



FAITH AND Infertility

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*Infertility can be heartbreakng.
Four couples share how they maintained faith and hope.*

Infertility: it was the last thing Brenda Horrocks ever expected to hear from her doctor. She and her husband, Brad, had been married for four years, and although she had experienced complications with her menstrual cycle from the time she was a teenager, doctors had told her and Brad that with “a little help,” they would be able to have a baby. “A little help turned into a lot of help,” Brenda says, and after multiple fertility treatments over several years, the Horrockses were told that the likelihood of their being able to conceive was extremely small.

Infertility is not uncommon—some 15 percent of couples in the United States have difficulty conceiving a child;¹ other countries throughout the world show similar figures. In 40 percent of instances, the wife is infertile. In another 40 percent, the problem rests with the husband. In 10 percent of cases, both are infertile, and in the remaining 10 percent, the cause is unknown.² In the context of the Church, where the family is celebrated as the fundamental unit of society³, not having children can be an especially difficult challenge.

Yet as Brad and Brenda and many others can attest, God does not leave His children alone in their trials. “Never give up,” Brad recommends. “There’s always hope. Heavenly Father always has something in store for us. We have found that over and over again.”

Here, the Horrockses and three other couples who have dealt with the challenges of infertility—Dave and Angie Belnap, Phil and Valerie Hochheiser, and Curtis and Melody Linton—share how they saw the Lord’s hand guiding them through their challenges.

Dealing with Grief

Brenda’s grief at the diagnosis was so overwhelming that she began questioning her mission in life, she says.

“I felt lost for a long time. I felt I had no purpose. That’s the ultimate goal, isn’t it, to get married and have a family? I still knew I was a daughter of God, but I hated that I couldn’t be a co-creator with Him. I felt broken, like I wasn’t a real woman.”

Brenda tried “swimming through” her grief for several months and even years. At one point, it became so severe that she felt prompted to seek professional counseling.

“I realized the grief was inhibiting my progression,” she says. She asked Heavenly Father to guide her in a search for the right counselor and began meeting with one who was able to offer the help Brenda needed.

“As I went to my appointments and continued to do my homework [usually assigned reading], my heart was being prepared for healing,” Brenda recalls. “Many of my fears and pains started to subside, and a new person was emerging.”

Brenda notes that while some well-meaning people tried to assist by suggesting what might be wrong with her or what she could try, that didn't help. "I just needed people to buoy me up as I struggled and to acknowledge that what I was going through was difficult."

Angie Belnap and her husband, Dave, learned after four years of marriage that they most likely wouldn't be able to conceive. Angie recalls going through all of the stages of grief but finding herself returning over and over to the anger stage.

"I remember wondering how something that was so important in life could be denied me," she says. "My feelings of hurt and what seemed to me to be spiritual abandonment manifested themselves through anger. I was very angry. Angry at myself. Angry at my husband. Angry at God."

But Angie started working through her grief by focusing on aspects of her life she *could* control rather than on those she couldn't. Angie, who worked as a third-grade teacher, looked for ways she could improve her skills at work. She also read a lot—"there was always a book on my nightstand," she recalls—and pursued other self-improvement projects. "I couldn't change the infertility, but I could progress in other areas of my life," she says.

She also found it helpful to keep a journal. "I didn't always feel that I could talk to people about what I was going through, but I could get my feelings 'out there' by writing them down. That helped a lot."

Debunking Spiritual Myths

Angie's husband, Dave, grew up with four sisters and two brothers and always expected to have a large family of his own. However,

when years passed without any children for him and Angie, Dave began to wonder if it were a consequence of inadequate spirituality.

"We tried to stay positive," Dave says, "but it was hard. I knew the importance of starting a family, but because we weren't able to have biological children, I felt like I was being punished or short-changed."

Like Dave, many people facing infertility look for the reason behind the struggle and sometimes blame themselves. Such thoughts and feelings can sting even more when others make well-intended but hurtful comments, often laced with misguided beliefs.

For instance, Melody Linton recalls sitting in testimony meeting and hearing new mothers say things like, "God trusted me enough to bless me with this baby."

"I can understand why they said it," Melody admits. "It's a fair statement. But in my situation without a child, I couldn't help but think, 'God doesn't trust *me*.'

"I don't know that I felt angry at Heavenly Father, but I felt forsaken by Him," she continues. "I felt so left out. Why were all these other women getting to experience pregnancy? I had tried to live my life worthily and do things I knew to be correct. So why wasn't it happening for me?"

Eventually, Melody found solace in the writings of Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) on adversity.⁴

"The tables turned for me," she says. "I began to think, 'Why *not* me? I'm strong enough to handle this.' She knew that with the support of her husband, Curtis, and in the strength of the Lord, she could face her challenges.

Brenda points out that it's important to continue to trust in the Lord, even when what is



The Horrocks Family

The Belnap Family

happening isn't what we want. "For a while, I thought if I had enough faith, I would be cured," she says. "But sometimes having faith means trusting in and listening to the Lord even when we are *not* cured. What we want won't always match what He has planned for us."

She recalls a Sunday School lesson in which a bishopric member shared an important message about faith—one she's clung to ever since. He said, "When someone has an ailment or an illness and they are healed as the result of a blessing, their faith is being strengthened. But for those who aren't healed but continue faithful, their faith is being perfected. The first is a faith-promoting experience. The second is faith-perfecting."

Turning to—Not Away from—Each Other

Infertility can cause a lot of couples to reevaluate their plans for their lives and in some cases, their very relationships. When Curtis and Melody's doctor suggested a particular fertility treatment—one of their last options—Melody was ready to move ahead, while Curtis had significant reservations. At this crossroads, Curtis recalls, he retreated deeper within himself and escaped by exercising and working more.

Melody, meanwhile, felt stagnant.

"While we were trying different procedures, I felt productive and proactive, and that brought a tremendous sense of hope," she says. "But when we were stalling and nothing was moving forward, that killed me."

The couple had worked hard for years to encourage each other in their education, careers, and other interests. This had carried over into their infertility challenges as well, such as when Curtis went to doctor appointments with Melody or she supported him as he sought refuge in bike rides and other physical activity.

"Trying to support Melody is what had saved me through all of this," he says. But as Melody sunk deeper into sadness, Curtis felt powerless in knowing how to help her. They were, it seemed, at an impasse.

That changed, Melody says, when she ultimately realized

that they needed to be united as a couple. While she did not share her husband's reservations about the proposed procedure, she could respect them. "One no meant two no's," she says. Together, they began exploring other options.

Phil and Valerie Hochheiser discovered that when the stresses of infertility were too much—especially because, like the Lintons, they came to stages of understanding at different times—they could find relief in focusing on their marriage.

For instance, varying the routine gave the couple something besides fertility testing and treatments to think about. Phil says it was helpful to break away by going to the movies or taking a walk. He and Valerie also "took a couple of trips to put everything behind us for a bit. Otherwise, infertility could have run our days and nights," he says.

To further strengthen their relationship, the Hochheisers wrote each other notes, went on dates, made anniversaries or other dates special by splurging on a hotel room, made efforts to look attractive for each other, sent flowers, and started saying "I love you" more often. "It's easy when you're feeling depressed to let some of these areas slide—or to not try anything at all—but by making a conscious effort, we were able to handle things with a better sense of well-being and unity," Valerie says.

Physical intimacy also played an important role, Valerie adds. "Intimacy in marriage has several 'functions'—procreation, yes, but also bonding and unifying a couple in their marriage. Going through infertility reaffirmed in my mind the importance of intimacy in our marriage."

That stronger marriage, in turn, brought blessings of its own.

"It helped me realize amid a lot of unknowns that I was really blessed to have a husband who is good to me, who loves me, and who was willing to work through this together," Valerie says. "It didn't mean that we got rid of the ups and downs. It didn't mean that there weren't times that were scary. But we've learned so much and grown much closer because of what we've been through."

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—Angie Belnap

Serving Others

Phil and Valerie readily acknowledge that it took more than turning toward each other, important as that was. They also needed to turn outward to others in the healing process.

Valerie remembers finding joy in her service in the Young Women organization. Focusing on those she served helped her deal with her own challenges, and occasionally, she even found personal solutions in the process.

"I remember one particular lesson teaching about having an eternal perspective. We discussed how different our own view is from Heavenly Father's. For some reason, that particular lesson—while I was in the middle of serving others—had a big impact on me. It helped me see a little bit more clearly that my struggles were only temporary ones."

Phil, too, had significant experiences reaching out to others. He remembers finding—and later sharing—Alma 26:27: "Now when our hearts were depressed, and we were about to turn back, behold, the Lord comforted us, and said: Go amongst thy brethren, the Lamanites, and bear with patience thine afflictions, and I will give unto you success."

"I identified with the 'when our hearts were depressed,' phrase," says Phil. "Dealing with infertility is such an up-and-down cycle, and you feel that way a lot of the time. But I learned to 'bear with patience' my afflictions and, as Ammon and his brethren were instructed to do, serve others. So that's what we did. We found ways to reach out to others and lift them up. We didn't yet know what the 'success' would be, whether it would be pregnancy or adoption or something else, but we trusted that it would happen."

Reaching Out to a Support Network

Because of infertility's personal nature, some couples may decide not to talk about it with other people. The Hochheisers, for instance, waited until Valerie was about to undergo surgery before they brought it up to their families.

"It was hard for my family, my mom in particular, to have not been informed all along," Valerie recalls. "She felt I

hadn't wanted to include her and let her be my support. But we were struggling to figure things out ourselves. It would have been really hard to answer questions when we weren't yet sure what we were dealing with." Moreover, they didn't want to trouble others with their struggles.

Of course, people handle unexpected situations differently, Phil points out. "Later on, I realized the biggest help was having a strong support group outside of the two of us—people who could see the whole picture, or even someone who had been through what we were experiencing."

Once they started talking to other people, Valerie and Phil realized they weren't alone.

"There are people out there; there are support groups, both in person and online," Phil concludes. "Look for help."

Curtis and Melody found some of their greatest strength in such support groups, specifically Families Supporting Adoption through LDS Family Services. Although they were nervous about going to their first meeting, when they walked into the room, Melody says, "I saw in every woman's eyes what I felt in my heart. I felt safe and knew that I could share what I was experiencing."

"Within the support group," Curtis adds, "we were Curtis and Melody dealing with this challenge of infertility, not infertility in the form of Curtis and Melody." That realization, he says, was paramount.

"There's nothing in the scriptures or anywhere in the gospel that teaches us to suffer in silence," Curtis continues. "That's a cultural thing. When you suffer in silence, you suffer more deeply. We went through periods where we were waiting for someone to take the first step to us. Be willing to approach others first. Share your story; you'll find that others will often open up after that."

Looking to the Lord

Eventually, the paths of the Belnaps, Hochheisers, Horrockses, and Lintons led them all to adoption. And while their children have brought great joy to each couple,

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—Brenda Horrocks

healing, they say, comes from the Lord—not from adopting or conceiving.

"I finally realized that infertility wasn't a punishment," Angie says. "Once I was past the point of anger and bitterness, I was willing to hear the Spirit and receive direction about what we were supposed to do. Of course, that comes at different points for everyone. Infertility was my refiner's fire. My faith was strengthened through those difficult years."

"I had never really thought about adoption, but when Dave and I had been married almost five years, we moved into a ward where we met a couple who had adopted, and we started asking them questions and learning about the process. In receiving direction from the Lord that adoption was the path we were to pursue, I felt physical and spiritual weights lifted from my shoulders. The realization of God's plan for our family gave me peace."

"One of the gospel principles I've learned to appreciate through our experience is that Heavenly Father has a plan for each of us," Dave adds. "Sometimes we get caught up in the one-size-fits-all mentality, and we feel that our lives should look like other people's lives. But that's really not true. Everyone has different trials, and Heavenly Father is aware of those. If we are humble enough to follow the plan He has for us, we'll be happy."

Valerie Hochheiser agrees that relying on and trusting in the Lord is crucial. "I learned that we had to do everything in our power but then ultimately turn it over to Him," she says. "Sometimes that means letting Him tell us which direction to go. Other times it's a matter

of choosing a direction and letting Him confirm the decision.

"I think that was part of our learning process," she continues. "I remember at one point telling Heavenly Father that we no longer knew what to pray for. We could pray for this to work or that to work, but mostly we just wanted to be ready for the blessings that Heavenly Father was ready to send us."

Seeking Heavenly Father's comfort and guidance will help us make the best decisions regardless of our circumstances.

"I have learned to trust in Him, to follow the Spirit, and to feel at peace because God's plan is the one that will benefit me the most," Brad says. "There's more to life than we can imagine."

Brenda agrees. "His gifts are the best gifts," she says. "He loves us so much. What I would have planned for our life would pale in comparison to what He has given us. We need to trust and know that He will give to us immeasurably. What He has in mind for His children is better than anything we could ever design." ■

*For additional information on this topic see Ana Nelson Shaw, "Being Sensitive to Couples without Children," *Ensign*, Aug. 2000, 61. You can also visit the Counseling and Resources section of ldsfamilyservices.org.*

NOTES

1. "Age and Female Fertility," The American Fertility Association, www.theafa.org/library/article/age_and_female_fertility/.
2. "Who's Infertile? Us?," The American Fertility Association, www.theafa.org/library/article/whos_infertile_us/.
3. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
4. See, for example, Neal A. Maxwell, "Content with the Things Allotted unto Us," *Ensign*, May 2000, 72–74; Neal A. Maxwell, "Plow in Hope," *Ensign*, May 2001, 59–61; or Neal A. Maxwell, "Encircled in the Arms of His Love," *Ensign*, Nov. 2002, 16–18.