FamilyLife Today® Radio Transcript

References to conferences, resources, or other special promotions may be obsolete.

Walking with God in the Valley

Guest:	Matthew Arbo
From the series:	Alongside (Day 2 of 2)
Air date:	March 29, 2019

Bob: When couples are experiencing infertility, Matthew Arbo says there are a lot of lies we're tempted to believe.

Matthew: This—"Everybody's too busy," "It's inconvenient. It's too hard," "Nobody really cares"—those are deceptions that are deep, but they have to be identified and named as deceptions because the truth is God loves us, and He intends for His church to be a community of love and self-giving. When couples are going through infertility begin to see that and they begin to feel it, they—themselves—find themselves giving back

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. It's important for couples, as we experience infertility, to remind ourselves of what the Bible says is true and then to believe those truths by faith. We'll talk more about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. We are spending time in the valley of the shadow this week. I know when you think about Psalm 23 where it says, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." When you talk about the subject of infertility, you don't think, "Well, I'm walking through the valley of the shadow of death"; but there is a very real sense that this is a death-like experience, month in and month out, for couples who are longing for kids. Every time a woman starts her cycle again, there's a death that just happened.

Ann: Oh, that's very true. I was just leading a Bible study this past fall. There were eight women, and three were struggling with infertility. The pain in the room that was so present every single week was hard, and it was really hard because, then, there was another woman who was pregnant. So, they were celebrating her, but there's also this pain that they are bearing that they are always wondering, "Will that ever be me?"

Dave: It's interesting to think—because I'm with those husbands—

Bob: Yes.

Dave: —and I've got to be honest. Often those husbands are quiet. They are not coming to a group and talking about it. They're just hiding. Yet, the pain is just as real. You almost have to draw it out of them to say, "Hey, man, what's going on?" Usually,

they are not going to go there unless they're really desperate. So, it's a quiet pain in that dark valley.

Bob: Well, this is a question that I've got for our guest, who I want to introduce to our listeners today. Matthew Arbo joining us again on *FamilyLife Today*—welcome back, Matthew.

Matthew: Thank you.

Bob: Matthew is a professor of Christian Ethics at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Matthew and his wife have been married since 2007. They have two boys and a third child on the way; right?

Matthew: Correct; yes.

Bob: You've written a book called *Walking Through Infertility*. In your investigation of this subject, as you talk to people in this experience, do men and women process and deal with infertility in different ways?

Matthew: Absolutely. Women, in general, are more open to talking about their experience with other women—particularly if the other woman has had that experience herself. Men are very, very unlikely to talk about the experience, and there are all kinds of interesting cultural reasons for that.

One of the more interesting ones—because it's so common—is there's this feeling / worry about virility; and long standing cultural assumption that masculinity is bound up with virility. That's a lie. Who we are as gendered person is bound up in Christ first.

Dave: Yes.

Bob: Yes.

Matthew: It says nothing about me as a man whether I'm able to have children.

Dave: It's interesting. Men—you know, this whole area / sexual performance—they'll joke about it.

Matthew: Yes.

Dave: It's something you joke about, and it's a cover-up because we're afraid to talk about it—especially when there is pain that they're going through. So, what do you say to a man who is unwilling to talk about it?

Matthew: Admittedly, it can be difficult to know, from the guy's vantage point, what's going on because conversation just typically isn't about these sorts of subjects.

One thing you can do, I think, is—if there's enough closeness and you have enough of a sense of their ordinary day to day life—asking questions that kind of coax—less sort of like a challenge / less sort of right to the point—like, "Hey, is this your problem?"—more or less, kind of inviting them to talk around it and then encircling in closer to the nature of the hurt or the nature of the difficulty. Does that make sense?

Dave: Yes.

Matthew: In a way, also, kind of relieves the possibility of pride / of suspicion—guys can be weird about discussing how they feel about anything depending on the circumstances; but with this one, in particular, I think there is a real worry about judgment.

Ann: Well, and one of the things that I'm thinking right now is, as a married couple, as you're struggling with this topic, I'm imagining that it would be hard to even talk to each other. Does that ever come into play that you've heard of—or even your brother and sister-in-law?

Matthew: Absolutely. For all sorts interesting reasons—but the thing I think I hear most about is—not just the breakdowns of communication—but then kind of islanding; you know? They're just becoming their own independent universes, and it doesn't take very long before the other person almost becomes kind of an object of resentment. There's not even a sense of, like, how to begin talking anymore. At that point, things are very dangerous and on very tumultuous ground.

What I tend to see with couples—and hear from couples—is this sense of profound isolation of not even knowing how to begin to have this hurtful, difficult conversation without it becoming about the blame / about fault / about explanations. It's just really difficult to forebear.

Bob: Dave and Ann are going to be able to finish this sentence very easily. The natural drift in every marriage is—what?

Dave: I don't know, Bob. I'll have to think about that.

Ann: Toward isolation—

Dave: Yes.

Ann: —and especially in this circumstance. If we were experiencing this, for me to come to you, Dave, and to say, "How are you feeling? Tell me the things that you are feeling right now about all that's going on with us," would that be scary for you? Because like—I say that a lot to him.

Dave: Welcome to our date nights right there. [Laughter] We'll go out on a date, and I'm not kidding. I'm a talker. You know I come home every day from work—

Ann: He's great at communicating details of the day.

Dave: She loves this. I give her details: "Here's what's going on." She just loves it. Then we'll go out on a date; and she'll say, "Let's talk about us," and I just clam up.

Bob: Does he say, "I don't want to talk about that?"

Ann: No.

Bob: He just fumbles his way around.

Ann: Yes.

Dave: Yes.

Matthew: We're good. We're good.

Ann: That's what I'm wondering. If in this circumstance, if a couple is really struggling, would it be bad for one of—either the husband or the wife—to say, "Honey, how are you? Tell me truthfully: What are you going through? What's going on in your mind? How are you feeling?" Is that a bad question to ask?

Matthew: No, it's essential. I mean, that's the kind of question that the couple needs at that moment. I mean that's like a lifebuoy. If we're talking about their total isolation, opening up—just in an initial way—just an invitation to communicate about how things are going—"What are you feeling in that moment?" Then just the actual externalizing of the feeling—"I'm feeling angry. I'm really angry, and I'm really upset. I feel like you don't care"—all the stuff that the other person didn't know.

Ann: Right.

Matthew: The other person had no idea that they felt this way.

Dave: I would guess it's not only just with your spouse. A guy—and I would say to the men out there: "You need a guy"; Women: "You need a woman that you can feel safe enough with."

I can remember—when Ann's sister was struggling and ended up dying from lung cancer, and Ann was down taking care of her often out of our home, I remember a buddy coming over. We're literally in my driveway shooting baskets. He just said to me—"How you doing?" I broke down. I remember sitting on my driveway and—"Man, I'm struggling. This is really hard watching my sister-in-law die."

But having that friend there—I just want to say to every guy, “You need that guy.” So, talk about the role those people in your life—how important is community as you’re walking through that valley.

Matthew: Yes, and I spent a lot of space in the book on this—

Dave: Yes.

Matthew: —because I think when a couple has trusted friends—and that—even if the marriage itself is fraught, they at least have this to lean on. They can lean on these people, and they have this sort of net that will uphold them in their difficulty. If they do not have that community / if they, say, withdrawn themselves from the church, then the isolation becomes compounded.

Dave: Yes.

Matthew: Not only do they not have each other, they have no one. I mention this in the book—and I really do mean it. The church also needs infertile couples. It needs all kinds. It needs fertile / infertile couples, its single people / married couples. That’s the nature of the church. We’re a very eclectic crew. It turns out that there are heaps of people in the church that want to be there for people. There are a lot of people that really do have the open hearts of love, and they want to come right alongside.

Statistics—the more recent ones—suggest that about one in ten couples will experience some form of infertility. So, I mean, you take up stock of your own church, and you can get a pretty good idea about how many couples in a church would have gone through that.

Bob: I’m thinking of friends I know who I know have struggled with this issue, and the thing that’s always been in the back of my mind when I see them—I mean, it’s almost like a little buzzer goes off—the thing I know about them is they are dealing with infertility; but you don’t want to every time you see them say, “So, anything happening? What’s going on? How’s—what’s this month like?” How do you know—to try to be a comfort and a friend, how do you know when to bring it up, how to bring it up, if to bring it up? How do you gauge that with somebody?

Matthew: As a congregant—that is non-pastoral staff—I would say, “You need to have that trust there / at least the familiarity.” Actually, I think venue matters; you know? How many ears are listening in? Where are you?—have a sense of space.

For pastors, though, a pastor that is shepherding their flock well knows which couples have had that before; and they’ll also know who to introduce to who. They’ll know—“Well, this couple—they’ve just experienced their first miscarriage”; and they know that this other couple had also experienced a miscarriage.

Bob: Put them together.

Matthew: “Do you want to talk?”—that’s good pastoral ministry.

Dave: So often a couple or a person will come up to me, and they think I’m the person they need to talk to. As I hear their story, like it could be infertility, I’m doing exactly what you said: “Oh, hey, I’ve got a couple.” They look at me like—“No, no, no, no. I want *you*.” The only reason they’re saying that is they just heard me speak. They can connect in some way.

Yet, when they follow through and go—“Okay, I’m going to meet with this couple”—guess what I hear later: “Oh my gosh! That was the perfect—thank you for putting me there.” I’m like—“Yes, you wouldn’t believe me”—but that is the body of Christ. That is what God has put us all together to do—to minister to one another.

So, has that been your experience?

Matthew: Oh, yes.

Dave: You’ve seen that happen?

Matthew: Yes; absolutely; yes. There can be the commendation too in conversation that—you know—“Open yourself up to receive from people. That feels really risky given what you’re going through.” Keep imploring it and keep praying for them. It’s there; you know? There is a place in the human heart to receive the love that another person has. Everybody wants to be loved—

Dave: Yes.

Matthew: —and to receive love. They don’t want—no one wants to close themselves off to it. There’s other stuff going on. Like, when you read the passage about—just sort of sticking with it / just sort of coming back, dropping by—and we’ve done this before. We’ve just taken people ice cream; you know? We don’t want to come in. We just wanted to bring you same Halo—or whatever it is.

Ann: Who doesn’t want that?

Matthew: Nobody has ever said, “You know get out here with that.” [Laughter]

Bob: Bring me Häagen-Dazs—not Halo; okay?

Matthew: That’s fine. That’s fine.

Dave: Here's an interesting thing I've watched in the church—not just as a pastor but even growing up around it—is the church can be the place where people hide the most.

Ann: Oh, absolutely.

Dave: It's so bad to think that's true; but I mean what would you say to the person who is hiding or keeping it to himself? How would you encourage them to say, "You've got to take the risk?"

Matthew: So, one thing I would say is there are people in your church who have or are, right now, experiencing what you are experiencing—maybe not on the same degree / maybe not with the same sort of shape or contours; but they've had that experience, or they have had familiarity with it. You are not a stranger to them. Your case is not so different that there's nothing that could be said and nothing could be done for you.

Dave: Right.

Matthew: One of the key truths—and it's worth repeating again and again—you're not alone. You don't have to be alone. There is a God who loves you and is present to you at all times with open heart and open arms; and you have many in your community who have open arms if you'll let them / if you'll let them in.

I would just keep reminding them of sort of basic truths which are easy to sort of switch off in our head and in our hearts. "Nobody really cares," "Everybody is too busy," "It's inconvenient," "It's too hard"—those are deceptions that are deep, and they can be sustained; but they have to be identified and named as deceptions because the truth is that God loves us, and He intends for His church to be a community of love and self-giving.

When couples that are going through infertility begin to see that and they begin to feel it, they, themselves, find themselves giving back—right?—almost immediately giving of their gifts to others and being fully participating in the life of the church. So, those are the kinds of truths that I begin to—they are very basic ones that Paul talks about in his epistles / that Jesus talks about how we are in community together. Yes, there are risks. God is with us.

Dave: Yes, when you said that, I thought of the verse that you just articulated without actually quoting it; but it's the other side. It's the couple that may be an infertile couple comes to and says, "We're struggling," and you've been through it. I don't know if you put this in your book or not; but it's 2 Corinthians 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort"—here it is—"who comforts us in all of our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are any afflictions."

So, it's like—"Man, when God has met me in the middle of my thing, God wants to use that in the future." I've been there. I've experienced God in the middle of it. How can I help somebody else see that God is there with them?

Bob: Matthew, I have to ask you this before we let you go. The issues of in vitro fertilization, reproductive technologies, couples who are struggling with infertility—they are wrestling with—"Is this okay? Is this biblical? Can I do this? Multiple fertilized eggs?" How do they process that? You know that Christians come to different answers on that. So, just give us guidance in terms of how we can think rightly and make up our own minds and be responsive to our own conscious in that.

Matthew: This is a big section in the latter part of the book, and I won't say—rehearse everything I do there—but just refer listeners to that section; but what will very often happen after a couple has been infertile for a year and a half to two years is they'll begin to seek the help of clinician.

The fertility expert will give them advice on what to do. Usually, the advice is non-invasive: "Let's do some blood tests; you know? What's your exercise regimen? How stressful is work?" When you do those analyses and you break it down, sometimes, those little, very minor lifestyle changes really do help couples.

Bob: Make a difference.

Matthew: Yes. But there are couples—plenty of them—that doesn't work. They are very healthy. They don't have stress. They try these things. So, then you can upscale the level intervention; and as you get further along, a couple may become eligible candidates for artificial reproductive technologies. That's where the ethics of treatment become a little thornier.

I treat two of them in the book. One is called IUI, and the other is called IVF. I don't have any strong personal qualms with IUI. It's a very common treatment.

Bob: What is that?

Matthew: Intrauterine Insemination.

Bob: Okay.

Matthew: So, that's where the sperm is deposited within the woman's own reproductive organs. That is, the egg is not externalized.

IVF differs in that the specimen sperm and egg are externalized in lab, and the fertilization takes place there. There are more risks involved there, and I call them moral risks and hazards in the book. I end up cautioning against IVF in the book. I do so—I try to do so and the way that I am now—in a pastorally sensitive way because I realize that

there are eclectic experiences and some couples are at different places along the path in that in that experience.

So, it's important, I think—as we've been talking about, as a theme, earlier in our discussion—to keep communication open. I think it's important for a couple to have clear boundaries and limits of what they're wanting to do or will do. They may proceed along with a specialist. They may get their advice, but they may also say, "We're not going to do that." So, it's important that couples have that sense of limits.

God is, indeed, the giver of life; and one of the main ideas I have in the book—because that—infertility isn't a judgment or an indictment; but maybe, the one way to think of it is God's just given you a different way of being a family. It's a participating in His life mission.

I think that bigger picture of how *we* are family of God—eclectic as we are / different as we are. We don't have to live up to some "American" model of a family or "American" picture of a family; but one that is biblical and Christian and one which is faithful to what God has said about us as individuals and as a couples. Living from those truths, then, I think, we begin to see how our commitments / what we proceed with and that sort of thing could flesh itself out.

Bob: We talked about the fact that your brother and his wife experienced infertility and, then, experienced a stillbirth after they conceived. What's their family today?

Ann: Yes, updated us.

Matthew: Yes, so, Patrick and Jennifer have—they adopted a sibling group. So, Amos and Anna are twins; Colton is four. Then they have a daughter who was born around the time that the book came together.

Bob: A biological daughter.

Matthew: Correct; a biological daughter, Ellie.

Bob: So, a family of four.

Matthew: A family of four. My brother Patrick and his wife are great parents, and they are shepherding their children well. I'm so proud of them. They've done—they've done great.

Dave: You know I would sort of wrap up the conversation with what I've felt like, on every page of your book, you started to begin and say—here's this central idea of what you just articulated. It's the fact that God's there, and He may have a different way for you to do family. I thought—as I read that and as you just said it, I thought, "That's true for infertile. It's true for fertile. It's true for people that are struggling in financial issues,

health issues, relationship issues—you name it. The question we struggle with: 'God, are You here? Do You see me? What are You doing?'"

Your book so clearly—throughout, the theme is He really is there. I would just say to our listener who is going through that dark valley—"Even though I walk through the valley…thou art with me." I know you can't feel it at times. I've been there. You question it. The truth is—even if you feel it or don't feel it, God really is still there. He's walking—probably carrying—you; and nobody knows the future. We don't know if you will have a baby or not, but we do know God is there. He will carry you. He will actually use it in some redemptive way if you'll trust Him. Trust Him.

Bob: You know I'm reflecting back on what we've talked about today—this subject of infertility. It's a tough subject, and the President of FamilyLife, David Robbins is here with us. David, you understand a little bit about how difficult this subject is; don't you?

David: Yes, indeed.

You know the thread through the whole conversation today that was encouraging to me was that relationship is the environment through which help and comfort come to those who need it the most. It reminded me of what Henry Cloud said, "The body of Christ, God's people, is God's Plan A for our growth and transformation." So often, we beg God to intervene in some supernatural, miraculous way. When His people with God's spirit put inside them is God's greatest provision for us—that He's given to us right now.

If people in your church or in your neighborhood are struggling in life, do they have the relational foundation and relational security to come to you? Do you have people who you can run to when hardships that are guaranteed to come and complexities of life that compound—do we have those people we can run to?

I think the place that starts is going deeper with the community that we are around today, and I suggest today, perhaps, a great place to start is simply extending hospitality / bringing over some ice cream because no one turns away ice cream.

Bob: That's right. There is something about loving God and loving others that's pretty central to what Jesus taught us; isn't there?

David: That's right.

Bob: Yes.

David: That's the foundation; yes.

Bob: Thank you, David.

Michelle: *FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife. And our goal is to develop godly families and marriages that change the world one home at a time. One of the ways we do that is through this radio broadcast, FamilyLife Today, which is heard in 47 countries and in 4 languages. We also partner with people around the world, people who share our same desire to see strong marriages and families and these people are sharing FamilyLife resources in their countries, maybe that's yours.

We have resources that may be helpful to you. On topics such as forgiveness, finances, honoring your parents and FamilyLife's Art of Parenting. You'll find information about these resources and others at FamilyLife.com. And, you can also email us global@familylife.com with any of your questions or concerns.

We'd love to hear from you. You are part of the FamilyLife family and we want to know how God is using FamilyLife Today in your life.

Thanks for listening. Thanks to Marques Holt, Dennis Leake, Rhonda Street and out entire broadcast team. We hope you've enjoyed the broadcast and that you will be back for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

FamilyLife, help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

We are so happy to provide these transcripts to you. However, there is a cost to produce them for our website. If you've benefited from the broadcast transcripts, would you consider donating today to help defray the costs?

Copyright © 2019 FamilyLife. All rights reserved.

www.FamilyLife.com