

WHEN THE CRADLE IS EMPTY

Copyright © 2004 by John and Sylvia Van Regenmorter  
All rights reserved. International copyright secured.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Van Regenmorter, John.

When the cradle is empty : answering tough questions about infertility / John and  
Sylvia Van Regenmorter.—1st ed.

p. cm. — (Focus on the family)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-58997-157-4

1. Infertility. 2. Infertility—Psychological aspects. I. Van Regenmorter, Sylvia. II. Title.  
III. Focus on the Family presents.

RC889 .V243 2004

618.1'78—dc22

2003017445

A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Other Scripture taken from THE MESSAGE. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior permission of the publisher.

Focus on the Family books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, churches, or groups. Special imprints, messages, and excerpts can be produced to meet your needs. For more information, contact: Focus on the Family Sales Department, 8605 Explorer Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80920; or phone (800) 932-9123.

Editor: John Duckworth

Cover design and photo: Mark Waters

Printed in the United States of America

04 05 06 07 08 09 10/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents



There Is an Empty Room .....	vi
Introduction .....	1
1. A Journey Begins .....	5
2. Pitfalls Along the Path .....	11
3. Why Does Infertility Hurt So Much? .....	27
4. How Can You Cope While You Hope? .....	35
5. Handling the Holidays .....	45
6. How to Keep Your Marriage Strong .....	53
7. What Do You Say to Aunt Sally? .....	69
8. Faith and Infertility: The Nagging Question .....	79
9. How Shall We Then Pray? .....	91
10. High-Tech Treatments: Tough Issues .....	99
11. Pregnancy Loss and Infant Death .....	117
12. Secondary Infertility: A Misunderstood Pain .....	127
13. When Is It Time to Move On? .....	133
14. Are You Ready to Adopt? .....	139
15. When Will the Journey End? .....	153
Notes .....	163

*There Is an Empty Room*

There is an empty room  
In which no child sleeps;  
Just a rocking chair, a teddy bear,  
The baby clothes they keep.

It is a quiet room  
With everything in place;  
But no happy sighs or lullabies,  
No child in their embrace.

There is an empty crib  
In the corner, tucked away;  
The gentle light of the moon shines bright  
As they kneel by the crib to pray . . .

“Remove all bitter thoughts,  
Your will is what we seek.  
Dry our tears and calm our fears,  
Lift us up, for we are weak.”

There is an empty room  
In which no child sleeps.  
But they know the love of a Father above,  
And His promises He keeps.<sup>1</sup>



# Introduction



**F**or whom is this book written?

- Married couples who are finding it difficult to have a baby;
- Spouses who discover that infertility is straining their marriage;
- Believers who find that childlessness is weakening their faith;
- Couples puzzled by all the options for treating infertility;
- Those who seek to encourage their spouses who are disappointed over a failure to conceive;
- Couples who grieve the children they've lost in miscarriage or at birth;
- Those considering adoption; and
- Family members, pastors, counselors, and others who want to understand those whose cradles are empty.

*By* whom is this book written?

To understand that, you need to know a little of our story.

Married in John's last year of seminary, we struggled with infertility for almost six years before adopting our first child, John Mark. Knowing there was room in our hearts and home for more children, we continued medical treatment for infertility, including two surgeries for Sylvia. Finally, believing God's plan for us didn't include biological parenting, we adopted a daughter, Sarah, in 1982.

Feeling doubly blessed, we were content with our family of four. After discontinuing all medical treatment, we became deeply involved in ministry to infertile couples. John completed a Doctor of Ministry

degree, and Sylvia helped to start a RESOLVE support group for infertile couples in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

God, meanwhile, had a surprise for us. At the ripe old age of 38 (Sylvia) and 39 (John), we were suddenly expecting! We were also dumbfounded, to say the least. Now we're triply blessed; our daughter Rebecca is an added joy.

We never would have chosen the journey of infertility. But we're grateful that God has used this journey to make us stronger and more mature in our faith. We're more conscious of our dependence on Him, more certain of His love, more grateful for every blessing, and more eager to serve Him in ministry to others.

When we discovered that we might not have biological children, we experienced questions, including, "Why, God?"

We experienced loneliness. Why did everyone around us seem to have children?

We experienced well-meaning but ignorant advice: "Why don't you just adopt and you'll get pregnant?"

We experienced doubts. Was infertility a curse?

We visited half a dozen physicians, spent thousands of dollars, and saw moments of great expectation crushed by agonizing failure.

Through these experiences two things occurred.

First, we learned. We did so slowly and sometimes painfully, but we learned. We learned that it's important to seek the most qualified physician available. We learned that high-tech infertility treatment can involve difficult ethical dilemmas. We learned that unintended hurts come from loving but uninformed friends. We learned how to challenge the spiritual doubts that plague many Christians who experience infertility.

Secondly, we gained the desire to help fellow travelers on this journey. As a result we've spent over 15 years in ministry to fellow infertile couples, including those who've experienced pregnancy loss. That min-

istry began when we co-authored a book with Dr. Joe S. McIlhaney called *Dear God, Why Can't We Have a Baby?* (Baker Book House, 1986).

Our ministry took a giant leap forward in 1996 when we became editors of *Stepping Stones*, a newsletter devoted to providing information and encouragement for those struggling with fertility issues. Today *Stepping Stones* is a ministry of Bethany Christian Services, a national and international Christian adoption and family services agency. The *Stepping Stones* newsletter is distributed to thousands of couples around the world.

Some have said to us, “You have two children through adoption and one through birth. What more do you want? Why are you still involved in this infertility work?”

We're not involved because there's something we want. It's because we have something to give.

The best of what we've learned is now available in the book you hold. It's a privilege to share what we've learned with you!

# 1

## A Journey Begins

by Sylvia



**M**any metaphors can be used to picture the problem of infertility. It can be described as a roller coaster or a nightmare, for example—or, as one person put it, “a rushing stream preventing me from crossing over into the land of parenthood.”

When it comes to infertility, the metaphor I like best is “journey.”

I like it because a journey has a beginning and an end. It’s purposeful, not pointless. It implies activity, not passivity.

Infertility is an emotional journey; before you’ve completed it, you’ll experience all the emotions known to humankind.

### STEP 1: THE FOG

The journey begins in a haze. Perhaps you’ve been married for several years and no children have come. You may have used “the pill” for a year or two while you settled into married life and built up a savings account. But you’ve been off birth control for some time and nothing has happened.

Perhaps you assumed that pregnancy would come easily because your sister is a “fertile Myrtle” who had three children in five years. Maybe the story of this wife who wrote to us sounds familiar:

I know that you have probably heard my story a million times. We began our marriage, as the song says, with “bright hopes and promises.” We had it all figured out. George and I were married when we were 23 years old, and we decided that we would have our first child when we turned 26. After trying to become pregnant for over a year, we wonder if the Lord has different plans.

In the back of your mind you begin to wonder why you haven’t become pregnant, but probably feel no real worry. You think that if you and your spouse were able to get away for a few weekends, or if you felt rested enough to make love more often . . .

For others on this beginning leg of the journey, getting pregnant isn’t the problem. You conceive and celebrate. You can’t wait to tell your mother and your best friends; you begin making plans. Then suddenly there’s a cramp, a patch of red, a frantic call to the doctor. Before you know it, your pregnancy has ended. Your disappointment is huge. You bristle at the comments of those who belittle your loss. Still, you tell yourself that you and your spouse will try again, and next time . . .

## **STEP 2: THE REALIZATION**

You continue in the fog until slowly, gradually, it dawns on you that something is wrong. You should have become pregnant by now. Each month you hope for the best, but each month you’re disappointed again.

When asked about starting your family, you may laugh it off. “Why get tied down so early?” you say. “We’re going to enjoy life a little first.”



But inwardly you're becoming disturbed: *What's wrong? All our friends are getting pregnant; why can't we?*

Or perhaps you have another miscarriage. Like this wife, you lose your baby once more: "Soon I was pregnant, but we lost our baby at only eight weeks. We were deeply disappointed, but we knew God would provide. Six months later, I was pregnant again, and again I miscarried."

### STEP 3: DOWNPLAYING THE PROBLEM

In some ways, the next part of the journey is the easiest. The fog is lifting; you're ready to acknowledge that you have a problem. But you assume the infertility specialist you've selected can help you. As one wife recalls, "After two years of trying to get pregnant, we decided to work with an infertility specialist. He discovered that I had too many antibodies in my system but he was confident we could work around them."

At this stage many couples think, "It's something minor, right?" In your eyes, infertility is merely a slight detour in your plans. The burden on your back isn't heavy. You see no need to pack a suitcase for this journey; an overnight bag will be enough.

### STEP 4: THE SHOCK

Suddenly you fall off a cliff, hitting the bottom with a startled thud. Your physician has discovered that there's something seriously wrong with you—or your spouse.

"Doctor," you say, "you've got to be kidding!" But she isn't. You may feel like the woman who told us, "Our doctor has informed us that I have stage four endometriosis—which is the most advanced stage you can get."

Shock is usually the shortest stop on the journey. Soon you'll climb back up the cliff. Though you are shaken, you are unbowed.

## STEP 5: DENIAL AND ANGER

With renewed energy and determination you plunge down the path—blindly. You charge ahead, oblivious to roadblocks. Though you may not realize it, you're in denial.

Convinced that the diagnosis is wrong, you tell yourself, "There must be some mistake. I want that test redone." Perhaps your denial takes a spiritual turn: "God is just testing us. Surely He'll let us have a successful pregnancy soon!"

Denial can swiftly veer into the thorns and thistles of anger. You may become angry with your physician: "He is so insensitive, so incompetent, so expensive."

Your anger may turn against your spouse: "Why can't you come with me to the next doctor's appointment? I always go alone!"

You may become angry with yourself: "It's stupid to get so upset about this problem," you might say, or, "I hate being so jealous of my sister and her children."

You may get mad at God, as one woman admitted to us: "I'm kind of angry with God right now. Why does He give me the desire to have a baby, and then not allow me to fulfill that desire?"

## STEP 6: GUILT AND DEPRESSION

Anger doesn't usually last long. Before you realize it, you're slipping down into the valley of guilt: "If only I hadn't used birth control"; "If only I'd had more self-control when we were dating"; "If only I'd gone to the doctor sooner"; "If only I'd been a better Christian." Much of the guilt may be unrealistic, but at the time you don't recognize it.

You begin to hate it when your friends happily announce that they're pregnant. You make excuses for not attending baby showers, but that makes you feel terribly guilty; after all, doesn't the Bible say to "rejoice

with those who rejoice”? Maybe you feel like the would-be mom who said, “I was genuinely thrilled for my friend, but I honestly did not want to attend the shower. I knew I would hate it. At the same time, I was angry at myself for feeling this way.”

At the bottom of the valley you encounter depression. This can take many forms; you may simply feel dragged out or unattractive, or you may lose all desire for sex and stop caring about your personal appearance.

### **STEP 7: WEARINESS**

It’s difficult to leave depression completely behind. You may fall into it again periodically, but in the meantime you continue the journey. You discover that the trip is much longer than you’d first thought. Instead of taking a short walk, you’re heading down a road that stretches for miles.

The sun is hot now as you trudge the dusty path. You’re getting weary. You pray, but you’re tired of praying because no one seems to answer. When you share your burden with others, they respond with platitudes. As one worn-out traveler put it, “If I hear someone tell me one more time to ‘just relax and it will happen,’ I’m going to explode!”

You endure tests and more tests, and still no end is in sight.

### **WHERE DOES THE JOURNEY END?**

Each couple’s pathway through infertility is unique. Yours may not include all of the aforementioned steps. But the chances are that you find yourself at some point along that itinerary.

Maybe you’re at the beginning of the journey. Your burden is light, your hopes are high, and the road doesn’t seem too steep or long. Indeed, your journey may well end in a successful pregnancy. That’s the experience of two-thirds of those who undergo treatment for infertility. Even if you stop medical treatment, you may be surprised as this letter-writer

was: “After struggling for many years with unexplained infertility, God blessed us with a wonderfully healthy son. What a joy it was for us to celebrate our tenth anniversary.”

Or perhaps you’ve been on this trek longer than you care to remember. There are no “surprises” in sight. The road keeps stretching endlessly into the horizon, and you wonder, “How and when will this end?”

Your journey will end in its own day and in its own way. I don’t know where yours will take you, but I do know this: Through faith in God, your journey will end with joy, not despair; with hope, rather than doubt; with fullness in the place of emptiness.

I hope and pray that this book will help you on your way!

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

# Notes



## **THERE IS AN EMPTY ROOM**

1. Adapted from Garcia, Stephanie, “There is an Empty Room,” *Stepping Stones Newsletter* (June/July 2002), p. 4.

## **CHAPTER 2: PITFALLS ALONG THE PATH**

1. McIlhaney, Joe S., Jr., M.D. with Nethery, Susan, *1001 Health-Care Questions Women Ask* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), p. 434.
2. Keenan, Jeffrey A., M.D., “Infertility: Facts and Fiction,” *Stepping Stones Newsletter* (October/November 2000), p. 2.
3. From comments made at a conference for infertile couples sponsored by Stepping Stones at Bethany Christian Services, May 4, 2000.

## **CHAPTER 3: WHY DOES INFERTILITY HURT SO MUCH?**

1. Schalesky, Marlo, *Empty Womb, Aching Heart* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), pp. 15-16.

## **CHAPTER 4: HOW CAN YOU COPE WHILE YOU HOPE?**

1. From an illustration shared at a ministry conference sponsored by the Willow Creek Association, at Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois, 1996.
2. Sometimes we wonder how many couples whom “God has joined together” have been “torn asunder” by the harsh realities