

Introduction



How Do I Respond to Words that Hurt?

I first faced the frightening prospect of infertility as a twenty-year-old college student diagnosed with endometriosis. The surgeon's crushing announcement to me that day was the first in a long string of hurtful and damaging words that I was to hear in the years to come. Stung with disappointment and with a sense of my own failures, I floundered through my twenties, handling my self-hatred with self-abuse.

I found Christ at the age of thirty, but this was only the beginning of learning to forgive those who had hurt me—and of extending grace to myself. Finally married to a wonderful man in my mid-thirties and desperate to start a family, I endured letdown after letdown as our hopes of conceiving a child were dashed, one blow at a time.

My husband and I were eventually led to international adoption, an arduous experience in itself, but one through which I gained a tremendous measure of healing and joy. Our son, from Vietnam, and our daughter, from China, are treasured gifts from God. Still, even after receiving the desire of my heart, I have continued over the years to field misguided comments and questions from others.

To these I have learned, and am learning, to respond with grace.

Any couple that experiences infertility and then takes on an adoption journey will be exposed to words that hurt. From “Gee, if you just had a little more faith that you’d get pregnant” to “Are those kids really yours?” we who walk this path are subject to a lot of questions and comments that can cause us pain and anger. Ours is a unique journey filled with sorrow and loss, faith and hope.

In the dozens of books I’ve read about others’ infertility and adoption journeys, I have glimpsed bits of my own story. Being able to identify with others, even in small ways, has been to me a soothing balm and has at times provided me a laugh at my own insecurities or fears. But in my reading I also came to the conclusion that there existed no one source that wove together the many threads that make up the tapestry of adoption.

It would have been of incalculable benefit to me and my loved ones if we’d had an informative, understanding source that covered the time from, say, well before a couple boards a plane to a foreign country to adopt a baby to the time their adopted child is several years old. A book such as this, had it included the strongest and brightest threads running through it not just of faith but also of forgiveness, would have been as a work of art to me. Faith is a prerequisite for adopting a child, in particular for adopting internationally. We need faith that our adoption agency will pull everything together to make things happen. Faith that another country’s government and officials will legitimately do their part. Faith that the child whose picture or video we have received is meant to be ours. Faith that the pilot who is flying our child to his or her new home country won’t crash the plane.

Some of the authors whose adoption stories I read spoke of faith in God, others of faith in themselves or in destiny. But none seemed to make mention of another essential ingredient prerequisite to adoption: forgiveness. The sources on adoption that I read simply did not tell me that I had to forgive anyone for anything, why I had to forgive them or how to accomplish this.

But just think for a moment about the enormous need for mastering the art of forgiving—and of forgiving over and over—within the realm of adoption.

Adoptive parents quite often need to make peace with themselves, and sometimes with God, for damaged or broken reproductive systems that refuse to create life or for the loss of life through miscarriage or stillbirth.

Sometimes we must forgive those who hurt us before we adopted—those who judged us for not becoming pregnant or for seeming to rub their pregnant bellies in our faces while we ached and longed for a baby to love. Maybe people asked us why we would go way over there—to China or the Ukraine or India—for a child. They may have insisted that there would be something wrong with the baby we had already committed our love and lives to before we'd ever met him or her.

We need to forgive doctors who give up on patients because they are worried about their success rates. Those of us who do not meet their protocols for producing babies prove unlikely candidates for fulfilling their success rates, and they may turn us away. They can tell us to consider adoption, but they can't prepare us for how our empty wombs will affect us when we walk out their doors for the last time.

Adopted children, even at quite early ages, can begin to hold resentments against the birth parents who gave them up for reasons their young minds struggle to understand. I realized this when my barely six-year-old daughter from China looked down into her cereal bowl one morning and out of the blue exclaimed, "My own mother didn't even want me!"

Birth parents whom we and our children may never know, but whom we probably think of from time to time, have to forgive themselves for the choices they have made. And all those involved in adoption in any way should forgive a society at large for its stereotypes, misconceptions and insensitivity directed toward them.

Some parents may have a difficult time forgiving their adop-

tion agency if it acted unscrupulously. Though most are run with integrity and do their best to work with foreign nations, we may find ourselves at odds with them for extraordinary delays in getting our children or for the ways we are treated in other countries. This happened to my husband and me while we were in Vietnam adopting our son when our adoption facilitator practically tried to force us to take a second child against our better judgment.

The church too, while it strengthens our faith in God, can also give us more than a little practice at honing our forgiveness skills. All of us have a tendency to expect much from others who, like us, have committed to loving others with the love of Christ. We sometimes fail to accept members of Christ's body as flawed, sinful individuals, just as we are.

The truth is, it takes exceptional people to steadfastly walk with a couple through the enduring hardships of infertility and adoption. If you find a few, consider yourself greatly blessed. I know that there are wonderful churches out there that will counsel and encourage a couple that is struggling with an all-consuming desire for a baby.

Although some will feel safe enough to look to the church in the midst of infertility, not many will be prepared for certain ramifications of doing so. For instance, unanticipated scenarios such as finding ourselves at odds with our church's view of fertility interventions, with our inability to conceive or with adoption itself may play themselves out. Positions on these matters will vary from church to church. It is probable that a church will be unable to offer absolute conclusions regarding the ever-increasing medical technologies available, from artificial insemination to ovary transplants.

Once we are home and settling in with our new child or children, we sometimes find ourselves broadsided by intrusive and hurtful words about our children that we never expected. My experiences have run the gamut from complete strangers approaching me to ask the cost of my children to people asking whether or not my kids are normal to others wondering aloud if my children are really brother and sister. Even my loved ones and friends have poked

fun at my kids' heritages or have silenced their own children when their kids have asked if I really am my son's and daughter's mother. On the other hand, there have been times when I have been guilty of making my own erroneous assumptions about adoption too and have had to forgive myself.

It is important for us to acknowledge and deal with hurtful words and to explore the motivations behind them. Doing so is a means of trying to understand those who have hurt us. Understanding why people say what they do is the first step toward compassion, as it allows us to glimpse another's perspective. This can lead to giving others grace—an undeserved gift of letting people off the hook for what they say—that eventually leads us to forgive them, which is this book's ultimate goal.

Forgiving others lessens the damaging effects of people's repetitive negative verbal assaults on us and on our families, and it prepares us for future difficult encounters or exchanges. It is the key to freedom, to fully ridding ourselves of another's transgression toward us or ours toward them. Forgiveness maintains and builds on relationships with those we care about. It also prepares us and our children for uncomfortable situations with people who sometimes say unexpected things in every place from the grocery store to the family dinner table.

If we can develop a better understanding of the motivations behind what sometimes seems to be a never-ending stream of questions and comments, and if we can at the same time address how these exchanges really make us feel, then with the desire to forgive in our hearts, asked for from God, we can respond positively to people and transform loss into gain. We can take back our voices and our stories. We can develop all-important skills for inevitable conflict resolution as we parent our adopted children.

It is my hope that this book will be useful to anyone whose life has been impacted by adoption. As for the family, friends, co-workers, professionals, adoption agencies, churches or any others involved with an infertile couple or adoptive parent, if you love

and respect these individuals, and if you hope to avoid saying or doing anything injurious in your support of them, this book can help you too.

PART 1
The Path to Adoption

1



I cannot forget the day, when I was twenty years old, when my surgeon walked into my hospital room, stood at the edge of my bed and announced to me, “If you want children, you’d better have them now.”

Still groggy from anesthesia, I just looked at her and thought about my cheating boyfriend, my unfinished college education and my lack of maturity, and in my mind I responded to her, *You must be joking.*

But she wasn’t.

She had just performed a partial bilateral oophorectomy on me, because of which half of my endometriosis-ravaged ovaries were now gone. Actually, as my surgeon put it, “We took what was no good.”

I blamed myself for this turn of events. During my previous college year, I had experienced months of the most sudden and horrific pain at the onset of my menstrual cycles, pain that left me in a fetal position on my bed for days. Yet I hadn’t scheduled a gynecological exam. What I had done a couple times was land in the emergency room of two different hospitals, certain that I was at death’s door.

One of the two ER doctors I had seen had mentioned that I might have a case of endometriosis, but he had never explained

the condition to me. He hadn't told me that endometriosis is the result of the membrane that lines the womb, which is normally shed during a menstrual cycle, not being eliminated. Nor had he let me know that my ovaries, where the membrane had been deposited and had grown like wildfire, could be at the mercy of this disease. He had urged me to see a gynecologist, however. But as a broke college student who had no medical insurance and a good case of denial, I had put such a visit off.

Now I had nobody to blame but myself. Had a doctor caught my condition early on, I may have been spared the loss of so many eggs and the resulting infertility that would later cause me to soak my pillow so many nights with a thousand tears.

But that wasn't all I blamed myself for. I had ruined a relationship with a man whom I cared a great deal for but had mistreated right into the arms of someone else. There was no chance now that we would marry after college and have babies together, and it was apparent to me that I had a lot of growing up to do before I ever got to the point of having a family. No, I didn't foresee babies in my future for quite some time, and by the time I was mature enough to mother them, I reasoned, it would be too late.

Perhaps some of the greatest hurts that we who face infertility suffer are self-directed. Unlike deciding to achieve a degree or acquire a job or reach for any other milestone in life, our decision to conceive a child may result in complete failure. And nobody tells us how this failure will hit us. No experience prepares us for how our identity will warp and morph into a version of self that can frighten and grieve us. Even if we have strong faith in God, which I developed over the years following my initial heartbreak, being confronted with infertility may bring us to a sort of spiritual crisis. We may tell ourselves that we are a failure. Or defective. Or unworthy. Or unfeminine. The list goes on.

Infertility has been, without a doubt, the biggest obstacle in my life to self-acceptance and forgiveness. Self-loathing over the belief that I was responsible for my empty womb due to my poor choices

and behavior turned my inability to have a baby into a runaway train. It sped off, taking with it all the essential ingredients of a life worth living: gratitude, joy, peace, love and contentment. The anger I felt toward myself and toward God gave my infertility the fuel that propelled it ever faster toward my destruction.

You see, I wasn't just immature. I also had a drinking problem that resulted in my being in a state of arrested development emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. God, back then, was someone whom I rarely gave a thought to. And why should I have? I had been told many years earlier that I was selfish and would never have children, so apparently God had made me that way. There was nothing for me to think about but myself and the next party I could attend.

I wasted a lot of time in early years. But I finally reached out to God when I was thirty, and He reached right back and scooped me out of the pit that was my life. Yet He still had much healing to do in me before I was ready for Mr. Right. It wasn't until I was thirty-five years old that I met my wonderful husband.

I remember sitting in John's car one night. I felt it only fair to tell him that I might not ever be able to have children. He nodded his head and said, "Well, I don't feel a burning need to procreate." And he never has!

He loves me without conditions and has never once expressed disappointment that he might not become a father to a biological child. He has also always supported my attempts at becoming pregnant and offered me compassion when they failed. Because despite my medical history and my "advanced age" of over thirty-five that placed a hoped-for pregnancy in the high-risk category, I believed that God could bless us with a healthy baby.

But as the years passed and medical interventions to achieve pregnancy became more costly and physically invasive, a realization dawned in me that God just might keep the door shut on conception and childbirth for me. Oh, how I grieved for the baby that would not come! Green horns of envy for others' fertility

began to poke their way through my skull. I felt disconnected and alone amidst a sea of fertile family and friends.

Wearing my heart on my sleeve made others notice my pain. And this only increased my angst. People attempted to replace my horns with hope by way of a plethora of advice and stories of pregnancy miracles. One told me, “Stand on your head for three minutes after intercourse.” Another, “You should probably see a chiropractor.” And one of my favorites, “My friend knows this woman who got pregnant, and she doesn’t even have fallopian tubes!” I heard it all. It seemed as if everyone who crossed my grief-stricken path wanted to throw something at me to see if their advice would stick.

Sometimes well-intentioned church friends encouraged me to attend this or that healing service. Some instructed me on how to effectively pray for a child. Others decided that I needed to be delivered from a “spirit of infertility.” One person suggested, “Just ask God why you’re not getting pregnant, because there’s probably sin in your life that He wants you to deal with.”

I pursued many of these suggestions. Still no pregnancy. And soon all those enthusiastic voices silenced themselves. In the hush and emptiness of those years existed moments of being ignored that felt unbearable. Some friends and acquaintances coolly withdrew from me. In my mind I wore a scarlet letter “I” for “Infertile” stamped across my forehead.

When I was with those who loved and supported me, try as I might, I could not keep the pain to myself. It snuck out in my conversations with them. They changed the subject. One friend even forbade me to mention my infertility woes any longer when she informed me, “I’m not a counselor.”

In fact, I was seeing a counselor, but still there was all this pent-up anger that rose up out of me like a storm. Frequently I lashed out at my poor husband and at God. Anger is like that. It either turns inward and becomes depression and self-hatred, or it targets

those whom we dearly love and feel safest with and who love us right back despite our shortcomings.

“It’s not fair!” I shouted at the Lord. “Why have you given babies to all five of my sisters but not to me? What have I done that’s so awful to deserve this?” The crushing silence from Him reminded me of when my parents would ignore my childhood temper tantrums.

But as children often do with parents who deny them of their wants, I would then burst into tears and seek comfort from my heavenly Father even in the misery I felt that He was responsible for. Sorry and sad, I wanted to draw close to Him and to know that He loved me and wasn’t angry with me for my juvenile behavior and bad thoughts. Still not understanding why His answer was no, the conflict within me that came from being angry with the One I most looked up to was too difficult to bear.

So the cycle continued with more self-loathing. I despised my empty womb—dark, barren, inhospitable place it turned out to be. I was defective, and that defect distorted the very essence of my femininity.

Outside my private, personal hell, life went on around me. Friends and family became pregnant and with enthusiasm shared their news with me. While glad for them, I experienced a kind of validation within me that everyone was deemed worthy of bearing a child except me. I wondered if all my Christian friends and family were, well, better Christians than I was.

When the last of my friends who had endured years of infertility finally became pregnant, my sorrow was incalculable. The one person who had remained in my life and who could understand my emptiness had been blessed too. I now stood utterly alone, barren, broken and cursed.

And when she found herself with a second pregnancy on the heels of giving birth to her first child, I wanted to scream at her when she told me, “I didn’t want this to happen again so soon. I’m getting on birth control after this one.”

And then came our adoption plan and our joy. Yet even that did not erase all the pain and self-condemnation nor cease the questions that I posed to God about what I had experienced. Those issues take time to heal.

What Hurts

When I first saw a gynecologist about my medical history with endometriosis and the difficulties of conceiving that go along with it, I received compassion from him—and a great story. He shared with me that his wife dealt with the same condition I did. She had undergone in vitro fertilization. He told me, “All we had was one embryo to implant. That embryo’s name is now Aaron, and he is five years old.”

That story was like a shot of vitamin B12 to my spirit. If Jesus could feed five thousand with a few fish and several loaves of bread, he could use just one of my eggs to create an embryo that would become a little person.

But when our fertility specialist refused to proceed with IVF with less than three eggs, I told him what our gynecologist had said. I even contacted the doctor and asked him to advocate for us. He said he would. But it didn’t change things. Rules were rules, our fertility doctor told us, and no exceptions would be made.

The world of reproductive technologies is a murky and confusing place. If a couple will undergo difficult, painful procedures, invest precious time in follow-through with them and pay exorbitant fees for a chance to become biological parents, they should have a greater say in how that treatment is handled—despite how it may affect a clinic’s success rates.

I believe that the desire to have children is a God-given one; unmet, it can turn into a consuming grief. It’s as the thirteenth chapter of the book of Proverbs says: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (13:12).

In desperation, many of us infertile couples wage war against our heart sickness. As this battle begins, the troops of family, friends,

fellow churchgoers, counselors and others pour in and offer their assistance.

While the support is appreciated at first, the battlefield can start to blur into a sea of combatants in which it's difficult to distinguish friend from foe. That's because a battle requires a strategic plan and a united front, with everyone in it for the long haul. Yet the combat zone can appear to be filled with scattered troops who plow ahead with their own battle plan, then mysteriously desert the field!

Great confusion flooded me during the raging war within me because of all the advice I received on how I should achieve conception. My confidence was shaken by having my faith and my sins and my choices dissected by others.

The process shredded any self-worth I'd had. I doubted my every move during the battle. Cornered and blasted by loaded barrels of hurtful words, I gave way to nursing my spiritual, emotional and physical wounds. Even so, in my battered condition I was expected to drag myself to baby showers, children's birthday parties and maternity wards to visit others' new babies. I forced myself to congratulate friends on their swollen bellies full of new life, to ask about their health and to help out new mothers.

God was the only One who had all the answers and the right direction for me to follow. At first I couldn't quite hear Him amidst the cacophony of voices that filled my head. As time wore on, however, the din faded, and I needed Him more than ever, because the troops had packed up and gone home, leaving me alone in my pain. One extreme had replaced another, and that hurt.

Grace Given

It is impossible for us to dwell in a place of self-condemnation, anger toward God and disappointment in people for long. We can't love, know that we are loved or have relationship with God or anyone else in such a state of mind.

The first step toward self-forgiveness is to give grace.

Just as someone who hurts or offends us takes "junk" from his

or her heart and dumps it on us, self-condemnation is when we pull ugliness from our own hearts and cast it on ourselves. We dwell on it, bathe in it, rub it all over ourselves—and it stinks. It burns. It keeps others away from us, and it keeps us in pain. We have to accept God's provision of forgiveness to take away the hurt.

If I don't give grace to myself or to another person who hurts me—if I don't let my offenders off the hook, so to speak—then my decision to withhold forgiveness negates the core of my faith. It's tantamount to telling God that someone is unforgivable, that Christ's death on the cross and His forgiveness for the sins of all mankind throughout the ages is insufficient for the forgiveness of my sins or another's sins. Who can say that she believes in God and what His Son has done for us when in the basement of her psyche she stockpiles all the hurtful, harmful things that she has done to herself and that others have done to her? This only allows the root of bitterness to take hold within us.

In her book *Living Beyond Your Feelings*, Joyce Meyer asks, "What is the seed from which that root sprouts? Unforgiveness! Bitterness results from the many minor offenses committed against us that we just won't let go of." She also acknowledges that "there are sometimes major offenses committed against us. The longer we allow bitterness and resentment to grow and fester, the more of a problem they become and the harder it is to be free from them . . . the best thing to do regarding any offense, large or small, is to forgive quickly and completely."¹ Not only does holding onto bitterness grieve the Holy Spirit (see Eph. 4:30), but it contaminates us and those we come into contact with.

I choose grace for those who haven't experienced infertility, because the problem is difficult for the fertile to comprehend.

Those who marry, plan a family, conceive and bear children just might take all these things for granted as a normal course of life events. They never have to feel the anguish that many of us do over a broken body. They don't question God as to why He hasn't allowed them to become mothers to biological children.

They do not have to exhaustively explore complex issues such as fertility interventions or face the judgment of family and friends who shun them. They will never feel as if they want to sink into the floor at a baby shower. Tears do not flow from their swollen eyes while they watch mothers in the park with their babies. And they aren't horrified by the onset of each period, riding a sickening roller coaster of hope and despair each month until they find themselves ready to jump off at the crest before yet another downhill run.

But I choose grace, because I know that those who love me will never understand and that they do want to help. I need to remember that I live in a culture of doers and fixers. When I present people with a problem, they try to come up with an answer.

Some of the suggestions and pieces of advice we receive can be helpful. We should be open and should receive them when they are offered by loving, wise sources. If I suffer through years of attempting to achieve a pregnancy and then years more on an adoption journey, I need to understand that family and friends can suffer burnout in their efforts to support me throughout what seems to them an infinite emotional struggle.

It isn't the intention of most infertile couples to diminish the joy that others feel about their own babies. Yet I realize that we don't always come across as the most enthusiastic participants in people's lives. We sometimes avoid our pregnant friends. We sit way back in the room at a baby shower or leave the nursery decorating or the baby-clothes shopping to other friends. We can let others down.

Lastly, doctors deserve grace too. Many do care about their patients and want to make wise decisions in their best interests. Unfortunately, many must adhere to protocol and guidelines for specific clinics.

Handling It

We have to remember throughout our grief and in any self-blame that God's Word tells us, "There is therefore now no condem-

nation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). If we love God and believe His Word to be true, we will be free from guilt and sin.

Don’t hate yourself or your body—or your God, for that matter.

Though I had an all-consuming desire to have children, God revealed to me that it was never my “right” to bear children. He makes promises in His Word, but He never promises that we will reproduce. Instead, in the Psalms He says that He “gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children” (113:9). He showed me that if it weren’t for the pain of infertility or loss that some of us struggle through, far fewer orphans would be placed in loving homes. To date, there are estimates of over 145 million of these adoptable children in the world!

Perhaps too God, in His mercy, spares the woman who cannot bear children from a fate worse than infertility. He knows all about us. There may be reasons beyond our ability to understand that we may never experience biological motherhood. Maybe our bodies would not be able to handle the physical demands of pregnancy or childbirth. Perhaps there are potential medical conditions or illnesses carried in ours and our spouse’s combined genes that would result in a child that would suffer beyond that which he or she and we could bear. What I am sure of is that I wasted far too much time and energy beating myself up and indulging in resentment of others over what I viewed as my physical and spiritual defects.

In addition to all this, it humbles me to consider the possibility that the adoption of my children has far more to do with God’s plan for their lives than with my desire to have given birth to them.

I know that God wanted my children here to be raised by my husband and me for His reasons. Of that I have no doubt. We are the imperfect vehicles that He has used to place our children right where He wants them to live for reasons that only He understands. My proof is God’s Word, which tells us, “And he made from one man every nation of mankind. . . having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:26).

Though I met with a counselor during my struggle to become a mother, I believe that I relied too heavily on family and friends for compassion and support. I shared too much with them, cried too many tears in their presence and left myself vulnerable to them as a problem to “fix.”

If I had to do it all again—and, thank God, I don't—I would find a support group of other infertile couples. They are the people who understand the pain of childlessness when the hurt of it is overwhelming. Most fertility clinics provide information on these groups and on how we can get connected with them.

I am not opposed to fertility interventions, despite my experiences and my faith. But I do think that those who wish to have treatment should be educated, assertive and prayerful about any methods that they seek.

Healing Questions

1. What has been the most painful part of your infertility journey?
2. Do you harbor any unwillingness to forgive yourself, God or others for your infertility?
3. Which insights or tools from this chapter will help you to move forward with healing from the pain and grief you've experienced?