

WE ARE HIS

BELONGING TO THE FAMILY OF GOD



Lorilee Craker



introduction

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Belonging to the Family of God

Even if you think adoption isn't a part of your story, it is. For in a sense, each one of us has been orphaned.

As Lorilee Craker shares her deeply personal story of adoption, we find surprisingly practical applications for each of us. Adopted herself, she's also the birth mother of two children and the adoptive mom of Phoebe, the princess with the orphan heart.

Craker sees adoption as an inherently "spiritual endeavor." "Orphans" are all around us, and we

engage in the spirit of adoption every time we help another in need. Similarly, we receive this grace every time someone meets us in our need. This is a picture of what God does for us and how he intends for us to treat each other.

Jesus told his disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (JOHN 14:18). Adoption reveals the heart of our heavenly Father.

“God settles the solitary in a home,” wrote the poet David (PSALM 68:6). Adoption is a part of everyone’s story because we have an adopting Father who welcomes us to his forever family.

Tim Gustafson

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one

Orphans No More

As is true for anyone, my story does not begin at my birth, or even my conception. Decades of events led to the very particular circumstances of my beginnings on this earth—my very messy beginnings. Although many of the stories that have led to my own include hardships and even despair, there has also been a golden thread of redemptive hope running through.

It was 1967, and the future physical education teacher and teacher's college student had a fleeting romance, or, as my birth father would describe it to me forty-five years later, "four or five encounters." At some point in those "encounters," I was conceived.

My first parents did not love each other. In fact, they would grow to loathe each other.

When Theodora found out she was pregnant, Ted fled the scene with dizzying speed. Vulnerable and alone in the big city of Winnipeg, my birth mother would resolve to give birth to me in total secret. Only her best friend knew she was pregnant.

I was born on a snowy Wednesday in March of 1968, to a 22-year-old mother who wept as I was taken out of her arms at the Women's Pavilion Hospital. She was alone in the cab which drove her from the hospital to her shabby apartment with its mattress on the floor and a sleeping bag for a bedspread.

My story began in this mess, this debris of lust, loathing, abandonment, and grief. Yet this messy beginning would not have the last word.

All our stories begin this way, spiritually speaking. We are each born in need of adoption, each born with wounds and an indefinable, desperate longing for the unconditional healing love of our heavenly Father. When God describes his adoption of us, of course, there are ways in which the metaphor does not apply. God has never abandoned us, and we have always been beloved children to him. However, the metaphor of adoption powerfully captures the idea of humanity's shared alienation from the experience of life lived in the care of God's love. In a way, we might say, being "adopted" by God is a bit like finally finding the love and family we've always been looking for.

This adopting Father promises to not leave us in our orphaned, alienated, separated state. He pledges

in his Word to come for us, no matter how estranged we are from him. “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you,” he assures us in John 14:18. And he never breaks promises to his children.

As for me, this Adopting Father stood tall in the rubble of my story. Before my birth, indeed before time began, he had planted the seeds of redemption, and he rolled up his sleeves and got to work, making all things new. When he crafted me with his two hands, he made a girl who loved books, friends, and red tulips. He knew—though I didn’t for a long time—that my biological great-grandfather had excelled at lacrosse and hockey, at a hall of fame level, and that my future son would flourish playing those two sports. God was there through it all, stitching a golden thread of redemption even within and through the tangles. *Just wait until she finds out about the hall of fame thing*, I can picture him thinking, smiling as he stitched. *She will flip!*



two

Plan B

When I was two weeks old, my parents got a call to say they could come pick me up. (Actually, they were told they could come pick me *out*, but my dad insisted the social worker pick me out himself, and that would be God's choice for their daughter. "We're not buying a cow here!" he said indignantly. I recently found out that I came with a receipt. \$8!—the cost of the administrative fees for my adoption.)

So I was brought home, and raised in a humble, Cold War era bungalow on Kingsford Avenue, in the Super Mennonite part of Winnipeg. That's right, we were *Super Mennonites*, which meant we ate Mennonite meat buns, borscht, and zwieback. My parents spoke

German (high and low), listened to German hymns on the radio, and did not disco dance—not even once.

My dad would sometimes tell me and my younger brother, Dan (he “cost” \$15), about his upbringing in Europe during World War II.

My dad was born in Ukraine during Stalin’s Great Purge. His grandfather was tortured and killed by Stalin’s troops, and two of his sisters—including his twin, Anna—died of starvation. The family fled when my dad was six, joining the retreating German army and fleeing to their ethnic Germany, away from the land Catherine the Great had given the Mennonites almost 200 years beforehand. There was so much pain, loss, and trauma in that flight from my dad’s homeland.

When he was ten, my dad joined his parents and his older sisters and crossed the Atlantic Ocean for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Canada opened its doors to my family again. (My mom’s Mennonite family had come during the first wave of immigration, in the late 1800s, to be homesteading pioneers on the prairies.)

The family of seven lived for a year in a chicken coop with no insulation. My dad was supposed to be in Grade Five but was placed in Grade One because he did not know English. At first, kids threw rocks at him and called him a Nazi.

My dad would grow up to become a bookseller, someone with a deep passion for story and truth. The greatest thing in the world for him was to place the right story—whether it was in a novel or a non-fiction book—in the right hands at the right time.

The refugee found refuge in stories. The immigrant settled in with a colony of people—his customers—who loved and revered story like he did. My dad found a haven in the bookstore from the terrible things of his wartime childhood. (In the same mall as my dad's bookstore, I would find out years later, there was also a grocery store where Ted—my biological father—would routinely shop. Did we ever pass each other as strangers, never suspecting we were related by blood as father and daughter?)

Every family has tangles and cracks, mess and sorrow. My biological family did, and so did my adoptive one. And even though I love my family dearly and cherish our lives together, something in me broke the day I was relinquished by my first mother. Yes, infants do grieve. Studies show that when the tiniest of babies experiences traumatic loss, the way they deal with that loss often expresses itself in the form of grief. Some babies scream and scream; others, like myself, hardly cry at all, mourning on the inside.

Author Elisa Morgan says that adoption, no matter how awful a situation someone is being adopted *out of*, and how loving and wonderful a situation they are being adopted *into*, always includes “a catastrophic loss.” On some level, the adoptee always pines over the loss of their original family. The need to be adopted comes out of a broken situation; by definition, it is always Plan B (or C, D, or E...).

Good thing our Creator God's specialty is redemption. When things on this earth break—and

they are always breaking—he rolls up his sleeves and gets to the work of redeeming, repairing, and restoring. He surveys the mess, the wreckage, and shards of brokenness and yet assures us, “I am making all things new” (REVELATION 21:5).

Repaired Pots

Have you ever seen those stunning Japanese pottery bowls, threaded through with veins of gold? Expressively translated to “golden joinery,” *kintsugi* is the centuries-old Japanese art of renewing broken pottery.▀ Rather than re-bond the ceramic pieces with an invisible adhesive, the *kintsugi* technique uses a special tree sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold. Once completed, seams of gold shimmer in the cracks, making each “repaired” pot one of a kind.

▀ ***Kintsugi***, also sometimes called *kintsukuroi*, can also refer to a philosophy of life, which emphasizes breakage and repair as part of something's history and legacy rather than something to disguise. The practice of valuing an item's wear and tear as seen in *kintsugi* may also be connected to the Japanese philosophy of *wabi sabi*, which emphasizes embracing the “imperfect.”

God does something much like this with each of his children. He picks up our broken pieces and sets about repairing us. And just like *kintsugi* artists, who often make the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original, revitalizing it and giving it a second life, God restores our lives. His light shines best

through the fractured places. Leonard Cohen said it best when he sang, “There is a crack in everything . . . That’s how the light gets in.”

Do you see the golden seams in the broken parts of your story? I am beginning to see them better than ever, glinting in ways big and small. Some may call it coincidence or even grasping at straws. But as I reflect, and learn more of our loving, adopting Father, I see more and more clearly glints of gold:

- My birth mother is a Dutch/Polish writer, and I adore tulips, pierogis, and writing.
- My birth father, who proved to be a heart-wrenching disappointment to me, nonetheless passed down some wonders through his DNA, including an Olympic connection (I am the world’s biggest Winter Olympics fan). Best of all, when I took a DNA test, one of my four ancestral homes on my biological father’s side was revealed to be Prince Edward Island, home of my literary life guru, Anne of Green Gables.
- My dad (my adoptive dad, aka my real dad) passed down his tender heart for the underdog and a lifelong love of books and reading.

Because my dad and my mom adopted me, my husband and I would go on to adopt a baby girl from Korea.

Because an immigrant and refugee adopted me, I have a deep concern for refugees and immigrants. I know what it is, via my dad, to be welcomed or

rejected as a stranger in a new land.

Because a bookseller and lover of story adopted me, part of my work on this earth is to write and tell stories.

God is patiently waiting for me—for all of us—to wake up and pay attention to all the ways he is renovating, repairing, renewing, and redeeming our souls. But God doesn't just glue us back to together so we merely function. He makes sure never to leave us abandoned in our messy beginnings and situations and choices.

Like a *kintsugi* artist, day after day, week after week, stage by stage, the Creator cleans us, treats us, enhances us with pure gold, and heals us.

As I've said before, my adoption story—like many adoption stories—began in the debris of lust, loathing, abandonment, and grief. But for all of my life, God has also been at work making all things new, though it took me years to see his handiwork.

If you are fortunate enough to own a *kintsugi* pot, you know how the golden seams flash and wink at you in the light. I am learning to pay attention to those shimmery winks. They remind me that because an adopting Father adopted us all, we know are loved. We know he is making all things new.



three

The Circle of Adoption

People often assume that my husband and I couldn't have more biological children after the births of our two boys, Jonah and Ezra, and that's why we opted to adopt our third child. That assumption is wrong.

My husband and I had actually talked about adoption from the very start of our relationship. It was important to me that Doyle be on board, not only with possibly adopting a child someday, but also with the concept of adoption. I have heard people say things like "I couldn't love another man's child like my own" or "adoptive kids are all screwed up." One of my friends told me her husband, when approached with

the idea of adopting from China or Korea, balked. “He just isn’t so sure about those foreigners,” she said. (She said “foreigners” in a fake hillbilly accent to lighten the sentiment. Yeah, *that* went well.)

These statements, while delivered benignly enough, struck a blow to my heart and identity. Was I some kind of “foreigner,” somehow harder to love or intrinsically messed up? I may have been a Canadian with Western European roots, but my friend’s remark made me feel decidedly “other.” (I can only imagine how much comments like this feel for adoptees of color.) When other friends would complain to me that their husbands (or were their husband really the problem?) wouldn’t even *consider* adoption, it all added up to a disturbing picture: Adoptees are definitely “other,” probably a mess, and overall not as valuable as “natural born” children—as if adoptees’ births are like something out of the movie *Alien*.

I could not have articulated in 1990, when I met Doyle, why it mattered so much, but I knew my potential life’s partner had to *get it*. He had to be the kind of openhearted guy who accepted my place in my family as equal to that of a biological child. And Doyle *is* that kind of guy. So just about a decade later, when our eyes locked in shock after the words “It’s a boy!” rang out in the delivery room, the seed of adoption fell on fertile soil. We had been told by the ultrasound technician that we were most likely having a girl, and when it was darling Ezra instead who was delivered that day, I had an epiphany. Our girl was going to be named Phoebe—a biblical, literary, and

nature name we both loved. It meant “bright, shining star.” As I cradled my newborn son in my arms, I knew with certainty that somehow, from somewhere, we would adopt a girl. A bright, shining star was coming to us all.

Mama Warrior

It was 2005, thirty-seven years after my own adoption in chilly Winnipeg. My husband and I were in sweltering Korea, having just been handed forever custody of our baby girl, Phoebe Min-Ju Jayne. She was six-and-a-half months when we brought her back to our hotel room in Seoul. Stoic at first, she was unsure of what was happening, but probably hoped these strangers who looked and smelled and felt weird would return her to her doting foster parents. We did not return her, and she screamed. She screamed into the wee hours, with me pacing back and forth, rocking, soothing, praying, and finally begging God to help me. Doyle, who is up before me 99.9 percent of the time, fell asleep at some point, which left me as the grownup in charge. How he slept through his baby’s shrieking I will never know. You know how they say necessity is the mother of invention? It’s really desperation that is the mother of invention. And I was desperate.

Carrying Phoebe facing outward in a baby carrier, I landed on a wacky idea. I turned on the taps, sat her little baby bum on the sink ledge, and let her kick her feet in the running water. Phoebe stopped crying. We stared at each other in the bathroom mirror

above the sink, sizing each other up. My little *Gonju*. (Korean for “Princess,” this was Phoebe’s foster parents’ nickname for her.)

I stood fatigued, done in, and heartsick. Yet something in me rose up like a warrior. I would soldier on all day and all night for this frenzied baby girl. I would not give up until she knew she was safe and that I could be trusted.

It’s me and you, baby. You will not win this one. This is what moms do: we fight. I will always fight for you, even when you are brawling like you are now, no matter what. We belong together now.

We stood that way for what seemed like hours. Finally, she fell asleep, and blessedly so did I. In the morning, she resumed screaming as soon as she woke up. I had harbored an absurd hope that Phoebe would have cried herself out the night before. But no. She continued to cry and sleep, reluctantly taking a bottle from one of us while giving us the stink eye the whole time.

I can’t say no one warned us this might happen. Both our social worker and our pediatrician (an African woman who was well versed in international adoptees) told us she might cry—a lot.

“She will either scream or be very, very quiet,” Dr. Addy had said. “These are the two main ways these babies deal with their grief.” If she had to choose, Dr. Addy said, she would hope for screaming. It was better than locking it all inside. Screaming meant that she had attached to her caregivers, her lovely foster parents with tears in their eyes as they handed their

Gonju to me. And if she had attached to them, it meant she could more easily form an attachment to us.

Doyle and I nodded. We understood everything in theory—and not much in reality.

Phoebe screamed much of the way home on a Korean airline, with Koreans trying to help us and making things worse. I would go to the airplane bathroom and cry my own eyes out. It was not the way I wanted to start out life with my daughter. Yet each time I walked back to my seat I felt a renewed resolve to fight for her orphan heart.

Yes, her orphan heart. If you are like many people, you may feel uncomfortable at the word “orphan.” You may think Phoebe’s orphan status was cancelled the moment they placed her in our arms.

But, in the words of Inigo Montoya of *The Princess Bride*, I do not think this word means what you think it means. *Orphan*, that is. We think of an orphan as someone who has lost their parents, but even though that is exactly what has happened to an adopted child, they don’t seem to count as orphans.

Dr. Marcy Axness, an adoptee and adoption expert, has seen this dismissive attitude countless times in her career. “In many a presentation at adoption conferences, I would bluntly say, ‘I lost my mother the day I was born.’ I’d go on to explain how, if I were to say that to most people, their response is, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry, that’s tragic.’ But if I then clarify, ‘Oh, I’m adopted . . . so . . . um . . . you see—’ ‘Oh, okay! That’s wonderful then. Adoption is so great . . .’”

There is a stubborn theory in society that adoption is unilaterally win, win, win! Once upon a time, a birth family is unable to care for their child so the child goes to a family that can care for it. And they all live happily ever after. The birth family wins (never mind the tragedy and trauma of not being able to raise your child), the adoptive family wins, and the child? The child wins the lottery, according to society. This narrative, delivered over and over in ways big and small, tells us that the child should be ever thankful for their grand new life and new and improved parents. Period. End of story.

I get it—I do. Who isn't delighted to see a child find a family who loves and adores them? I follow a hashtag on Instagram called #adoptionislove, and many nights you can find me scrolling and sniffing as I click through any number of photos of gorgeous babies and children and their delirious parents. Adoption can be joy unspeakable, but there is also deep loss. And it's okay and even good to carry both.

Technically, legally, an adopted person is no longer an orphan, but those orphan feelings often persist. When I was researching my memoir, *Anne of Green Gables, My Daughter and Me*, I found a definition of orphan that stopped me in my tracks: *Orphan: Bereft, left behind, and left*. This broadens the definition considerably. Many of my readers could relate to feeling abandoned by their parents even if they grew up with their biological parents. Some felt left behind because they were handed divorce papers, or broken up with, or excluded in some other painful way. For

others, many of us, I suspect, there is simply a sense of longing for something that is not there, and that we can't identify.

For adoptees, in some ways, you never stop feeling bereft over the loss of your original family members, who vanished in air thick with questions. You never completely stop looking over your shoulder, peering back to catch a glimpse of those who left so long ago.

Thankfully, no matter our reasons for feeling forsaken, no matter who walked out on us, we have a Comforter and Healer in Christ. As spiritual orphans, we also felt alone and searched long and hard for a way to get our heart's needs met. You and I share humanity's experience of feeling *bereft, left behind, and abandoned*; we "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (EPHESIANS 2:3).

Then something happened. God in Christ breathed life into our deadened hearts and enfolded our lonely selves into his Father arms. He called us sons and daughters, his very own cherished children, able to now receive his love and care. Wondrously, when we experience Christ's love for us, we also learn the truth that we belong to him forever. We can finally stop looking over our shoulders for comfort, for answers, for Home.



four

Wound Healer

Our spiritual home, or “interior castle,” as Teresa of Avila¹ called it, is the place where healing has its beginning, middle, and end. And in our fallen world, there is much we all need to be healed from—emotional, physical, and spiritual.

▶ **Teresa of Avila** was a sixteenth-century mystic whose masterful autobiographical writing on the spiritual life has been cherished and celebrated for centuries for its humility, compassion, and profound insights on the human struggle to experience God’s love. She is most known for *The Interior Castle*, which describes a seven-fold journey of spiritual development leading to the ultimate goal of the soul’s union with God.

Fourteen years later, I still hear Baby Phoebe’s screams. They were the cries of grief, at being torn

from everything she knew: her Appa and Eoma (mommy and daddy), foster siblings, her home, country, culture, and beginnings. Not having any control over what was happening to her, Phoebe was mourning all the strange and frightening things that were happening. Her heart had broken like a bone.

That grief is part of her story, and mine, but only a part. Neither of us, nor any adoptee, is defined by that old wound. People often reject the primal wound theory because they don't want themselves or their loved ones to be explained or limited by it. But, though the wounds from our pasts are undeniable, the gospel story tells us that wounds can find transformation and healing through the tender molding of the Creator.

➤ *This is the same idea that Paul expresses when he talks about sinners being made saints. Our past, no matter what it was, **does not define us**, and we are not bound to being that person as adopted sons and daughters.*

Wounds *can* heal. There are spiritual and emotional resources to draw upon. People are resilient and strong, and with the right support and love can integrate their broken and beautiful beginnings into lives that are rich and filled with joy.

Integrate—meaning “fitting in, assimilating, or joining together.” Kind of like the process of golden joinery, of the Artisan taking the pieces and creating something new and beautiful with them.

The key is to not skip over the hard parts. Or pretend there are no hard parts, no loss.

If you are on the outside, looking in at an adoptee

you love, you might not believe me. “But, Lorilee, seriously now, can you really say that my niece, whose birth parents were drug addicts and whose parental rights were terminated, is not so much *better off* with her parents and all of us who love her to pieces?”

Yes, of course she is “better off.” I am better off, too, and so is our daughter Phoebe. Both of us would have been raised by single mothers. Living in Korea, my daughter would have been stigmatized for being born out of wedlock. I have even heard that sometimes these single mothers and their children—bereft of societal and family support—end up being trafficked for their bodies. I can hardly bear to think of it.

Are adoptees often better off? Yes. But it’s still sad that our original families could not be what they needed to be for us. It always will be. Adoptees are hardly alone in their original families not being what they need to be for them. Brokenness abounds in all kinds of families. How was your own family lacking in important ways? How did their brokenness create loss for you?

Whatever the source of our wounds, as human beings there is always some old brokenness to reconcile. Adoptees, whether they admit it or not, bear an old break that sometimes will kick up and give us a little trouble. Like my tailbone and pelvis fractures from a car accident in 1997, these cracks will start to hurt when we least expect it.

If I could say one thing to adoptive parents, it would be this:

Acknowledge the crack.▀ Even if your child was

adopted out of hopelessness and despair, as many adopted children are, and into your loving, accepting arms, the original crack is there. It just is.

➤ *One of the truly revolutionary dynamics of the gospel message was the way in which it challenged a focus on the biological family as the norm. Instead, the apostles emphasized **humanity's equal experience of brokenness** and need for a new identity and an entirely new way of life than the "empty way of life handed down" from one's ancestors (1 PETER 1:18 NIV). See also Matthew 12:48 and Romans 8:14–17.*

I am 51, and I was loved deeply by my parents. And my husband and I love our girl with a depth and intensity that startles me sometimes.

But the truth is, no human parent can “love away” such a fracture, caused by the confusing loss of one’s original family. This doesn’t mean adoptive children won’t have wonderful lives. I did and do! I’m so grateful my parents adopted me, for the gift of their unconditional love. They are my realest of real parents, not my birth mother and birth father. I could shout from the rooftops how grateful I am to have the family I have, the loving grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins.

But that original loss must be reckoned with, no matter how little of a loss it may seem to be.

How?

Be brave, mom. Have courage, dad. Be willing to answer hard questions and help your child connect those dots. You are the grownup. You are the one

they trust to help them navigate the scary waters of life, the confusing feelings. Invest in your child's heart, entering in the painful places and encouraging understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness. Point your child to the God who mends and makes us strong at the broken places.

Together, lean into the healing God who promises, "I will restore you to health, and heal your wounds, declares the LORD" (JEREMIAH 30:17 NIV).

And if someday your child grows up and wants to find out more about their cracked beginnings, to search out a birth mother or father or native country or orphanage, be the first in line to help them do so. (PS: This can be terrifying.)

My parents supported me in my search, and in the end, my love and loyalty for them knew no bounds.

I understood as I never could have otherwise that I was their girl, and nothing could change that.

Ask God for a waterfall of wisdom and mercy. Ask him again, daily, hourly, whenever you think of it. You will need every drop.

An Adopting Father

We didn't know then, in sweltering, exotic Seoul, what we know now, fourteen years later. We didn't know how profoundly our views of the world and God would change. Adoption is an intensely Christian concept, though countless numbers of non-believers have embraced it. It is a Christian doctrine and practice shot through with grace and redemption. But what makes adoption such a spiritual endeavor?

My pastor, an adoptive father of three, loves to preach on this topic. From him, I learned that the early church modeled adoption: in the Roman Empire in the first century AD, infanticide was rampant, as it was easier and safer (for the mother) than abortion. Babies (mostly girls) were brought to the outskirts of the city, where they would die of exposure or be killed by animals. The early Christians rose up, rescuing and adopting the babies in droves. According to theologian Gene Veith, in a blog called “How Christianity Conquered Pagan Culture,” early Christ-followers “expressed their opposition to infanticide by rescuing the abandoned children of Rome and raising them as their own—an enormously self-sacrificial act at a time when resources were limited and survival was in doubt.”

My pastor was the one who described God as an *adopting* Father, not just an *adoptive* father. God didn't just adopt one or two kids. He has adopted millions of us in the past and continues to adopt new children every day. It is part of his loving, pursuing character to find new beloveds to care for and call his own. This action is ongoing, enduring, and open ended. He is always adopting, ever embracing us.

We can learn so much about God's heart through understanding adoption. My own understanding of God has grown far deeper because of my adoption and our subsequent adopting experience. The Father's devotion abounds as he brings us out of our past circumstances, enfolds us as his own children and protects us, even unto his own death. We will always be sons and daughters of the King. Our identity rests

in his safekeeping. His adoption of us defines us as cherished, safe, and kept.

Through adoption, we understand as never before the depth and constancy of God's love. Like we pursued Phoebe through adoption and claim her as our own deeply loved child, our Father pursues us, claims us, and never turns his back on us. As strongly as we are committed to our daughter, God's commitment to us is infinitely stronger, an unbreakable covenant more durable than death.

Adoption shows us that God loves all of us the same. I'm so glad I have the chance, as both a biological mom and an adoptive one, to compare the way I feel about my boys and the way I feel about my girl. Because now I know for sure there is no difference. Adopting teaches us anew that God delights in, sings over, and cares tenderly for each of his children in the same way. As believers, we are all adopted, and therefore, nothing can separate us from his love.

As God is the helper of the orphan, so we can be through adoption: God promises shelter, help, and resources for those who cannot protect themselves. He invites us into this sacred work of helping orphans through feeding them, caring about their lives, and righting their wrongs. He calls us to defend and support them as he himself does. "The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless," it says in Psalm 146:9. Adoption won't solve the global orphan crisis, but it will solve one orphan's crisis. His eye is on the sparrow, and ours can be too.



five

Bearing God's Image

“ **will not leave you** as orphans; I will come to you,” Jesus says in John 14:18.

This verse is for all of us—every child of the Father. Though we as human beings have often been or felt bereft, left behind, and left, God's character is to comfort his sons and daughters, to lavish us with his love. God does the opposite of abandoning us—he runs *to* us. He doesn't leave us; instead, he stays. He keeps and saves and sustains. In other words, God promises to come for us and adopt us. We belong to him.

What are the implications for us as God's image bearers? Legal adoption means we are not leaving children behind as orphans, we are coming for them in a tangible way. But adoption is not the only way to emulate our adopting God, to engage in the "pure religion" of looking after orphans and widows in their distress (SEE JAMES 1:27 NIV).

Let's consider just who the orphans are. And this doesn't just mean "technical" orphans. Orphans are mentioned in the Bible forty-two times, always referring to someone who doesn't have a father. (Yes, even if you still lived with your mother, if your father died, you were considered an orphan.) The biblical culture's way of looking at orphans has interesting propositions for today's culture, which sags under the weight of widespread fatherlessness. How can we be there for the orphan like God is?

Some ideas include mentoring an at-risk teen, being an unofficial big brother or sister, and taking an interest in those who lack parents or who are alienated from their parents for some reason. Take a boy being raised by a single mother to a hockey game, or fishing, or even just hang out playing video games. There is a crisis of parenting in our society, and if we are watchful, we can find the "orphans" of today and serve them. It's all about developing an adopting spirit like God's.

You know how Mr. Rogers' mother famously told him to look for the helpers? "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news," he said, "my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You

will always find people who are helping.” The world is a scary place for orphans. Let’s look for them, and let’s be the helpers they need. 🏠

🏠 One way to reflect God’s adopting, embracing nature is through cultivating an experience of community that is inviting and accepting to any longing for the experience of home. For more, see our resource “Evangelism: Reaching Out Through Relationships.” <https://discoveryseries.org/courses/evangelism-reaching-out-through-relationships/>

I think of our friend, Louisa, adopted out of foster care at age three by loving, older parents and who lost her dad at age eleven and then her mama at age fourteen. Being placed with her thirty-year-old adoptive brother was Louisa’s only option other than going back into foster care. Though her brother, Marvin, was good to her, he was limited in his capacity to raise a teenage girl. By the age of eighteen, Louisa was living in public housing and struggling mightily to pay the bills and survive, much less go to college or thrive in a trade. Our family and others in the church have been privileged to care for this now twenty-four-year-old orphan. This has meant inviting her out for lunch, over to our house for a meal, and recently, hiring her to come and clean every so often. (She loves cleaning; I don’t. Hallelujah!) When L comes to clean, I can check in with her, give her a mom hug or two, feed her, and overpay her just a little bit. Others in the church have also fed, nurtured, and encouraged her, donating to her college tuition and helping her fill out complicated paperwork to receive additional help from

nonprofits and government agencies. We pray with her and for her because she belongs to our church family. Honestly, “looking after” this orphan in her “distress” has simply meant supporting her in ways big and small, practical and spiritual.

I challenge you to look for the Louisas of the world, your country and neighborhood. This may mean opening your heart to the possibility that family is not all biological. Some mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and daughters and sons are chosen, no paperwork required.

My brother Troy, for example, is not related to me by blood or adoption. Two decades ago, we met at the church nursery in Grand Rapids, Michigan, picking up our babies. To our astonishment, we were both from the Winnipeg area, 1,000 miles away; both huge fans of the Winnipeg Jets, and we were both from a Mennonite heritage, him partly, me wholly. Considering that many people from West Michigan had never heard of Winnipeg, and some folks thought all Mennonites rode in buggies and churned their own butter, Troy and I understood each other completely in moments. We were both homesick and pining for someone to just “get it” without lots of explanations. Over many years and countless get togethers, birthday parties, Canada Day picnics, and Canadian Thanksgiving celebrations our two families have become as close as, well, family. His wife is a sister to me, and my husband is a brother to them. When Troy became a grandpa recently, I took seriously my role as “Aunt Lorilee” and bought little

Daxton a Jets' onesie with his name embroidered on it. Because that's what aunts do.

"God sets the lonely in families," (NIV) King David says in Psalm 68:6. God set me in Troy's family, and he in mine.

As children of God, we are all adopted into a family that transcends DNA. We may nod our heads in agreement—*yes, yes, of course that's true*—but do we really believe it? Do we truly trust in and live out the fact that our primary identity is as love-showered children of God? "See what great love the Father has lavished on us," John cheers in 1 John 3:1, "that we should be called children of God!" (NIV).

▶ *To further meditate and soak in the incredible reality of our identity as God's beloved, listen to the Discover the Word series "Beloved."* <https://discovertheword.org/series/beloved/>

Yet life on this cracked blue marble of a planet holds many opportunities to feel less than loveable.

When I took a DNA test a few years ago, I was shocked to find the following revelation: "Ted Gilmore is your father." I had known with 95% certainty that this was the case, but to be told this as a certainty, irrefutably backed by science was startling. Yet the man whose ancestral code is bundled deep in my bones had no interest in being my father. He ran from my birth mother in the summer of 1967, and he had been running ever since.

But in the wreckage of a spectacular failure of fatherhood, I was pointed back to our perfect,

loving Father. (But not immediately. I struggled to make sense of this wholesale rejection of my personhood by the man most people would agree was my “real” father. The rejection kicked me in that old wound.)

From the death of a dream—that Ted would want me this time—new growth emerged. It became an opportunity to fall into the arms of my forever Father, who was with me and for me, wanting, choosing, and keeping me then, now, and always.

He is your forever Father, too. Whether you are an adoptee, an adoptive parent, or just *feeling* orphaned and rejected as we all do, be held in his able arms. “I will be your Father, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty” (2 CORINTHIANS 6:18 NLT).

He is picking up the shards of your life and repairing you to wholeness and a golden shalom—nothing missing, nothing broken. We are orphans no more.



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