want to discuss this important topic independently of the morality of cloning, the study guide does not stress the cloning issue, which was the immediate context of her remarks.

Your group may extend its discussion of this material. In one session, review the layers of meaning within Hannah's story (1 Samuel 1-20) and passages like Psalm 113 that mention barrenness, and use this as a springboard to discuss Ryan's view that we can help infertile believers re-envision their suffering from a spiritual crisis to a spiritual quest. In the other session, discuss her ideas to make infertility more visible in worship and to reframe our theology of marriage.

## Study Questions

1. Peninnah taunts Hannah by saying that her infertility is a judgment, for "the Lord had closed her womb" (1 Samuel 1:5). From Peninnah's perspective (which totally ignores the mysterious nature of God's blessing), Hannah is 'rewarded' with a child only because she prays 'fervently enough.' If we were to adopt uncritically Peninnah's theology and rather wooden interpretation of the situation, we would be insensitive to infertile believers.

Scripture's realistic depiction of Hannah's suffering, her husband's tender love for her, and the compassion of the priest Eli, can help infertile couples make sense of their suffering.

2. Regularly in worship, but especially in services that emphasize families and family life, a prayer or song or sermon might lift up those who are struggling with infertility. The biblical passages associated with barrenness can inspire new worship materials. Some churches set aside certain days—like Presentation Sunday, which celebrates the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:21-40)—to invite "those who were suffering infertility or pregnancy loss to come together to pray and to experience the support of the community." Encourage members to review the worship practices, good and bad, that they have experienced.
3. Two ideas in this passage may help infertile believers move from a *spiritual crisis* to a *spiritual quest*. First, Christian hope means we perceive that God's presence in the midst of our suffering can draw us into deeper relationships and new ministry. This hope does not deny our loss and pain, and is not reducible to a platitude like "Suffering builds character."  
Second, hope is not reduced to a longing for a biological child. This keeps us from distorting prayer into "a relentless expectation of a miracle," Ryan says. "It also becomes possible to bring realistic expectations to medicine. Stopping treatment is 'abandoning hope' only when success or failure is measured as the achievement of a certain result. When the experience of infertility is lived as an invitation to experience the mystery of God's care for us, God's infinite 'motherhood' and 'fatherhood,' God's desire for our flourishing, it is not necessary to pursue 'success' at the expense of the self. Indeed, it does not even make sense."
4. Infertile believers may experience marriage as more rewarding and complete within the Christian life, hear God's call to special service as a couple, and discover new ways to care for children by adoption or through friendships in the church family. How are marriage, Christian calling, and care of children celebrated in worship in your congregation? Are infertile couples encouraged to lead in worship, care for children, and develop ministry gifts?

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.