



Adoption brings unique challenges. Love and bonding don't always come naturally. There can be emotional distress, frustration, and disappointment. With empathy for adoptive parents, Chapman and Shaler provide an honest and invaluable resource of wisdom, joy, and healing. Apply these lessons and watch love grow and flourish in your home.

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# Loving Intentionally

I (LAUREL) PULLED UP to a house with the longest driveway I'd had ever seen. Noticing a pony meandering through the large front field, my husband, Nick, and I double-checked the address. We were surprised to learn we were, in fact, at the correct home. Feeling simultaneously excited and nervous, we slowly made our way down that seemingly never-ending stretch of pavement with great anticipation. We parked the car and walked up to the front door, knots in our stomachs and our hearts pounding.

Before we had even knocked, the big brown door opened. On the other side stood a lovely older woman (she'd hate me for calling her older), holding a baby. As I stepped over the threshold, she placed that little girl in my arms. In that moment, I knew—I *knew*—we were meant for each other. The rest, as they say, is history. And it is history in the making. Our adoption story is nothing short of amazing, and I'll share more of that story (and the second one!) in a bit.

## ADOPTION BASICS

The two children we adopted—forevermore *our* children—are two of the approximately 120,000 children adopted annually in

the United States.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these children are five years or younger at the time of their adoption. Our daughter was two months and five days old on the mild February day we met her. The baby boy who followed a few years later was a mere three days old.

Perhaps you can relate to adopting a young child. Or maybe you are still in the considering and praying phase. It could be that you counsel, pastor, or simply want to support adoptive families. Adoptive families are more common than some believe, with one in twenty-five families having at least one adopted child and one in fifty children having been adopted.<sup>2</sup> This equates to about 1.5 million children living in the United States right now who have been adopted, or about 2 percent of the population. In whatever way you have been or will be impacted by adoption, this book is for you.

Adoption is no longer the secret act it once was. Not only are there more open adoptions between birth families and adoptive families than in the past, but adoptive children are now more likely to know about their start in life. As you may know, an open adoption is one in which the birth or biological family (these terms are often used interchangeably), or at a minimum the birth mother and the adoptive parent(s), have some degree of knowledge about one another. This might even include meeting in person. In fact, some adoptive parents are in the delivery room as the child who is being placed with them is born. Sometimes, an open adoption only includes using first names; while other times, more information, such as last names and contact information, is shared. While the degree of openness varies, the birth family and adoptive family often keep in touch with each other as the child grows up. That could be through pictures and letters, or it might involve occasional visits. An open adoption typically involves the biological family and the adoptive family communicating without an intermediary, whereas

a semi-open adoption often involves the use of the adoption agency or attorney to communicate between the two parties and does not always include the sharing of identifying information.

A closed adoption means there is no known identifying information shared between the two parties, the placing parent(s) and the receiving parent(s), and there is no contact between the families. In our family's case, we do not have any kind of relationship or communication with the birth family of one of our children (I met the birth mother only one time). With the other child, we keep in close contact with a couple of biological relatives, but not the birth parents. Sometimes, the level of openness changes and evolves as time passes. I have even heard one birth mother who speaks frequently about her story share that her teenage biological child regularly spends the night in her home. The primary focus must always be on the child or children and for their benefit. They need to be safe and secure, emotionally and physically. As a family, we are attempting to weave our children's adoption stories into their lives in an age-appropriate and sensitive way so as to be honest, but not overwhelm them. On one occasion, after sharing some new information about her adoption with my daughter, she wisely said (at the ripe old age of five years old), "That is a little difficult to understand, but also educational." We'll keep sharing as she matures and is ready to learn more. Most importantly, we want our children to know that they are deeply loved by many people, regardless of how their adoptions came to be.

### WHY ADOPT?

People come to adoption for many different reasons. While we have experienced infertility, we actually felt called by God to adopt

*prior* to knowing that—barring any medical intervention—we could not conceive naturally. My desire was to become a mother, to parent a child or children, not necessarily to be pregnant, give birth, or have biological/birth children (though I was always open to that if the Lord willed). We didn't know what the Lord had in store for us, but we were not in any hurry. After nine years of marriage, we answered the call to pursue adoption, though we would surpass our fourteenth wedding anniversary before our first adoption was finalized.

Other couples decide on adoption specifically after experiencing infertility. Many couples suffer tremendous pain due to the inability to conceive. I have known women who cried each month when they discovered once again that they were not pregnant. Sometimes, a pregnancy takes place but does not result in the live birth of a child. It is a well-known statistic that, sadly, almost one in three pregnancies ends in miscarriage. This heartache can complicate the adoption process. As authors Graham and Dorman note, it is important to emotionally deal with the infertility prior to starting the adoption journey.<sup>3</sup> That does not mean the disappointment will ever completely go away, but working on accepting what you have not been able to change is important. Even if you have already adopted but are still dealing with the searing loss of infertility or miscarriage, please consider counseling. This might need to include couples counseling, as such a loss can take a tremendous toll on a marriage as well. A troubled marriage is not healthy ground to build a family on, so please do seek marriage counseling as soon as possible.

For others, adoption is part of the building of their family, but not the entire picture. In these cases, the adopted child or children join a couple's own biological children. I know people who

specifically pursued adoption without ever attempting to have their own biological children; some of these are single individuals.

No matter why you, or someone you love, have arrived at the choice to adopt, “adoption is the heart of God.”<sup>4</sup> This is revealed in at least two ways. The first is that God deeply cares about orphans, often described as the fatherless in the Bible. The second—and more important—way is that God adopts us as His children when we accept the free gift of salvation provided through His Son, Jesus Christ. Below are a few verses that speak to this:

“He executes justice for the fatherless.” (Deuteronomy 10:18 ESV)

“A father to the fatherless . . . is God.” (Psalm 68:5)

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption to sonship.” (Galatians 4:4–5)

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:27 ESV)

Adoption should never be looked at as a backup plan to having biological children. Yes, the Lord sometimes uses infertility to bring couples to the point of adopting, but in His sovereignty, adoption was His plan all along. It can be hard to wrap our heads and hearts around this. We know that God created Adam and Eve and, blessing them, told them to “be fruitful and increase in number.”<sup>5</sup> We know that God’s heart is for nuclear families to

stay together and for children to stay with their biological parents whenever possible.

Yet, for a myriad of reasons, it's not always possible. Sometimes parents decide to place a child for adoption for reasons such as the parent's age, financial difficulties, or circumstances surrounding conception. Sometimes parents die or are harmful, resulting in the child or children being placed for adoption. And sometimes biological parents, as a result of in vitro fertilization (IVF) producing a significant number of embryos, cannot carry or raise all of these children. Thank God that in those instances there are families able and willing to care for these children through embryo adoption. In this situation, an adoptive mother will have an embryo transferred into her own uterus, thereby carrying and giving birth to her adopted child—becoming both the birth mother and the adoptive mother. At the time of this writing, my husband and I have gone through an embryo adoption ourselves and are awaiting the arrival of our third baby, due very soon!

Adoption may not be Plan A in our minds, but it is never Plan B in God's mind. We can't always understand His ways, but as my pastor Barry Jimmerson says, "God can hit straight with a crooked stick!"

## THE IMPACT OF ADOPTION

I mentioned that our adoption history is in the making. The adoptions are completed, over and done with as soon as the judge's gavel hit the desk with a resounding thud. The words "It is so ordered" remain some of the most exciting words that have ever been spoken to me in my entire life. Yet, the impact of adoption—the good and the bad, the pros and the cons, the love



and the loss—is never-ending. Nancy Newton Verrier, author of *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child*, wrote that adoptive parents “who have been waiting for a baby and who feel ready to love and nurture” come into the adoption “picture at a disadvantage.”<sup>6</sup>

To begin with, my children were conceived by couples who do not share my husband’s DNA or mine. I didn’t even meet one birth mom, and the other was only a few weeks shy of delivery when we first met. The decisions they made resulted in our children having a challenging start to life. It would be easy to say—and easier to live—but is simply untrue that solely because we met our children when they were itty-bitty and have devotedly cared for them, their adoption status is water under the bridge. No, the story continues. While it doesn’t have to always be at the forefront, it also can never be forgotten or ignored. Even children adopted as infants (when the baby is taken home from the hospital by their new parents) have experienced trauma. Being removed from biological parents, regardless of the child’s age, is the primary wound Verrier is referring to. Yes, children can be resilient and overcome many challenges, but nothing changes the fact that the trauma happened.

I recall a time when one of my children was struggling with managing emotions and behavior. As I started to chat with a trusted friend and pondered whether this could potentially be related to the adoption status, my friend blew off my notion with a wave of her hand. “Nah . . . all children act like this.” Sometimes this is true, but sometimes it’s not. Sorting through what is and what isn’t adoption related can be complex, but it always needs to be considered. Additionally, it’s crucial to connect with other adoptive parents. In the story I just shared, I neglected to do that.

Thankfully, we have been able to connect with other families similar to ours. In fact, our daughter attended preschool and kindergarten at a school that happened to have several adopted children in her age group. We didn't know that when we selected the school, but the Lord did. Another friend who adopted several children is farther along in her journey than our family, and I have relied heavily on her at times as I've sorted through how best to approach adoption-related topics with my children. We need the support of other adoptive families, and adoptive families need the support of the community at large. There are many who are adoptive- and trauma-informed who have not personally adopted. The bottom line is how crucial support is for adoptive families. We'll talk more about that later in the book.

### MORE OF OUR STORY

I promised more of our journey to adoption, so here it is: The woman holding the baby girl in the opening paragraph of this chapter was her biological relative who had sacrificially agreed to take her home from the hospital and care for her, and who also sought out a loving adoptive family. She knew that she and her husband were too advanced in age to provide the kind of family she wanted that little one to have, and she was also bound and determined to fiercely protect that child. In a series of events that could only have been orchestrated by God (because our efforts over several years and just as many adoption agencies produced nothing but heartache), we wound up at her doorstep.

I still find it hard to believe, but I lived it, so I know it's true! One Wednesday night at church, the same church I had attended since I was four years old, one of my childhood Sunday school

teachers came up to me and said, “I know a lady who is looking for an adoptive family for her relative. Can I give her your phone number?” Not giving it much thought (because we had been down that road with others before), I assured her that was fine, while doubting anything would come of it. Two days later, as I was pulling into the gym parking lot, my phone rang. I didn’t recognize the number but answered anyway. It was her! The baby’s relative had called after all. Another two days passed, and there we were, holding the baby girl who would legally become ours later that year.

A lot happened between that February and November when the adoption was finalized (fittingly, in National Adoption Month), but we got there. We tried to enjoy the time we had with that little girl, never knowing during those months whether the adoption would go through. Regardless, we made her a part of every aspect of our life. We introduced her to our families, and she was with us on holidays, birthday celebrations, and vacations. Yet, she was not with us full-time until we were given custody. Once we were granted custody and finalized the adoption a few months later, the hard work of parenting really began. It brings to mind what my beloved daddy told me when we shared our initial plans to adopt. He said, “Parenting is the hard part, and I know you’ll do it well.” His faith in me and his utter devotion to my children until the day he died carried me far in this adoption journey.

## TESTIMONIAL TIME

It’s so important to have people who believe in you, in *this*. People who can talk openly with you; people you can cry with. I shed many tears during the wait to adopt, begging God to fulfill my longing and also wrestling with God over why children were

being abused and neglected when I could give a child a loving and safe life. As the months passed without us knowing if the little girl we were helping care for would become our daughter, I would rock her and sing “You Are My Sunshine.” Every time I got to the last line—you know the one, “Please don’t take my sunshine away”—I would choke back tears. But the tears didn’t stop after the adoptions were finalized. More were shed as I have struggled to best help my children and lamented over parenting decisions I have made.

Adoptive families need others to come alongside us, and it’s awfully helpful when they have been there themselves. That is a major reason for writing this book and offering it as a resource to you. We’ll touch more on the nature of this book in chapter 2. First, we’d like to share a few encouraging words from adult adoptees. Whether you are just starting the adoption process or are in the thick of parenting, we hope hearing from adult adoptees who have had positive adoption experiences gives you some hope that even though parenting children who have been adopted has its challenges—and the adoptees certainly have a mixed bag of emotions—it is worth it for all involved. While not every adoptee has a positive story, many do, and they are worth sharing.

These stories are being retold with permission from those who openly shared about their experiences.

### *Amanda*

Now an adult, Amanda, at the age of seventeen, shared about her childhood experience of being adopted. She said that when she was first adopted, she did “not know that a mother and father were people who loved you and helped you.”<sup>7</sup> She went on to write that

she did not even know what the word *love* meant! Of course, this was no fault of her own, as she hadn't ever really been shown love. Yet, in time, she came to understand love as demonstrated by the mom and dad who adopted her. She wisely wrote these profound words:

To parents who may adopt or have adopted, I think the most important thing is not to give up on the child, and no matter what, don't stop loving them. What they need most, whether they realize it or not, is love. That is the best thing you can do for that child. If they push you away, show them more love.<sup>8</sup>

### *Drew*

Drew was adopted in the early 1980s, the only child of the husband and wife who became his parents. He grew up in an area without many other children who had the same experience of being adopted. In fact, when he was young, he was frequently identified by his status as an adopted child. Although “othered”—or treated as different—at times by members of his community, he states, “My parents provided a great life.” He also had a close relationship with his grandparents, who were an integral part of his childhood.

When Drew was sharing his story, there was one line that brought me to tears. When asked how he knew he was loved, he replied, “That could take a million pages to answer, I suppose.” He knew he was loved because his parents and grandparents made time for him, they took him fishing and to football games, they taught him kindness, they sang to him, they told him stories, and they took him to church. Drew also expressed appreciation for his

biological mother, who he said loved him and chose to place him for adoption to “have a better life.” He said that if he could say one thing to her, it would be “Thank you.” What a powerful story.

### *Patricia*

Patricia was born in Germany at the end of World War II and was adopted at six months old from an orphanage by an American couple. Like many other orphans, Patricia was not cared for as she should have been prior to being adopted and has always been grateful for the life she was given by her parents. Patricia “always wanted to help other orphaned little girls because of what her adopted parents had done for her.” She and her husband, Ernie, took in three foster daughters, one of whom they adopted. They have also been very involved in foster care advocacy (since the mid-1980s!) and training others in the Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) approach. (More to come on that in a later chapter.) Like Drew, Patricia expresses gratitude for the parents who adopted her.

### *Sophie*

Sophie was born in Russia and adopted at the age of one. Sophie shared this: “My mom says my birth mom is her hero. My mom is *my* hero because she loved me enough to come get me. She has shown a lot of love in her support. She has taken time for me and my sister. She prays with us. She thanks God every day for us. Having a parent who thanks God for us is so nice!”

Sophie also related that her parents are supportive in both big and small ways. One small example is when she receives a text from one of them that says something as simple as “Have a great day. I love you.”

Sophie, age eighteen at the time of this writing, has never doubted her parents' love.

### MY PRAYER

Not long ago, as I was telling my daughter good night, we embraced for one final hug before lights out. With her little arms clinging to my neck and her head on my shoulder, she said sweetly, "You're the best mother in the whole world, and I promise to love you forever." Now, I know the first part isn't true. I'm not a perfect parent and would say that if anyone promises you perfection if you just say or do *x*, *y*, or *z*—run! So, I'm not the best mother in the whole world.

The fact that she thinks that is true is precious to me, and it motivates me to continue striving to be the best mother I can be for *her*. I don't know what things will look like when my children grow up and become "adult adoptees," but I sincerely hope we have a success story like the others that have been shared in this chapter. One day my daughter will realize I am not the best mother in the world, but I do pray she and her siblings will always love me—and I most assuredly will love them with every breath I breathe for as long as I live.

### WRAPPING UP CHAPTER ONE

As my daughter started to take a bite of a fruit I'm allergic to, I started to tell her not to eat it, fearing she would have a negative reaction. Then, I remembered that since we are not biologically related, I had no reason to believe she would be allergic to the same fruit. Although we might briefly forget, we can never

completely forget that our children are adopted, nor should we want to. We have chosen to adopt children, and this part of their story—of our story—will remain with us throughout our lives. This is a love we can intentionally grow bit by bit and develop into a love that will last forever.

Regardless of the lack of biological connection, and the fact that I am her mother and not her sister, my little girl thinks we're pretty much twins. I recall a time we went on a mother-daughter camping trip. By "camping," I mean we stayed in a lodge that had a private bathroom. So, closer to "glamping." The room we were staying in was designed for a family and contained a queen-size bed and two sets of bunk beds. Despite all the bed options, my daughter told me we needed to sleep together in one of the twin beds "because we're twins, and that's why they make twin beds." She knows she is adopted, but that doesn't stop her from viewing us as being "two peas in a pod" due to the attachment we have developed. Fortunately, I was able to convince her that since we are both queens, the queen bed would work out better for us than the little twin bed.

Adoption is not easy, but it can have a lifelong, positive impact for both the child and the parents. In the next chapter, we'll explore how this book can help you along this parenting journey.



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