

# Introduction

## **Sara's Story**

The idea for this book began as many conversations with friends about adoption. As a mother of a daughter adopted from Uganda, I end up talking about adoption almost every day. I see this as an opportunity to share God's heart for orphans and the Gospel: we adopted because we are adopted. I also see it as a great responsibility.

This book is the conversation I would love to have with a friend who is learning about the orphan crisis, considering adoption, or starting an orphan care ministry. It is the conversation I wish someone would have had with me several years ago. I have learned so much about adoption and orphan care over the last few years – much of it the hard way.

We began praying about adoption five years ago. At the time, I was pregnant with our youngest son. My pregnancy was complicated, and we knew he would be our last biological child. One of my nurses at the hospital where I spent several weeks of

my pregnancy was a good friend. She and her husband were in the process of adopting a baby boy from Ethiopia.

Their story inspired our whole family. We watched them wait and then rejoiced when they brought their son home. Our family began to pray, learn and dream about adoption. We waited until our son was eighteen months old to start the process.

In that season of waiting and learning, we began to ask questions about how to adopt a child who truly needed a new family. Like many parents considering adoption, we wanted to find a trustworthy agency to help us navigate the complicated process.

We watched news reports and read articles describing corruption in adoption. The stories were often critical of Christian families and adoption agencies. At first I categorized these as attacks – maybe even spiritual warfare. Agreeing with the growing movement of Christians who described adoption and orphan care as war, I reasoned *Satan hates adoption. The last thing he would want is for an orphan to be adopted into a Christian family.*

As a Christian, I wanted to be able to trust a Christian adoption agency to do what was best for orphans and families. Yet as we continued to learn, I could not silence my conscience. I realized that adoption was full of ethical questions. Ethics is about deciding what is right and what is wrong, often in complicated situations. I wanted to believe that adoption was always right, that it was absolutely good. But I began to see that adoption necessarily involves loss. Adoption always involves painful decisions.

I will never forget the moment my daughter, Gabrielle, was placed on my chest. My husband and I were sitting in an African orphanage. She was six months old, but still the size of a newborn. I kissed the top of her head, feeling the softness of her curly black hair. As her tiny, brown fingers wrapped around mine, I thought she was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. My emotions in that moment were the same as when each of my biological sons was placed in my arms the first time. In that moment, I became Gabrielle's mother.

At the same time, however, there was another mother who had sat in that room. A few months before I first held Gabrielle in my arms, my daughter's first mother experienced the most painful loss. She was unable to care for her precious daughter, who shared her warm smile and soulful eyes. With both love and desperation, she made the painful decision to leave her daughter in an orphanage

and then to place her for adoption. I can scarcely imagine the depth of her sorrow.

As I reflect on this moment, I see how important it is that we protect vulnerable orphans and families. There are times children are separated from their families due to death, disease, abuse, or neglect. Most of the time, however, children are separated from their families due to poverty. Families in desperate situations make the decision to place a child in an orphanage or for adoption because they feel they have no other choice. Moments like these require great care to protect vulnerable children and families from exploitation. Sadly some people who are involved in caring for vulnerable orphans and families are seeking selfish gain.

As I went through the adoption process, my eyes were opened to the truth of what was happening in many international adoptions. In many countries popular for international adoption today – including Ethiopia, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo – corruption is widespread. There are not sufficient safeguards in place to stop corrupt adoption agencies, orphanages and officials from taking advantage of vulnerable children and families.

## Amanda's Story

I never got to hold the children we adopted. I now trust that I was never meant to hold them physically. Like many people who decide to adopt, my husband and I had been unable to have children biologically (I've since given birth to a son). After years of infertility, doctors' appointments, medicines and surgeries, we took the leap into adoption.

As Christians, we believed adoption was about more than just a beautiful way to grow our family. We believed it to be a calling and a mission for our family. Trusting the Lord's leading, we picked a Christian adoption agency and chose to adopt hard-to-place children: an older sibling group. Having previously spent time in East Africa, we decided to be a pilot family for a program in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

One in five children in the DRC will die before the age of five.<sup>1</sup> DRC is a beautiful, vast country that has been devastated by colonialism, war, slavery, poverty, and corruption. We believed there was great need for families to adopt the country's orphans.

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank, Child Mortality Data, 2013. Available from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.DYN.MORT>. 24 Mar. 2014.

When our adoption agency failed to provide us with good evidence that the children we had adopted were legal orphans, we hopped on a plane to find out for ourselves. We landed in Kinshasa full of hope, still optimistic that we would be bringing our adopted children home. Within two days of being on the ground, however, we found all the answers we had been seeking. The children were not orphans in any sense of the word. They had a mother, father and extended family who loved and wanted them. They were made to look like orphans on paper for the purpose of international adoption.

Broken-hearted, I returned to America determined to sound the alarm to other families that not all in international adoption is as it seems. Like Sara, my heart was broken for orphans. Now my heart is equally broken for vulnerable families who become victims of injustice through corrupt systems of international adoption and orphan care. Sadly, these systems are often created and funded by well-intentioned Christians. I believe the Church can do better and wants to do better.

## **Who are we to write this book?**

Writing about adoption and orphan care is a heart-wrenching experience. Who wants to volunteer to write about how Christians with good intentions are involved in exploiting orphans and trafficking children? *Not us.* There have been countless times as we have been writing this book that we have questioned *Why us? Who are we to write this book?*

Let us make this clear at the outset: We did not set out to become experts on international adoption and orphan care. We are not scholars or academic experts in international relief and development. We are not pastors who attended seminary. In many ways, we are unqualified to speak on these subjects.

But like most of our readers, we are moms. Sara is an adoptive parent. Amanda has been through an entire adoption process. We have friends who have adopted and are adopting. We are Christians involved in orphan care ministry at our churches and in our community. We don't write as authorities on international adoption. We write as fellow pilgrims walking with you on a path set out for us by the Father of the fatherless. It is only by the grace of God that we can write the truth with confidence and conviction. The Bible calls Christians to 'bring justice to the fatherless,'

(Isa. 1:17). A relentless pursuit of God's heart for the widow and the orphan forms the heart of this book.

## **Break my heart for what breaks yours**

For much of the twentieth century, Evangelical Christians viewed the gospel as a sort of contract with God. The good news proclaimed by this older generation was that through Jesus' death on the cross, your sin could be forgiven and you could enter into a personal relationship with God. This narrow understanding of the gospel influenced how Christians lived. The focus of Christian missions became the proclamation of the gospel, not the meeting of physical needs. Although Christians throughout the history of the church have cared for orphans and widows, in the last century many abdicated their God-given responsibility to the least of these. Caring for the fatherless and the poor was increasingly left to government institutions.

While this understanding of the gospel is accurate – and we are saved from sin only through Jesus' death on the cross – it is not complete. When Jesus began His ministry, He quoted the prophet Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor,' (Luke 4:18). According to Jesus, the good news is that He is the King and His kingdom is coming. The gospel is good news to the poor because in the coming kingdom of God, there will be an end to poverty and injustice – and the orphan crisis. According to author Brian Fikkert:

The mission of Jesus was and is to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to say to one and all, 'I am the King of kings and Lord of lords, and I am using My power to fix everything that sin has ruined.'<sup>2</sup>

God has a heart for the poor and the vulnerable. It is impossible not to see this throughout the Bible. God's people are called to reflect God's heart. The purpose of the Church on earth is to make visible the invisible: to make God's character and His kingdom visible on earth. While the kingdom of God will not be complete until Jesus returns as the glorious King, the kingdom is already here among God's people. As God's people, we are called to fight injustice and to meet the physical needs of the poor – not in order to gain God's

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<sup>2</sup> Corbett, Steve, and Brian Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts*. 1st ed. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009. Kindle Edition.

favor, but because we have received His grace. We are called to be people who offer justice and mercy to a broken world in response to and as a demonstration of the gospel.

A new generation of Christians sees the gospel as more than a contract with God. No longer do we see missions as something people go and do halfway around the world. Increasingly Christians and churches are calling themselves missional. By this we mean that we are on mission with Jesus. As Jason Kovacs writes:

This mission includes not only the declaration of this good news but also the demonstration of it in our world. Mission is both declaring the words and works of Jesus and doing in the world what he has commanded us to do.<sup>3</sup>

While being missional often means a renewed focus on reaching our neighbors, we no longer define neighbors as just people who live next door. Our generation is globally aware and globally connected. Tim Keller defines neighbor as anyone who we see in need.<sup>4</sup> As a generation that has grown up with CNN, Google™ and Facebook™, the needs of the world's poor are in front of us daily. We have been challenged by books such as Gary Haugan's *Good News about Injustice* and Richard Stearns' *The Hole in Our Gospel* to consider how God calls Christians to respond to injustice and poverty. Our generation has had unprecedented access to international travel – and millions of us have gone on short-term mission trips to the developing world. We cannot say we are unaware of suffering around the world.

## Break our Hearts

I see a generation rising up to take the place...Heal my heart and make it clean. Open up my eyes to the things unseen. Show me how to love like You have loved me. Break my heart for what breaks Yours, everything I am for Your Kingdom's cause as I walk from earth into eternity.

‘Hosanna’ by Hillsong United<sup>5</sup>

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3 Cruver, Dan, John Piper, Scotty Smith, Richard D. Phillips, Jason Kovacs. *Reclaiming Adoption*. 1st ed. Adelphi, Maryland: Cruciform Press, 2011. Kindle Edition.

4 Keller, Timothy J. *Generous Justice*. 1st ed. New York, N.Y.: Dutton, Penguin Group USA, 2010. Print.

5 *Hosanna*. Brooke Ligertwood, 2006 Hillsong Music Publishing. Sydney, Australia.

A little more than ten years ago, I (Sara) graduated from Seattle Pacific University with a degree in International Relations and Global and Urban Ministry. I will never forget the challenge given to our graduating class:

Open the Bible and the newspaper, side by side. And pray this dangerous prayer: *God, break my heart for what breaks yours.*

The media is full of stories of brokenness: war, famine, corruption, injustice. Sometimes it is hard to understand how a loving God could allow so much suffering in the world. But as Christians, we believe that God's heart is grieved for the suffering of people and the brokenness of creation. When our hearts cry out that this is not how things should be, we are reflecting God's heart.

These words challenge us to open our eyes to see the brokenness in the world around us. They compel us to seek God's heart and ask how we, as God's people, should respond.

Writing this book has brought me face to face with the things that break the heart of God.

God calls Himself a 'Father of the fatherless' – and I believe His heart is broken over the millions of orphans and vulnerable children in the world today. Hundreds of millions of children in the world today live in extreme poverty. Twenty-six thousand children die every day as a result of poverty. Poverty makes children vulnerable to hunger, disease, illiteracy, discrimination, violence, and trafficking. None is more vulnerable than the child who is separated from the love, care and protection of a family.

Over the last ten years, God's people have awoken to God's heart for the fatherless. There is a growing movement within the Evangelical Christian church to care for orphans. While the movement started in America, it is now spreading around the world. Thousands of Christian families are adopting not because of infertility but in response to God's call. Likewise, thousands of churches are developing orphan care ministries. The focus of these ministries is often building or supporting orphanages or visiting orphans on short-term mission trips. If there are millions of orphans in the world, encouraging Christians to adopt and get involved in orphan care must be good.

But good intentions are not enough – and sometimes our best efforts end up hurting the people we want to help.

International adoption is controversial. Over the last decade, as the Christian adoption and orphan care movement has exploded,

the number of children adopted from overseas has declined. In 2004, Americans adopted nearly 23,000 children from overseas. In 2013, this number dropped to just over 7,000. This is the lowest level since 1992.<sup>6</sup> This trend has been mirrored globally, as the total number of internationally adopted children fell from 45,000 in 2004 to fewer than 30,000 in 2010.<sup>7</sup> If you ask experts why there has been such a dramatic decrease in international adoptions, you will get wildly different answers.

Journalists and academics claim economic development, the widespread availability of contraception and changing attitudes toward single motherhood mean fewer children are in need of international adoption.<sup>8</sup> Many experts who have investigated international adoption point to corruption in countries such as Guatemala, Vietnam and Ethiopia for causing the decrease. In recent years, dozens of articles, books and documentaries have documented widespread corruption in international adoption. Critics of international adoption argue for more regulation to protect vulnerable families and children from exploitation in the adoption process.

Conversely, many in the adoption and orphan care movement tell a very different story. They claim there is a global orphan crisis with millions of children in need of international adoption. They argue that restrictive and arbitrary policies prevent good families from adopting children who are growing up in orphanages or on the streets. Many within the movement minimize evidence of corruption in adoption. Christian adoption advocates blame red tape for making adoption too difficult and expensive. Adoption advocates see the decline in international adoptions as a crisis and lobby for policies that would make adoption easier and faster.

The truth is both sides of the controversy are right. Red tape is making international adoption difficult and preventing thousands of orphans from being adopted by good families. At the same time, corruption in international adoption exploits vulnerable families. In many countries that are popular for international adoption, there

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6 Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, *FY 2013 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption*, March 2014. Available from [http://adoption.state.gov/content/pdf/fy2013\\_annual\\_report.pdf](http://adoption.state.gov/content/pdf/fy2013_annual_report.pdf). 24 March 2014. See also Crary, David. 'Foreign Adoptions By Americans Decline Sharply'. ABC News 2014. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.

7 Selman, Peter. *Global Trends In Intercountry Adoption: 2001 - 2011*. 1st ed. National Council for Adoption, 2012. Web. 18 May 2012.

8 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Child Adoption: Trends and Policies*. New York: United Nations, 2014. Web. 18 May 2012.

is significant evidence of corruption in the process of international adoption and the approach to orphan care.

## Will we look the other way?

You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know.

William Wilberforce<sup>9</sup>

Christians are called to defend widows and orphans. Like God who identifies with the vulnerable, we are called to identify with the powerless, to take up their cause. As Christians, we are called to fight against corrupt adoption practices that exploit vulnerable families. But some Christians are involved in concealing, justifying and participating in corruption in international adoption. Likewise some Christians are supporting and visiting orphanages that harm the children we're called to help.

At the heart of this issue, we believe Christians are afraid to look at the truth. We do not want to talk about corruption in adoption and orphan care because we fear for what will happen to the orphans who are left behind if more countries close to international adoption. Many Christians are unwilling to ask hard questions about their own adoptions. Christians hesitate to accuse others of corrupt practices for fear of being called divisive. Families who do speak out about the corruption they see or experience are often criticized. In the face of this fear, Christians are looking the other way or hoping that corruption is rare. We believe it is time for change.

In writing this book, we have opened our Bibles and spread out literally thousands of pages of research. We have opened our eyes to the truth in the Bible and the evidence in the research – and prayed that God would break our hearts for the things that break His. Initially, we set out to answer one crucial question: how should Christians respond to corruption in international adoption and orphan care?

As we traveled around the world and interviewed dozens of adoptive families and adoption experts, we discovered other important questions: Are there really 151 million orphans who are living without the love and protection of a family? Can adoption end the orphan crisis? Why are there 8 million children living in orphanages? Is there an overwhelming need for Christians to build

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9 'William Wilberforce Quotes.' Goodreads.com. n.p. n.d. Web. 1 Jun. 2014.

and support orphanages? Are mission trips to visit orphanages helpful to vulnerable children? How can we support poor families to prevent children from being orphaned? How can we get to the root cause of the orphan crisis?

If you are reading this book, we imagine you are already thinking about some of these questions. We hope this book will challenge you to ask new questions. We pray this book will open your eyes and that together we can stand up to defend widows and orphans. As we begin this journey together, we want to tell you a little about the structure of this book.

In the first chapter, we will examine the truth about the global orphan crisis. We will also consider the assumptions of the growing Christian adoption and orphan care movement.

In chapters two through four, we will consider the three main ways Christians have responded to the orphan crisis: supporting orphanages, visiting orphans on short-term mission trips, and encouraging adoption. We learn that responses to the crisis, while well-intentioned, are sometimes misguided and harmful to vulnerable families and children.

In chapters five and six, we will dig into the Bible to seek God's heart for widows and orphans. We will discover how God calls His people to respond to His heart by protecting and providing for widows and orphans.

In chapters seven through nine, we will discover principles for reforming international adoption and orphan care. These chapters include stories from families, organizations and churches around the world who are living out James 1:27 without building orphanages.

Finally, in chapters ten through twelve, we will learn effective ways to protect and provide for orphans by addressing the root causes of the orphan crisis. Through these final chapters, we will discover the unique role churches can play in getting to the very root of the orphan crisis.

This book is designed to ask questions and to challenge assumptions. It may be helpful to read this book with your husband or wife, a close friend or a small group. Each chapter ends with questions for reflection and discussion that are designed to help you wrestle with the truth and seek God's heart. Use these questions to start a conversation in your local church – or join in the conversation online at [defenseofthefatherless.com](http://defenseofthefatherless.com).

We hope you'll take this journey with us. There may be times as you read this book that you want to throw it across the room. Researching and writing this book broke our hearts and challenged our assumptions. So throw the book across the room if you need to, but please pick it back up. Join us in wrestling with the truth and in fighting for justice. Our prayer for you as you read this book is that your heart would be broken and your assumptions challenged, but that you would ultimately be inspired and encouraged. There is much we can do as the people of God.