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Born on the Right Side of History—Barely

My sister and I sat on the couch across from our parents. It was strange, to my six-year-old mind, that they had the same expression on their faces. They looked serious, concerned. I do not remember the exact words our parents spoke that afternoon as we sat in the '70s-décor living room with rust curtains and olive-green carpet, but the gist of the conversation was this: my sister and I were adopted.

I have no recollection of asking for details or feeling awkward about the news I had just heard, the news of my origin. “Some husbands and wives cannot have children at a hospital, so they can choose children whose parents are not able to help them,” my parents explained. Fair enough. For me, it was back to playing football in the backyard and pestering my mom about second helpings of mashed potatoes at dinner.

Even during the fragile tween years, I was never insecure about being adopted. If the issue surfaced at school or in peer groups, I would interject briefly my own experience and move

on. And God was gracious. Never was I the subject of teasing or scorn from peers because I came from Nebraska Children's Home and not from my parents' marital union. On a family trip in the autumn of 1984—the highlight of which was attending a home Nebraska Cornhuskers football game in Lincoln—we stopped in Omaha to visit the children's home. My parents had picked me up there thirteen years prior. I do not remember if it was on that trip or sometime later when I learned that my biological parents met in high school, one time, at a party. When my biological mom discovered she was pregnant, she was kicked out of the home. She found the hospitality of a physician in Omaha who took her in until I was born. She did light housework and helped care for his younger children as payment. There is no record that she told my biological father that I exist.

I have no scars from knowing I am adopted—but some kids do. They struggle to connect with their adoptive parents

or siblings. They feel estranged or unwanted, a mistake (we will come back to this later). For me, the only scar of being adopted was that while I had such a good experience, many women were choosing to abort their babies when in situations similar to that of my biological mother. “That could have been me!”

If I'd been born five hundred days later, when the landmark Supreme Court decision Roe v. Wade was made, you would likely not be reading this book.

I would say to myself. I was born September 25, 1971. If I'd been born five hundred days later, when the landmark Supreme

Court decision *Roe v. Wade* was made, you would likely not be reading this book. The thought that aborted babies could have been adopted infuriated me when I was an adolescent and it still does today (more on that later, too). But my pro-life zeal is not just the result of personal reflection and gratitude that I was not aborted. I was born at a time in the history of the United States when children in the womb—even if unplanned by a man and a woman—were recognized as human beings who bear God’s image. Scripture declares that people are made in God’s image, redeemable through Jesus Christ.

Created in God’s Image

God’s creative work in Genesis 1–2 climaxes with the creation of humanity—male and female created in the image of God. According to Genesis 1:26–30, one feature of image bearing is sharing responsibility for governing other animate creatures and plant life. There is a progressive flow in the creation account of Genesis 1. God’s image bearers created on the sixth day are to care for and rule over plant life created on the third day (Gen. 1:9–13) and animal life created on the fifth day (Gen. 1:20–25). The creation story highlights God’s interest in people. He likes them—us. He wants us to partner with Him in managing His creation.

And yet—by God’s design—all is not well in creation. In Genesis 2:18, we see something that shocks us. God has been creating, and for the first time, He describes an element of creation as “not good.” What is “not good”? The fact that Adam does not have a fellow image bearer to rule as God had intended in Genesis 1:26–30. Genesis 2:18–25 records that God creates

image bearers with distinct genders so that through sexual union, image bearers produce more image bearers. Abortion militates against the very purposes of God in creation.

We see the importance of image bearing reproduction repeatedly throughout the entire Genesis narrative, in which God is recognized as sovereign over male and female bodies uniting to form offspring. The notion that human sexuality needs divine enablement in order to produce offspring is a major theme of Scripture. Childlessness is a crisis that forces Abraham and his descendants to trust God to provide them with children.¹ Abraham's lament to God concerning Sarah's barrenness in Genesis 15:1–6 provides the framework for how God would have His image bearers relate with Him: their reliance on Him (and ultimately His redemptive plan in Christ) is credited for righteousness (as the apostle Paul writes in Romans and Galatians).

Abraham's compromise to produce children with Hagar in Genesis 16 underscores the fact that without God's aid, Abraham and Sarah could not conceive a child. In Genesis 17, the Lord affirms that He will give Abraham and Sarah the ability to conceive—and will thus be known as the God who is powerful over life itself, jealous for image bearers.

We see this same issue with Isaac and Rebekah's situation as they tried to have children. No success. Rebekah is barren, and Isaac, the child of promise, cries out to the God of promise that his wife would be able to conceive (Gen. 25:21). Jacob, the son born to Isaac and Rebekah, knows that without God's creative work, no man and woman could conceive a child. When Jacob's wife Rachel complains to him, "Give me children, or else I die," Jacob replies, "Am I in the place of God?" (Gen. 30:1–2).

Poems of Life

The importance of image bearing doesn't stop in the Genesis narrative. The Hebrew poetry of the Psalms includes the notion that human offspring—even while in the womb—are known by God. In Psalm 139:13–16, David wrote:

For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.

Just beneath the surface of these poetic lines rests the idea that human reproduction is also God's creative activity. God is involved in the conception of each human life. He is jealous for the process of procreation because He is jealous to bear His image through humanity.

Throughout Psalm 139, David confesses God's all-encompassing, inescapable presence. He recounts God's knowledge of his paths, thoughts, and words and asks, "Where can I go from Your

Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” (v. 7). In Psalm 139:8–12 he raises a series of hypothetical situations that might challenge God’s omniscience. But he refutes each. No location or condition is unknown to God. Because God knows every child in every womb, abortion contradicts God’s purposes for humanity. I don’t know if my birth mom knew God—but I know that God knew me even in her womb, and in even the womb I bore God’s image.

When I think about God’s purposes for my life, I think also of Psalm 8. Like Psalm 139, Psalm 8 is circular in its logic, concluding with an idea similar to where it begins. Psalm 8:1 and 9 read, “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!” (ESV). What prompts David to reflect on God’s majesty? It appears that he had been meditating on God’s creative work recorded in Genesis 1–2. In Psalm 8, he muses on the fact that God is powerful to create the moon and stars (v. 3), sheep, oxen, birds, and creatures of the sea (vv. 7–8). God’s magnificence as Creator might lead to the conclusion that He would rule creation independently—a Being this great would need no assistance. But for David, God’s majesty is seen in the fact that God created humanity as His image bearers to rule creation:

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;
What is man that You take thought of him,
And the son of man that You care for him?
Yet You have made him a little lower than God,
And You crown him with glory and majesty!
You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet.

Though God is so great and could rule His creation without His image bearers, His majesty is expressed in His rule through them, through us, through children right now living in orphanages and foster homes, through children who secular society would think

His majesty is expressed in His rule . . . through children who secular society would think of as negotiable, in the crosshairs of “choice.”

of as negotiable, in the crosshairs of “choice.” Though these children may have brought pain and anguish to their families, they have also brought joy and reward. In every instance, they have taught their parents about the glory of working with God to rule His creation. And in every instance, God wants to use them to teach us, His people, that same glory.

Jesus, Born of a Woman

As I noted above, Abraham’s *trust* in God’s ability to provide him and Sarah a child becomes the biblical pattern for relating with God. In the storyline of Scripture, faith in Jesus Christ is the basis of right-standing with God. That is, faith in what Scripture records about Christ—including His birth as a human baby. The fact that God took up human flesh magnifies His interest in humanity—even those termed an unwanted pregnancy.

Consider what the New Testament states about Jesus’ birth and the purposes of His life. The first chapter of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus Christ and culminates with an account of His birth. Matthew 2 begins with the account of

Herod's decree to kill all male children under two years old in his attempt to eliminate Jesus in the process. Luke 2 likewise records the physical, human birth of Jesus as having come about according to the prophetic announcements of Luke 1. And the gospel of John begins with the statement that the Word was with God in the beginning and in time, "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). At the outset of their narratives, three of the four New Testament Gospels note Jesus Christ's physical birth.

The New Testament Epistles then reflect on the implications of Jesus's birth. In Galatians 4:4, for example, Paul writes that at the pivotal moment in God's plan of redemption, "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law." Jesus bears the image of God not just as a human but as God's unique Son. The Son came as a man so that humanity could become sons of God. Though God created humanity in His image, human sin separates us from God. And New Testament writers like Paul describe Jesus as God's Son bearing God's image perfectly so that through His death and resurrection, we fallen image bearers could be reconciled to God. This is the gospel message—and it is based on the birth of a baby.

Ultimately, life in the womb has value because—as a human baby—the Son of God came to earth bearing God's image. Every life matters because of Jesus' life. Every life is redeemable by Him. With that knowledge, when we, the church, step into our role of caring for God's young image bearers, we participate with God in His plan to redeem His image bearers through Jesus. We participate in history-changing and eternity-shaping work. Much is at stake.



DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- When you were a child or teen, did you know anyone who was adopted? How did adoption affect them?
- What would you say to a teen couple who found out they were expecting?
- What would you say to the parents of that couple?
- Read Psalms 8 and 139. How would you summarize the themes of human dignity and responsibility in these Psalms?
- In what ways does Jesus' incarnation affect your view of human dignity?
- As I mentioned in my story, had the timing of my birth been five hundred days later, I may not have survived. Have you ever thought that a person you know may not have been born? In what ways does that make you think differently about God's image-bearing stamp on all human life?

2

“We Want to Adopt You!”

Adoption has never been an “issue” for me, not something I dwelt on or perceived as a threat. Early in my relationship with Julie, who would become my wife, I told her that I was adopted, and she welcomed the news. Because of my positive experience and Scripture’s clear teaching on the need to care for orphans, we discussed the possibility of one day adopting as well. Once we were married, however, those thoughts subsided as we had five biological children before our tenth anniversary in 2004.

The idea that we might expand our family through adoption didn’t come up again until the summer of 2013, when we took a vacation to South Carolina. I’d recently reread the book of James and came upon this verse: “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27). James’s words stuck with me as I recalled Julie’s and my premarital conversations about adopting. So I brought up the subject again with Julie, who willingly agreed.

Since most of our children were in their tween years, we

realized that for them it would be a major adjustment if we were to introduce new members into our family. I broached the subject while touring Charleston for a day when I announced that I was going to carry a heavy backpack, symbolizing a foster or adopted child. We would occasionally interrupt our sightseeing as if to change a diaper, give a bottle, or address some other need. We called the backpack “Mark” or “Molly,” and throughout the day I considered the needs of the world and the resources of my family. It was a fun “experiment” and the kids all got into the adventure of it. But after vacation, we went back to the busyness of our lives and didn’t give the idea more than a passing thought from time to time. As educational as our backpack adventure was, I had no idea that in the years to come, I would see just how truly needy orphans can be—how important it was for us to do more than just carry around a backpack and to step out in faith, and how much our family needed God’s help to welcome kids into our home.

Doors Closing, Doors Opening

That same summer when we were touring in Charleston, a prison inmate in central Missouri relinquished his parental rights of two biological daughters, Maggy and Molly.¹ His leadership and legal authority terminated, Maggy and Molly were at the mercy of other family members. The courts gave three different family members opportunity to care for the girls. All failed. By June 2013, they were without a forever family, orphans in the full custody of the state of Missouri.

While that was happening with Maggy and Molly, we had our own family change: our oldest child left for college, leaving

us with an empty bedroom. Less than two weeks after our son's departure, Focus on the Family hosted a "Wait No More" informational meeting for pastors in our hometown of Kansas City. "Wait No More" events connect state social workers and children's advocacy agencies with that region's faith community in order to highlight children whose parents' parental rights have been terminated.

As a pastor in the area, I wanted to attend to see if there were ways our church could get involved. When Julie and I attended, however, the stories I heard became intensely personal. Being adopted, I felt a deeper connection to the kids who were profiled there. In every story, I read my own. The hallways of the event space were lined with photographs and details of kids who were in temporary foster homes or group facilities. Attendees slowly exited the conference area, mingling around the pictures and skimming the biographical information listed for these kids. As we exited the building and walked into the sunny August afternoon, neither Julie nor I could speak. We walked to our parking space in near silence, listening to God's call on our lives.

We went home and started looking for that backpack. Julie and I committed to praying daily for what God might have us do with our college son's bedroom. After a month of constant prayer, we approached our children about the circumstances the Lord was working in our minds. What we were considering would drastically change life for our four daughters still living at home. We needed information. Having heard of Russell Moore's *Adopted for Life*,² we purchased a copy and read it in a matter of days. We then passed it to our four girls and asked each of them to read it—and join us in seeking God's will.

The “Wait No More” event confirmed in Julie and me that we should pursue adoption ministry unless the Lord intervened and ceased our aspirations. Our children were, like us, naïve and scared but optimistic. Where to begin? Public and private adoption options abound. We chose to seek kids who were already in the foster-care system but whose parents’ parental rights had been terminated—kids like those we had heard about at the “Wait No More” event.

Ready, Set, Research

Like most parents, before we began the first foster licensing class, we had already begun to research. We discovered the sad reality of websites that coordinate and profile foster children whose parents’ parental rights have been terminated. These children are under the care of the state, in foster homes, group homes, or residential facilities. On one of those websites (adoptuskids.org), we saw a profile that matched our interests. First, we wanted a sibling set. We feared if we took in one child, he or she would be overwhelmed at having so many older siblings. Second, we wanted girls. We were in the girl mode, having four eleven-to-sixteen-year-old girls still living in our home at the time. Third, we wanted a few years of space between our youngest biological child and the siblings we planned to adopt.

We thought if we could take a sibling set of girls who were younger than our biological daughters, these adopted girls would see the patterns of life and behavior in our older daughters as a model. We hoped that through these patterns, we could explain to the adopted girls that the good ways of life their new older sisters exhibited resulted from the good news of Jesus’ life, death,

and resurrection. The imagery of Psalms 127 and 128 was brewing in our minds. We understood that we needed to consider all children—even our adopted kids—a gift from the Lord as the psalmist writes in Psalm 127:3. I envisioned Psalm 128:3³ taking place in my home as a table filled with children—girls, specifically—reflected God's goodness to one another while Julie and I looked on. Our strategy toward these ends was rooted in the principle of Titus 2, in which Paul described older women teaching younger women and older men teaching younger men. Our biological children would, in a sense, be a full generation emotionally and spiritually above their adopted siblings. We hoped that in time, the adopted girls would follow the model our biological daughters had established.

In January 2015, Julie and I saw Maggy and Molly on adoptuskids.org. They were five and six years old, respectively. We printed their photo and put it on our fridge. And with our biological daughters, we began praying daily for them. The patterns were starting to form.

We began our foster-care licensure class the next month, and by August we had completed our adoption licensure class as well. In the foster-care classes, while the curriculum covered the basics of parenting, it also dealt especially with behavioral and attachment issues that surface in 99.9 percent of kids in the foster-care system. We learned that the goal of the foster-care system is to reunify the children with their parent or parents once they have resolved to the court's satisfaction whatever issues gave rise to the children being removed from the home. So the foster class equipped foster parents to speak highly of and reinforce the biological parent-child bonds, even when the biological parents have blown it. This is tough stuff. As the social workers leading the

The church—because of the power of the gospel—is strategically positioned to help kids who have had their world torn apart.

class told story after story of difficulties that arise in foster care, some participants began to think twice about bringing kids into their homes. It was jarring for Julie and me at times too. But at some point during each class, the Holy Spirit brought Scripture to

mind, specifically passages about the power of God to rework relationships through the gospel. I remembered what God had done in my life, what I preached every week. I was reminded of the power of the local church to provide identity and relational structure. During those class sessions, I became convinced that the church—because of the power of the gospel—is strategically positioned to help kids who have had their world torn apart. And we would definitely need the church's help.

All Things New?

Like most newly licensed parents, we got right to it. The day we received our certificate in the mail, we contacted Maggy and Molly's caseworker to see if they had yet been adopted. We learned the girls had been living in a stable foster home for two years. Maggy and Molly's foster family had made sure the girls were in a school environment that could attend to their behavioral and learning challenges. They integrated the girls into their extended family. But with two biological children of their own and having already adopted one other child, they were unable to make the

adoption commitment to the girls. The door was still open!

Over the next few months we spoke with the various members of the girls' care team. The school the girls attended was just as much a part of the girls' lives as the foster family. The school provided meals, social support, and love—even hiring an extra staff person to accompany one of the girls throughout the day to ensure she always had an emotionally stable adult with her. The school's commitment was genuine. (When we adopted the girls in November 2016, the principal and two teachers drove 250 miles round trip to celebrate with us—even though Maggy and Molly had been out of their school for eleven months.)

But the girls' caseworkers and counselors were the most stable network of relationships in Maggy's and Molly's lives. They intervened when the girls' biological family didn't follow court orders. They taught the girls the importance of truth and the horror of lies. They helped to emotionally connect the girls to our family. They gave the girls hope.

Visits to our home were filled with fear and excitement—themes that would characterize the first six months of Maggy's and Molly's lives with us. The first time the girls visited our home, in November 2015, one of the first activities we did with them was our Joshua rock basket. Joshua 4 records that when Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan River, he had leaders of each of the twelve tribes take stones from the dry river bottom. Those stones were to be memorial stones for Israel, symbols of God's providence and power behind and before them. We have a basket of rocks on our fireplace, each numbered to a corresponding entry in a journal that recounts a particular blessing the Lord has worked in our lives. Patterns. The rock basket is an integral part of our family life, and we wanted to get to it straightaway

with Maggy and Molly. Visits also included parks, arts and crafts, and activities purposed to connect Maggy and Molly with our biological daughters. We wanted Maggy and Molly to experience our patterns.

By the first week of December 2015, the caseworkers and therapist recommended to the judge presiding over Maggy and Molly's future that they should be placed in our home with a plan to adopt after six months. We moved the girls into our home on December 23. By Christmas Day we were already aware that the patterns of our family, however strong we thought they were, would be stretched to their limits if Maggy and Molly were to take our last name. The girls' anger and defiance surfaced seemingly out of the blue. At meals they would have burping

contests and exhibit other bodily noises not welcome at the dinner table.

What brought stability amid tantrums, anger, fear, hatred, biting, kicking, scratching, and sleepless nights? What kept us from giving up? Our local church.

As Julie homeschooled them along with our biological daughters, Maggy and Molly would fight, distract, and defy. During family worship, the girls would wiggle, fidget uncontrollably, and throw the rocks from the Joshua

basket. Maggy's and Molly's temper tantrums strained our patterns to the breaking point. When corrected or emotional, kids who have been abused exhibit physical strength beyond their years. When Julie confronted or corrected the girls, they bit, kicked, scratched, and hit her. And the walls of our home learned

a new vocabulary along the way. After the girls had been with us for just one month, my already petite wife had lost considerable weight. Full nights of sleep had become a distant memory. While at work, I was constantly on edge that my wife would call with news of another blowup. Our four biological children felt threatened in their own home. What had we done?

Until the following summer, life was a roller-coaster for our biological family and Maggy and Molly. How did we manage? What brought stability amid tantrums, anger, fear, hatred, biting, kicking, scratching, and sleepless nights? What kept us from giving up? Our local church.



DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

- I carried a backpack around Charleston while on vacation to help my family visualize and experience what it might be like to have a foster or adopted child along with us. What tasks, activities, or games might help a family prepare for having a child with them?
- What do you know about the factors that lead social workers or police to remove children from their parents?
- How do these events affect the kids? How might knowledge of those situations affect foster or adoptive parents?

- Do you know anyone who has completed foster or adoption licenses? What did they share with you about that process?
- How might a church help a family during the transition phase when foster or adopted children are settling into their new home?