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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

SEEING GOD IN ADOPTION; A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF ADOPTION

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Abstract

Adoption is a scriptural metaphor that emphasizes the permanence of our relationship with God, the rights we have as His children and His redemption of us. The presenter will share some of the treasures she has gleaned as an adoption social worker, from watching God at work in adoption, hoping to give participants a fresh glimpse of God.

God is at work in every area of life, in every part of the world but, for many years, my life has been adoption and that is where I have seen God at work. My personal life is deeply affected by adoption because our three children were adopted. This summer our oldest daughter turned 21 so I have stored up over 20 years of very personal and deep thoughts about adoption. My professional life and ministry is adoption and last year marked 25 years of working with people who are touched by adoption. Adoption has saturated exactly half my life and this been a significant milestone for me. I decided to mark it by writing down some of the treasured thoughts that I have pondered over the years, lessons I've learned about God through adoption. When one lives and breathes adoption every day for twenty-five years, at home and at work, I guess it's natural to always see an illustration that relates to adoption. It's always a treasure when one learns a new truth about God or discovers His presence in a quiet moment of Bible study or prayer or a moment of life so these are precious, personal thoughts that I share with you. I hope they will encourage you to see God in your moments and places in life. My appreciation of adoption has been heightened as I've explored the dynamics of adoption and theology. I believe that God has a special love for adoption and that, in loving adoption, and those that are touched by adoption, I am loving what God loves

In the field of adoption we refer to the *adoption triad*. Let me illustrate the triad with you. At the top is the adopted person, usually adopted as an infant or a child. On the bottom, supporting that child are the adoptive family and the birth family. Usually everyone in this triad comes to adoption through a loss and through these losses, a new and permanent union is made in adoption bringing new life and new possibilities. Grief and loss then are at the core of adoption and reverberate through each member of the triad's life. God dearly loves each person in this triad and he understands the loss and the grief of each person. He loves each person.

Loving What God Loves

Several years ago I was tired and struggling with my "calling" when, as part of a Missions Emphasis Sunday, I heard a sermon that challenged me to *Love what God Loves*. Mark Jobe grew up in a small village in the north of Spain and came to Chicago to study for the ministry, planning to return to Europe. He hated the city but as he sought God's call for his life, he learned to love what God loves and God gave

him a great love for the City of Chicago. In 1986 Mark took a church in the inner city, in a gang infested neighborhood, a dying church with 17 people. The New Life Community Church grew to eight different locations, with 10 different services in two languages, with over 2200 people, bringing New Life to their communities.

That morning, I sat through the service a second time. I want to love what God loves. God began to speak to my heart about what God loves and the calling he had given me.

God loves children- Adoption is first and foremost about children. When the disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, when they were vying for adult power and political concerns, Jesus (Matthew ch. 18) called a child and used a child as an example of what we need to be like to enter the kingdom of heaven. Can't you imagine that child was close by to Jesus to begin with? A child's place in the world requires humility and dependence, even if they need to ask for things. What an adult is concerned about in an adult world is of little concern to Jesus, if a child is in view. He said,

"Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Mt. 18:5, 6)

Matthew 18 shows us that God loves children and that, if we love what He loves, we need to be concerned for children; I need to pray for children and I need to spend my efforts on children.¹ Everyone who is part of an adoption is serving a child.

God loves orphans

God not only loves children but He especially singles out and cares for orphans. James 1:27 says "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Jeremiah 49 describes the Lord Almighty's judgment on Edom. It describes how He will have no mercy, stripping Esau bare, uncovering his hiding places. It says that his children, relatives and neighbors will perish and he will be no more. But then He says, "Leave your orphans; I will protect their lives. Your widows too can trust in me."

God loves the fatherless

Over and over the Scriptures talk about the judgment that comes on those who oppress the fatherless, who steal from the fatherless, and we're told to care for the fatherless. God himself protects the fatherless. Psalm 68 (vs. 4-6) says

Sing to God, sing praise to his name,
extol him who rides on the clouds
His name is the LORD
And rejoice before him.
A father to the fatherless, a defender of the widows,
Is God in his holy dwelling?

¹ *Stuart Hackett's message, "That None Should Be Lost" Blanchard Alliance Church Wheaton, IL 07/13/08*

God sets the lonely in families. . .

God loves widows

In many ways single mothers today are our present day widows. Many of these women struggle to support themselves and their children alone. Although we suffer the consequences of our actions, God never deserts His people. He always has a plan for your deliverance and for some of these women, birth mothers, the choice of adoption may be the part of the deliverance He offers.

God loves the pregnant woman and the nursing mother

When Jesus was talking with his disciples about the signs of the end of the age, he described the horror of fleeing to the mountains to hide, not even taking time to gather one's coat and He said (Mt. 24:19),

“How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers”.

The tenderness Jesus feels for these mothers is sweet and personal.

God loves the barren woman

While we use the word infertile today we know who we are if we are a barren woman. I never noticed the attention Scripture gives to the barren woman until experiencing the reality of my own barrenness. God really notices barren land and barren women. Two things hit me about God and his view of barrenness. God loves and cares about the barren, the infertile woman, and God often intervenes in the barren woman's life in a very special way and has used barrenness of now famous women to bring about His plan.

Sarah was barren and had no child (Gen 11:30).

Rebekah – Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. (Genesis 25:21). She became the mother of two great nations!

Leah (Genesis 29)– the LORD saw that Leah was hated and opened her womb, and then of course, in His time he opened Rachel's womb and we have the twelve tribes of Israel.

Hannah (I Samuel 1)– whose barrenness caused her to cry out to the LORD in such grief that others thought she was drunk. Her son, whom she gave back to the Lord, became one of the greatest prophets in Israel.

Elizabeth – was barren and well stricken in years (Luke 1:7) and God gave her a child – John the Baptist, the one came to prepare the way for the Savior.

Proverbs 30:15 says,

There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, “Enough!”

The grave,

The barren womb

Land, which is never satisfied with water, and

Fire, which never says, Enough!

The barren womb is right up there with unquenchable death, dry land, and fire. God hears the cry of the barren woman; He cares and understands that it doesn't go away. He doesn't get tired of the infertile woman or her cry for children.

God loves the broken hearted

God is close to the brokenhearted.

“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” (Ps.34:18)

“He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds” (Ps 147:3)

When I think of brokenhearted, crushed in spirit, I see a birthmother leaving the hospital or my office, empty, without her child, fearing that she will never see him again, that she won't be able to protect him, that he will grow up and hate her and not understand her decision. God loves the birth parent grieving for the loss of their child. I could tell you so many stories of birth mothers who I've seen God touch through His closeness. I've seen their wounds bound up by seeing the joy of the adoptive parents, by hearing the tender words of the adoptive mother affirming their love for the child and their respect and love for her. I've seen God use a letter or a beautiful photo of her child years later to affirm her decision— the redemption of seeing something beautiful come from her decision. I've seen God place someone else in her life to share their story. I've watched birth mothers pick up the pen to sign the consent to adoption, putting their trust only in God. One woman told me that the only way she got through the days after her baby's birth was to remember what God had shown her several months before and to “not doubt in the darkness what God had shown her in the light”.

One of the ways I've heard birth mothers describe the closeness they feel of the LORD is if they grasp that God the father himself understands because He too gave up His son, gave up control over His life, and gave up the right and ability to protect His son, because He believed there was a higher calling, salvation for us.

He loves the infertile man and woman broken hearted over their inability to have a child or their miscarriages, ectopic pregnancies, stillborns and their monthly, repetitive disappointment.

God loves families

He created the family and, uses the ties and love of family as a picture our relationship with Him. Ephesians 3 (14-15) tells us that human families reflect an eternal fatherhood. We understand something of the way God fathers us through our relationship with our human fathers and the reverse is also true: We know what human fatherhood ought to look like based on how our Father God relates to us (Moore, 2009, p. 17).

God loves adoption. The concept of adoption came straight from the heart of God and is a Scriptural metaphor that emphasizes the depth and permanence of our relationship with Him, the rights we have as His children and His redemption of us.

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. (Ephesians 1:4)

Russell D. Moore, a theologian and an adoptive father, in his recently published book, *Adopted For Life*, says that some rude questions about adoption taught him about the Gospel of Christ. When the Jewish Christians demanded to know if the newly confessed followers of Christ, Gentile believers, were really brothers (circumcised), when the tribal fracturing of the church was most threatened, Paul laid out a key insight into the church's union with Christ – *the Spirit of adoption*. Moore says, “For Paul, adoption isn't simply one more literary image to convey “Jesus in my heart.” It has everything to do with our identity and our inheritance in Christ, with who we are and where we're headed” (Moore, 2009, p. 24). He goes on to say that he and his wife went to Russia and back, twice, to complete the paperwork and attain legal custody of their sons and they found a truth of adoption more ancient, more veiled, but just as real: our own adoption. He says, “None of us likes to think we were adopted. We assume we're natural-born children, with a right to all of this grace, to all of this glory” but those who are in Christ have found a home through the adopting power of God, we have received sonship. We are

here by the Spirit of adoption. We are here by grace and our adoption shows us just how welcome we are (Moore, 2009, p.30,31).

And. . . .

God loves to work all circumstances for good for all those who love Him.

God always has a plan. A friend and I were talking about this and she told me that He (God) thought that what she would gain through infertility would be more than she would lose.

God loves every person who is touched with an adoption. He loves them just because he loves them but He has a special love for them because he loves them with a special compassion as a birth mother who believes that someone else can better care for the child she loves, as a father who is giving up his son or daughter for a higher calling or purpose, as a barren woman who He remembers and blesses with a child, not born of her own flesh, or as a fatherless child who He places in a family, or as a unit because He knows that this earthly family formed through adoption is a reflection of His great love and commitment to us.

Through that sermon, God reminded me in a fresh way why I love what I do, because, in doing my work, I am loving what God loves. When the drama of a case, the crazy hours and the unpredictable outcomes of our work bothers me, God has often given me strength and faith to press on because of the love He wants to express through me. Loving what God loves is fellowship with the Spirit, being in line with what the Spirit is doing.

Some lessons learned from Birthmothers

While it is wonderful to see adoptive couples bring their baby home and it is wonderful to see an infant welcomed so lovingly and completely into a family, my greatest privilege has been to work with women who have chosen to give life to their babies and to carefully make an adoption plan. I have never seen young women as spiritually open as they are when they are looking for guidance in making a decision about their child's life. A birth mother is a mother, with a mother's heart and with a mother's love, who makes a decision that is contrary to everything natural in her heart and body, when she chooses to give her child parents and give them the role as parents in her child's life. Even open adoption does not take away the loss of parenting and ability to protect that she gives up. God understands, completely, the feelings of birth parents, the loss of control they are giving up because; He too, gave up His son. He willingly separated Himself physically and spiritually from His only son because He believed there was a higher calling for us. Of course birth mothers are human, fallen women like all of us, but I have walked this path with many who have been strong and selfless in this area, even when they were struggling in other areas of their lives. I love the birth mothers that I have known over the years.

A Biblical View of adoption

As our staff has provided adoption education over the past 25 years, much of our time teaching is taken by dispelling the myths that surround adoption. The world's view of adoption is very different than a God's view of adoption.

I read somewhere that 98% of Americans support adoption but I know that means that they support adoptive parents adopting. Our experience is that 98% of Americans do not support birth parents that make an adoption decision and many people still see adoption as a "second best" way of building a

family. Like many themes in Scripture the Old Testament gives us “case studies” in adoption but never mentions the word “adoption” while the New Testament offers some teaching, given by Paul.

Adoption, in Scripture, embodies the biblical theme of covenants. Adoption is not just a legal process but it is mainly a relationship, a promise. When Paul says in Ephesians that we were chosen, before the foundation of the world, to be adopted, he is describing a privilege that was originally bestowed exclusively on Israel but now made available by the new covenant to all who believe in Christ. This should clarify that adopted children are not second best or not *really* a member of a family.

Think about some of those “case studies” in the Old Testament. And, I want us to note, that in none of these cases was the adoptive status of these people incidental but rather, part of God’s strategic plan to provide for children and to further His purposes and Kingdom.

Moses – Jochebed, Moses, biological mother certainly loved her son and arranged a situation for Moses to be rescued, and adopted by the Pharaoh’s daughter, in order to save his life. Moses was raised in Pharaoh’s court and later became the God’s deliverer for the Israelites. Moses had to be born a Hebrew and he had to have what his adoptive family gave him to be prepared to do what God called him to do. His birth and his adoptive heritage were what made him who he became.

Esther raised by her uncle, Mordecai– Esther had her place in Jewish history, as her story tells us, being prepared “for such a time as this”, to save the whole Jewish people from annihilation.

Samuel, given to God by his mother and raised by Eli, the priest (1 Samuel 1) – Samuel raised and trained by Eli in the temple was prepared to lead the nation of Israel as a great prophet.

Joseph and Jesus – God, Himself, provided His own son with an earthly father to raise Him. Who are we to say that children don’t need fathers?

One could say the theme of these stories takes place for the well-being of children but I think God has an even greater purpose in placing each child in the family that he chooses to raise them.

Adoption is a scriptural metaphor that emphasizes the permanence of our relationship with God, the rights we have as His children and His redemption of us.

I feel blessed, as an adoptive parent, to have experienced the miracle of attachment and the bonds of family ties that I’ve experienced through adoption. With a child who has passed the teen years, one in her teens and a pre-teen, I have never doubted, through the ups and downs of their lives, that I am their mother and I would do anything to surround them with deliverance. I understand my permanent place in God’s family in a very real way. Everything my husband and I do is for the future of our children, we hope to leave them an inheritance, and we take our responsibility to help them grow into productive adults as the greatest responsibility of our lives. And – we’ve experienced the joy of knowing at an early age that we were the very center of their lives, the joy of having our little girl sit between us on our bed and with pure joy and contentment sing, “momma, daddy, momma, daddy” or having our 10 year old boy write a school paper about his hero – his dad. We’ve also understood the deep grief and fear, as only a parent can feel it, of having a child rebel and the relief and joy of watching her return.

Adoption is an outpouring of God’s grace, a redemptive act for everyone involved.

I've watched a young woman in a crisis pregnancy find meaning in her pain in seeing the beautiful life of her child. As one song writer says, we live in a culture that "saves the trees and kills our children", and these women are making a brave, often misunderstood choice to carry their baby and then "give them up", something most women in our culture won't even consider doing. I've seen the meaning it gives to her to feel like she can give someone else a gift that is the best gift of all to give.

Certainly adoption can relieve the pain of childlessness caused through infertility. A child can also experience God's grace through their adoptive family, feeling the love and commitment of their parents and the love of their birth parent who made an adoption plan for them. And again, above all, the adoption of a child can further God's purposes in lives of individuals and of His kingdom.

I want to end with the story of a friend of mine. Mary was adopted 37 years ago by a family who raised her in a Christian home. Mary, placed in a private adoption, knew only what was on her birth certificate about her birth parents. She asked me if I could help her find her birth parents. I took her information and located her birth father but discovered that her birth mother had died a few years ago. I called one of her children listed on the obituary that I found. When I began to explain to the woman why I was calling she told me that she had only learned that Mary existed two years ago. Her aunts had told her after her mother's death. She said that she had just been thinking about trying to find her but didn't have any idea how to go about it. Well, Mary met her mother's other children and has grown particularly close to her sister and niece and nephew. She began to write to her birth father and talked on the phone with her him and his family. She recently drove 8 hours to western Iowa to meet him. She asked the women in our Sunday school class to meet with her after the Sunday service and pray for her before she left. I know that God had a plan for Mary and I believe that it was also part of his plan for Mary to now share her journey and her faith with them. God's timing is perfect and I can't wait to see how many spiritual adoptions may be the result of Mary's adoption into her family.

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