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Hopeful Beginnings

Following the Path of Adoption

AT times, memories surprise me like unexpected waves.

I'm sitting here on the back porch, watching my children and their friends play in the yard. My eyes land on Carl, and I am, again, consumed with awe and amazement that this child, from another country, is now living in our home, is an integral part of the family, is now our son. I have told so many people over the years that Carl was unexpected, unplanned—that we thought four children were all we would have, and that God surprised us with another. That was a lie, though. Not an intentional lie, but still an untruth in one sense.

Earlier today, when I first came out to the porch and was enjoying the soft breeze on my face, God whispered into my ear, 'Don't you remember? I have been preparing you for adoption for years.' 'What? I'm sorry, God, I'm not sure if I heard you right. What are you talking about?'



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Immediately, as if an old projector had been turned on, I began to remember long-lost snippets of my life. Bits of conversations. Feelings. Thoughts.

The first one that came to mind occurred on a winter evening about four years ago. The kids were starting to get ready for bed when we looked outside and noticed it was snowing. 'Put your boots and coats on, kids. Let's go out and enjoy the snow!' It was coming down pretty hard, and since the temperatures had been below freezing for days, it quickly began to accumulate. I recall being mesmerized as I looked up to the street light so I could see how much snow was falling. The wind and flakes swirled around me, giving the evening a magical feel, like I was being swept up into the life of the snow. I looked over at Abigail, who was right beside me, with her tongue out, joyfully catching snowflakes. Felicia and Madison were twirling, with their heads back, getting caught up in their dizzy joy. And Jeffery had grabbed the little round plastic sled, excitedly journeying up and down the hill across the street from our house. Laughter from all pealed through the air, and I simply stood there, taking it all in. Some moments you just don't want to end.

A couple of our neighbors came out to play as well, and we ended up asking them to spend the night. The entire next day was spent joyfully playing in the winter wonderland, and when evening came, we did not want our friends to go home, so we asked if they could spend a second night with us. That's when it happened. That's when I remember God speaking to my heart. 'Twila,' He said, 'one day you will have this many kids in your home.' 'Yes, Lord, I can see myself having more children. I could do this. I would love for you to fill my home with more little feet, laughter, family.'





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Then, as soon as that memory became crystal clear, God cut that tape and began a new film of a very different part of my life. I then found myself in the memory of one of the last conversations I had with Aunt Debby, my mother's little sister, shortly before she died of cancer. We were in the sunroom at Mom and Dad's beach house. Mom was on the bigger couch, and Debby and I were beside each other on the love seat. Our conversation was sweet, but bold and honest. Debby knew at that point that she did not have much time left to live, so we talked about heaven. She said she was not afraid to die because she knew she would be with the Lord, but she was sad to think about leaving her family, knowing how much they would grieve. She talked about her children, who were grown, and we prayed together for them, for their futures, and for the strength of their faith to continually increase throughout their lives. After saying 'amen,' she turned to me with that kind, gentle face, and asked me about my children. I caught her up on what was going on in their lives; then she, point blank, said, 'Twila, I bet you will adopt one day. I could see you doing that.' Rather than denying that possibility, I agreed with her that that just might happen sometime.

'Yes, Lord, I see that You planted many tiny seeds of adoption into my heart long before they came to fruition. You knew all along that our family was not yet complete. So, even though it seemed like the idea of adoption came up out of the blue, it didn't really, did it? Carl was planned long ago, even "before the foundations of the earth" (Eph. 1:4).'



On Sunday, February 28, 2010, we were visiting a friend, talking about our children, and catching up on our lives,



when she asked me if I knew anything about summer hosting programs. She said that she had heard of a local group that was going to bring over orphans from Ukraine so the children could have the experience of spending three weeks with families here in the US. I was not familiar with the program, nor was I very interested in learning about it. I did not want to be rude to my friend, however, so I patiently listened to her as she excitedly shared what she knew. As this conversation came to a close, she offered to send me the link to the hosting group. I promised I would look at it, not because I was considering hosting, or adopting, but simply because I knew it would make my friend happy.

The next day, upon receiving the link, I almost deleted the email. Thankfully, though, I didn't. I decided I would be a good friend, and at least look at what it had to say. I opened up the site, clicked on the 'view orphans' link, and, immediately, our lives changed.

It's hard to put into words what happened at that moment, except to say that God opened my eyes to the fact that one of those children was supposed to join our family. Now, orphans have always tugged at my heart strings, but *nothing* like this had ever happened before. I remember crying ... crying for those children, ages eight to sixteen, who were stuck in orphanages, without parents; crying for the hope that we were supposed to offer a home to at least one of them; and crying that the good Lord was nudging us—*us*—to have a part in doing this good and worthwhile thing called adoption.

I got up from the computer, went to talk to my husband, Jeff, and asked if he would ever consider adopting an older child from Ukraine. Amazingly, he said, 'Maybe!' That almost blew me over, because every other time in the past I had

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asked anything about adoption, he had said, equally quickly, 'No.' But 'maybe' was a word full of hope. He encouraged me to keep researching as much as I could about these children, and get back to him on what I found. So that is exactly what I did.

The next day, I had a wealth of information on the plight of Ukrainian orphans, so I shared what I was learning with Jeff. I had found all sorts of sad statistics, such as 'without intervention, upon leaving the orphanage [at age sixteen], 60 per cent of girls will end up in prostitution, 70 per cent of boys will be on the streets or in jail, and 15 per cent will commit suicide within the first two years on their own' (<http://www.newhorizonsforchildren.org/>). We talked about what it must be like to grow up without parents to love and guide you through life, and how the older children are typically passed over in lieu of the available babies. After we talked, I was ready to begin the adoption process, but Jeff simply asked me to keep researching and to continue informing him about everything I found out regarding orphans in Ukraine.

I was thrilled that Jeff was still interested in learning more about these children, but I wasn't so certain that he was drawn to adopt one into our family. So, I had to look him straight in the eyes and say, 'Please be completely honest with me on this. If you are wanting me to continue to dig deeper into this idea of adoption just because you think it will make me happy, I need you to tell me to stop. You see, it's important for me to know what you think about our adopting. If it truly is something you would like to pursue, then, great, we'll keep going. If you are going along with this just to appease me, however, then we need to stop. If we choose to do this, then it will have to be something that we decide to do together,



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for it is going to permanently change our family.' Amazingly, without hesitation, he said that given all that he knows now about these children, he cannot *not* adopt. If he turned his back on what God was calling us to do, then he knew we would regret it for the rest of our lives. So, the green light was on!



From that day of beginnings, we set our eyes on the horizon and sprinted toward the goal of bringing home our orphaned child. We did not meander slowly down this path, for God impressed on our hearts to **move!** God works uniquely in each family, but in ours He instructed us not to host a child, but to immediately begin preparing for adoption. We were not to look too closely at our finances to figure out how we would come up with the \$30,000 to make the adoption happen. We were not to look to the future to figure out how we would put five kids through college, or how we would pay for weddings, or how we would be able to save for our retirement. God knew that if we fixated on those things, they would completely paralyze us, and we would never adopt this child. So, God said to move quickly, to run, to fix our eyes upon Him and His plan for this child, and to trust that He would show us how to go down this path.



Adopt: 'To take and rear (the child of other parents) as one's own child' (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/adopt>).



Adoption is not just about plucking someone out of a hopeless situation and rescuing him. It's about giving your very life to





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another. If you adopt, it will be one of the most selfless acts you have ever done. It will also be one of the hardest, yet one of the most worthwhile things you will ever experience. On the very first day that we met our adoption facilitator face-to-face, he looked us in the eyes and told us that even though we had four biological children, we were not to go into this thinking our adopted child would emotionally be just like our others. He informed us that the mere fact that the child we were adopting was an orphan meant that he had experienced significant trauma in his life. Chances are that he would bring fears and anxieties into our home, and we needed to start immediately equipping ourselves (through sources such as books, blogs, and talking to other adoptive parents) to understand where he was coming from, so we could begin to parent him in ways that he would need, in ways that would be effective and wise, yet in ways that would be humble and full of grace.



I hate to admit it, but in the past I would hear about orphans, feel sorry for them, then tune them out. I would simply keep living as if they weren't real, or as if it was up to someone else to do something about them. When God's timing was right for us to adopt, though, He grabbed hold of us and made it clear that we were to do something. No, we couldn't adopt all the orphans of the world, but we could make a significant difference in the life of one child. Not just any one child, but the one child whom He had chosen to be in our family.

That was the premise of our adoption. It wasn't based or begun on the foundation of what we had planned or





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envisioned for our family; it was begun by God Himself on the foundation of what He had planned for Carl (the boy we ended up adopting)—and for us. You see, all through the Bible, we are given stories about how God answers prayers. He is an intensely personal God and loves to make Himself known to His people. For years, in an orphanage in a tiny town in Ukraine, a little boy prayed to God, making his fears, requests, and desires known. As with all of us, he did not want to go through life unloved, ignored, forgotten. He didn't want to be invisible to the world. He wanted to be known, to be seen, to be loved unconditionally. He wanted to belong to a family, and God heard his cries, and delivered him.



Don't you love it when God gives you new perspective on something that you thought you already knew? As we prayerfully considered this directive of adoption in our lives, we initially focused in on James 1:27, which says,

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 (ESV).

Early in this process, I knew that we were supposed to adopt, but that did not stop my fears from creeping in. I would vacillate between knowing for certain that this was what God desired for us to do and questioning whether or not we could do it. So God, in His eternal patience, began to teach us about His view of adoption so that we could better grasp the fact that He would faithfully lead us through the adoption process, as well as through the entire life of the child He had chosen for us.





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This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

1 JOHN 3:16-18

In these verses, I clearly saw that Jesus laid down His life for us, and that we ought to do the same for other people, namely, we were to lay down our lives for this orphaned boy. We were to be willing to give up many of the material possessions we owned in order to afford to give this child a home. We were to show our love for Christ by being obedient to Him, and our love for this orphaned child, by our actions. We were, in essence, to be the hands and feet of Jesus to this young boy.

So, as we journeyed down the path of adoption, I kept envisioning myself as representing Jesus-in-the-flesh to this hurting, abandoned child. There was more for me to learn, though. On October 30, 2010, while in Ukraine, I wrote in my journal that Matthew 25:34-40 had taken on new significance for me. I'd like to share this Scripture with you, as well as my journal excerpt in response to it:

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then





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the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

MATTHEW 25:34-40 (ESV)

In response to these verses, I wrote in my journal:

All this time I thought *we* were being the arms and feet of Jesus in going and loving these orphans. But as I read these verses today, I see the *orphans, too*, as representing Jesus. This tells me that Jesus permeates adoption. He is everywhere, present on both sides! How prideful was I to think that my part was the most important one. No, once again, God has reminded me that this is not about me at all; it's entirely about Jesus, for He is the one who not only loves the afflicted enough that He wakes us up to their plight so that we can help, but He also personally loves the orphans of this world. He doesn't just love them, He relates to them, He feels their pain of abandonment, He enters into their lives so much so that when we help them, we are in effect helping the very Son of God.

With that on my mind, adoption became very holy to me. I knew that God had fore-ordained this boy to join our family, and I wanted to honor God in how I (we) parented him. I was afraid of failure, but hopeful because I knew God, Himself, had called us to this task. No matter how weak or





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uncertain Jeff and I would be in helping this child, we knew that God would be our backbone, and that His plans would reign despite our fallenness.



When the day came to meet our son, Jeff and I were confident that we were exactly where God wanted us to be. I remember being in the director's office at the orphanage, waiting for Carl to step inside. I expected him to be timid and shy as he entered; but, instead, he burst into the room, with a huge smile pasted across his face, and with joy and expectation oozing from every movement. Immediately, his eyes found ours, and our hearts were connected for all time. He didn't know exactly what to do, so he went up to Jeff and extended his hand, which Jeff enthusiastically shook. Then he came to me, expecting to shake my hand, too, but I just *had* to hug him! He was a child of mine, and I wanted him to know how much he was loved from that first moment. I think I caught him off guard, though, for after the hug I noticed he was blushing. That made my heart melt even more.

Meeting Carl was sweet and wonderful. He was trusting, loving, and kind, and he stole our hearts from the very beginning. We spent a couple of weeks together, and bonded quickly. During this time, Jeff and I spent our evenings reflecting on, and marveling about, our experiences that each day offered. Not wanting to forget those memories, we were faithful to blog our journey on a daily basis (milesfamilyfun.blogspot.com). One night, as I was typing, I became overwhelmed with the reality of what was happening. We were not simply on vacation, making a new friend. We were in the midst of bringing into our home a child who we had





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only just met. But what an incredible child this was! Just that afternoon, for example, we had taken two large pizzas with us to the orphanage to share with Carl and his two best friends. We knew that pizza was something they rarely ate, so it would be a treat for them. What we didn't expect was the reaction of the other orphans as we arrived with the meal. In an instant, we were surrounded by a host of hungry children, begging to have a bite of the food we were holding. My heart ached for each of them. I remember looking over to Jeff, not knowing what to do. Carl, who had excitedly met us at the taxi when we first got there, took charge and beckoned us to follow him. He swiftly went into the room reserved for families and children getting to know each other during the adoption process. As soon as we entered, our translator gently closed the door, with a sea of hopeful faces remaining behind it.

Carl and his two friends immediately sat down at the table, and Carl offered up a prayer of thanksgiving. We lifted up the pizza box lid, and the boys quickly devoured the entire thing in record time. As they were finishing up their last few bites, I started to open the second pizza for them, but Carl shook his head, 'no.' With a gentle smile, he picked up the box, opened the door, and handed it to the other children, who were still waiting behind it.

As I finished blogging about that experience, I was touched with how tender-hearted this child was, how precious a gift he was to his friends in the orphanage, and how blessed we were to have him join our family. My emotions swelled, and I found myself pleading with God to be with Carl as he left his friends at the orphanage, and to help us as we brought him into our home. Over the course of the next couple of days, I wrote a poem, putting words to those thoughts and prayers.





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FRAGILE

By: Twila Miles

*Moving forward with God's purpose and plan,
To save a little boy in another land.
Counting the hours before we can give
A smile and a hug; a chance for him to live.*

*Finally we see him and his sweet, smiling face.
He is strong and courageous, yet fragile as lace.
Surrounded by friends he's full of joy and delight.
Games give us time to connect and grow tight.*

*Be with us, Lord, as he holds our weak hands.
To give him a foundation, not hopeless sand.
Well fed, cared for, in this temporary place,
But a real home he needs, filled with love and grace.*

*Timid and scared to leave this comfort zone,
But ready to change and move to a new home.
Restless, yet happy, each day closer to the new
Experience that shall carry him closer to You.*

*He now does what he can to remember his friends
Though some may come, too—some see this as the end.
This new life ahead is larger than imagined,
So now, more than ever, we need love and compassion.*

*Be with us, Lord, as he holds our weak hands.
To give him a foundation, not hopeless sand.
Well fed, cared for, in this temporary place,
But a real home he needs, filled with love and grace.*





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Two days before we went to court to make the adoption official, Carl shuffled over to his bedside table and pulled out a little bag, and gave it to us. This bag held absolutely everything that was important to him in life: letters people had written him since he had been an orphan, pictures, and a few items from our time together. Could you imagine packing up to move, and finding that all you have fits into a sandwich baggie? That night when we went home, I began to think about what he had given us: he had joyfully, expectantly, unreservedly given us his whole life, knowing that he was now a part of our family, and that we would take care of him, love him, guide him, and always be there for him. I started thinking, isn't that what God wants us to do to him? Doesn't He want us to completely, joyfully, expectantly, unreservedly give our lives to him? And here, all along I thought we were changing this little boy's life. Little did I realize just how much he would change ours.



That was the beautiful beginning of how our son, Carl, came to join our family. We were thrilled at the prospect of adding another child to our fold, and refused to believe that we would experience extreme challenges in raising him. We never voiced it out loud, but deep down we truly believed that enveloping Carl with a great magnitude of love would give him reason enough to trust and bond with us right off the bat. I assumed he would always be joyful and thankful to have been chosen to be in our family, that we would always be thankful for the gift that he was to us, and that within no time at all, we would be functioning as a strong unit.

Within a matter of months, however, our reality went from being rosy to dark, from being joyful to anxious, from



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being hopeful to despondent. Many nights I'd cry myself to sleep, seeing myself as a failure, uncertain how to parent Carl, and feeling completely alone in this task. I did not know of anyone else who had ever walked down the path of older-child adoption, so I didn't have anyone to glean wisdom and encouragement from. You see, our son had deeply engrained fears and ways of going through life that controlled his responses to situations. He began to do things like beating and bullying our other son, Jeffery, almost daily. And his lack of respect toward me sent him railing for hours on end when Jeff was at work. Many other things happened, too, which I will share with you throughout this book. My desire in doing so is not to put Carl down or to ridicule him, but to relate to many of you who are experiencing similar difficulties, and to share with you the hope we found in Christ every step of the way.

One day was especially challenging, and I began to wonder if we had completely taken away Carl's joy for life when we brought him to the U.S. He seemed to always be afraid, upset, or angry, so I couldn't help but question whether or not we had rescued him from one difficult life that he despised, only to place him in another. 'Lord, why is parenting Carl so hard? We love him so much, and want him to be happy in this family. Does he think we made a mistake by bringing him here, so far away from the only life and country he has ever known? Does he even want to be here? We need Your help, Lord. I don't know what type of help to ask for, though, but You know exactly what we need, don't You? Would You please give us some of that, whatever that may be?'

I thought for sure God's help would come in the form of changing Carl somehow. Maybe by taking away some



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of his fears, or by giving him a gentle spirit. God did not choose to change Carl at that moment in time, though; He chose to change *me* instead. He brought me out of the mire of self-pity, complaining, and fear, and set me on the foundation of God and His plan for Carl. He lifted my face toward Himself and gave me the gift of a new perspective. One full of renewed hope, grace and expectation. One that would allow me to keep heading forward despite the obstacles. One that would equip me to give glory to God for all the good that He *was* doing, and all that He *would* do in Carl's life.

After Carl had been in our home for about six months, there was one particular day when God blanketed me with peace and understanding. He endowed me with new vision—new perspective—as He brought two small, yet powerful, experiences into my life. The first one came about as I sat on the floor beside my bed, organizing a mountain of books that had accumulated over the previous few months. I like to group the books on my shelf topically, so I was taking the time to look at each one individually to ensure it went in its correct spot. I was about halfway through the pile when something caught my eye: a corner of a photograph that was peeking out of one of the books. I was curious what the picture was, so I pulled it out of the book and found myself staring into the eyes of a young Carl.

The photograph was one that the Ukrainian State Department of Adoption took when Carl initially entered the system, which meant he was a tender six years of age. He had rosy cheeks, big blue eyes, a cute little nose, and a timid smile revealing a mouth full of baby teeth. I stared at that picture for a long time, wondering things like, did he have





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anyone to rejoice with him when his first tooth fell out? What was he thinking and feeling when he was taken away from his parents? Did he expect to be adopted quickly?

As I continued to study his expression, it seemed to me that at that point in his life, Carl was sad, yet hopeful—perhaps relieved that someone helped him escape a traumatic past, and expectant that better days were ahead for him. Yes, Carl must have believed that one day another family would take him home and love him, and we ended up being the family that gave life to that dream. As the realization of that set in, I could feel God's grace cleanse and renew me. All of a sudden, I no longer saw the challenges we were having with Carl as bad things, but as indicators, reminders, of how much pain and abuse Carl had endured through the years. Yes, he wanted a family then, and he still wanted one now. We just had to be willing to be patient with him as he healed enough from his past so that he could trust us.

Then, later that afternoon, I had all five children packed in the back of our van as we headed to the store to buy a few things. I pulled into a parking space and was about to get out, when, from the back of the van, I heard Carl say, 'Wait, Mom. Remember when you and Dad first went to the orphanage, and I got to meet you? We were in the Director's office for a little bit, but then we went to that big room down the hall. Remember? For years, I had been dreaming of going in that room, getting to know my new mom and dad. It was wonderful. Then, the next day I thought you were coming back again at noon, just like you did on the first day. But you weren't there at 12:00, or 12:30, so I assumed you had changed your mind about me, and decided not to come back. I wish someone had told me that you would be coming at





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2:00 that second day rather than noon, because that was the loneliest I have ever felt. I cried and cried, until I couldn't cry any more. Did you know that?'

No, I never knew that had happened, and my heart ached as I imagined him so sad. With tears in my eyes, I thanked him for sharing his experience with me. There had been so much turmoil in our relationship in the last few months, I had lost sight of the true issues at hand. I had been allowing my fears and emotions to rest on shaky ground based solely on the actions that I saw, but Carl's willingness to share with me, unprompted, a very personal, vulnerable part of his adoption experience helped me to see him more as the hopeful little boy I had viewed in the photograph earlier that day than the belligerent, out-of-control teenager that I often struggled with. Once again, I could sense God at work, helping me to understand Carl a bit better.

In just one day, God had brought me from being depressed and worried about the present difficulties that we were facing with Carl to being joyful and expectant about better days ahead. My own loving Father had refueled my drive to do whatever it would take to help Carl heal from his past, and grow into his future. That is just like God, though, isn't it? He is God of new life, resurrection, and hope. That is why I am writing this book. I'd like to offer renewed hope and encouragement to anyone who may be struggling with the harsh realities that often come with adoption. My prayer for you is that God will give you a new perspective on your child and the role you have been given as that child's parent. Most of all, however, I pray that God continually lifts your eyes to see His presence in your home. Your adopted child was brought there by the Lord for reasons you may not





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yet understand. Rejoice in being a part of His plans, and pray for patience, wisdom, and understanding as you travel down the path set before you. Know ahead of time that this road will be bumpy, but rough terrain does not mean we should travel down a different road. It just means that we will become stronger in the Lord as we lean into Him for guidance and support.

‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’

JEREMIAH 29:11

But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who long for your saving help always say, ‘The LORD is great!’

PSALM 70:4



Personal Reflections:

1. Read 1 John 3:16-18. Christ taught us how we ought to love others, with actions and in truth, by giving our lives to others, by serving. What specific ways are you being called by God to love and serve today?
2. Read Matthew 25:34-40. Do you see how Christ permeates adoption? He truly is active and present on both sides. Do you understand just how holy that makes adoption? If you are struggling greatly with your adopted child, and wondering how any of you will survive





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this calling, prayerfully ask God to grip your heart with new perspective and renewed hope. Your outlook on life makes a world of difference.

3. Read Psalm 70:4. Memorize this verse. On your most difficult days, ask God to bring these words to your heart and mind. Rejoice in the Lord, and praise Him for how He is using you in life. Be encouraged that He has not placed you on that road alone, but is right there with you at all times. Yes, He is great, and greatly to be praised.

 4. Read Jeremiah 29:11. Rest assured that God has not brought challenges into your home to hurt you or your child. Rather, He is in the process of working out something grand in both of your lives. I would like to encourage you to keep a journal or a blog so that you can record your life story, as well as the journey of your family as you go through the joys and trials of adoption. Years from now, as you look back, you will be able to see just how God worked all things out in marvelous and unexpected ways for your good, and for His glory.
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