



A CALL TO LOVE

*Preparing Your Heart & Soul
for Adoption*

JULIE HOLMQUIST

Julie has beautifully captured the spiritual and emotional ups and downs of the adoption journey. I encourage all prospective adoptive parents, and those in the midst of their journey of parenting kids from hard places, to read this book. You'll be encouraged and refreshed as you press on in your calling.

KELLY ROSATI

Vice President of Community Outreach, Focus on the Family

Julie's book is a great guide for future adoptive parents as well as a guide for parents who are questioning their motivations for adopting. The book makes us aware that adoptive families are the true heroes for orphaned and vulnerable children.

BILL BLACQUIERE

President and CEO, Bethany Christian Services

I loved *A Call to Love*: It's the book I always planned to write one day! It's biblical, educational, practical, and comprehensive. There is so much in here that captures my own experiences as the parent of a child adopted from foster care—and what so many of my former clients experienced when I was a social worker—as well as what I know remains true today as I engage in domestic and international advocacy for children.

CHUCK JOHNSON

President and CEO, National Council For Adoption

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A Call to Love: Preparing Your Heart and Soul for Adoption

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Foreword

No two adoptions are quite alike, each with all the distinctive curves and contours of a fingerprint. But almost every adoptive parent I know shares similar words about the journey: “Some of the hardest things I’ve experienced. The most meaningful, too.” Isn’t that true of nearly all the best things this side of heaven?

The truth is, if we’ve never uttered words like that, we probably won’t have much to look back on in the end. But when they’re threaded deep into the cloth of our days and years, those words yield a life well worth living.

So adoption has everything to do with what we desire most.

If things like comfort, convenience, and smooth sailing top our wish lists, we’ll likely want to steer clear of adoption (and perhaps of just about *any* worthwhile endeavor).

But if we value other things even more—things like the rough-and-tumble of life in a family . . . the way parenthood can double the capacity of our hearts and then double it again . . . the chance to be menders in a torn world . . . moments in which our lives humbly reflect the way God first loved us—then adopting may very well be one of the best and most significant decisions we ever make.

I remember vividly the days when I first began to ponder that choice. My wife was ready for the adventure, already a couple of steps ahead. But in my head, all the excitement and hesitations were having a massive tug-of-war.

It made for quite a ruckus inside. And amidst it all came the weight of countless questions starting with “How”: *How do we even begin weighing all the options and counting the costs? How can we prepare for a journey that is certain to stretch us in every way, from our finances to our marriage? How do we answer questions we don’t even know to ask?*

That’s where this book comes in. *A Call to Love* is the kind of guide I wish I’d had when we started grappling with these questions and many others. I trust I wouldn’t have decided differently, but it all would have been with a much fuller sense of what I was embracing . . . and how to do so wisely and well.

Yes, I’m one of the many who’ve said these words, at times with knitted brow and set jaw, more often with a grin and laughter in my eyes: “Some of the hardest things I’ve experienced. The most meaningful, too.”

I hope these realities will prove true for you as well, because they almost always come together. And when you really think about it—especially in moments when you ponder what kind of life you want to look back on from the end—isn’t that what you want too?

Jedd Medefind

PRESIDENT, CHRISTIAN ALLIANCE FOR ORPHANS

Introduction: The Journey to Adoption

*Whoever receives one such child
in my name receives me.*

MATTHEW 18:5

One year my husband surprised me with a hot-air balloon ride as a Mother's Day present. I still remember five-year-old Ben and six-year-old Anna watching from the ground as their mother floated up into the heavens. Little did I know then, as I soared above the Saint Croix River valley in Wisconsin where we lived, that my family wasn't complete.

I didn't know that someday I'd be flying to Russia to unite with two preteens who had stolen my heart. I didn't know they'd give me a ride that would bring me much closer to heaven—and God—than any giant hot-air balloon could. But God knew. In 2002, He began whispering *adoption* to my spirit.

Perhaps God has also whispered to you, and you are beginning to listen. You might be exploring, unsure of where God is leading you. Maybe you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has called you into the ministry of adoption, and you want to know what to expect.

No matter where you are in this process, I invite you to learn from others as they describe the emotional and spiritual landscape of adoption. If you've already made the decision to adopt,

you can also record your unique spiritual journey within these pages.

Remember that you are not alone. As you travel through a process that can be incredibly joyful one day and deeply painful the next, know that God is with you each step of the way. He has promised to “never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). In fact, you may find that this journey will lead you to a closer, deeper relationship with your heavenly Father.

Many people have walked this road before you, and you’ll hear about some of their journeys in this book. Some struggled to choose adoption after facing infertility. Others were hesitant to obey what God had called them to do. Most battled fears. Would they be able to love the children they adopted? Would they have enough money? Would they be adequate for this task? Would they be able to handle any “issues” their children had?

And once they made the decision, the process instigated doubts. Could they truly trust God to choose a child for them? Would they be able to deal with the foster-care system? Would the wait ever end? I understand, because my husband and I asked those same questions.

As you begin your own journey to adoption, I’m praying you’ll be encouraged as you read how God reassured and directed other couples. Their stories also reveal how God uses the process of adoption to grow people’s faith and deepen their trust in the Father who adopts all of us as His children. He will do the same for you if you keep turning to Him.

My family’s journey began one morning as I read John 14:18 during my devotion time: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” I’d read this verse many times, but this time the Lord was giving me a command, speaking deep into my heart.

Don’t leave them as orphans, Julie. Go to them.

Eventually, that’s what my husband and I did. We adopted

Daniel (eleven) and Masha (ten) on June 2, 2004, in a Russian courthouse and brought them home to join our two biological children, Anna (fourteen) and Ben (twelve).

While your journey will be different from mine and every other story within these pages, there is really only one narrative here. It's the story of God's love for orphans and for us.

Just remember, God's adoption of us as His children was not without cost. He gave His only Son, who suffered for us. If your role in God's story includes adopting a child, it's likely that your journey will involve difficulty and struggle too. Being a loving parent of any child—biological or not—involves sacrifice, dying to self, and suffering, as well as incomparable joy. Yet the difficulties can often be magnified when we adopt children, simply because they have already suffered at least one loss—or, most likely, multiple losses and trauma—before arriving at their new homes.

I remember that when my husband and I were praying about adoption and reading descriptions of wounded children in the US foster-care system, I saw a picture of Jesus while browsing through a store's craft section. This phrase accompanied His image: "I didn't say it would be easy. I said it would be worth it." I knew it was a message for me.

I've learned from numerous adoptive parents, and from my own experience, that the cost of adopting a child can also bring unexpected joys. One of those joys is a chance to know Christ and His astounding unconditional love at a deeper level as we attempt to model that love for our new children.

As you listen to the stories within these pages, ask your Father in heaven for His thoughts. My prayer is that God will direct you as you prayerfully consider your role in His story and the next step in your adoption journey.

PART 1

Making Decisions



CHAPTER 1

Great Expectations

A wonderful gift may not be wrapped as you expect.

JONATHAN LOCKWOOD HUIE
100 Secrets for Living a Life You Love

“Go ahead, kick me out!” bellowed my son in that serious Russian voice of his as he jumped up from the kitchen table. “Why did you even bring me here? I don’t belong here!”

My family of six was having a noisy dinner at the time. Everyone was talking, and I had apparently missed something Daniel was trying to say to me. He took this as a sign of rejection—he took most everything as a sign of rejection. I knew what he was thinking: *It’s better to leave first, before they get rid of me. Because it’s just a matter of time before they abandon me, just like Mom and Dad did.*

It had been seven months since my husband, Jeff, and I had adopted this boy and his eleven-year-old sister, Masha, from a Russian orphanage. In our hearts and minds, they were officially

Holmquists, joining our teenage biological children, Anna and Ben. But Daniel didn't believe he could actually be part of our family. Assuming this sensitive, hurt boy would immediately trust us was expecting too much.

Our new son had communicated his distrust for months in the strange ways that only a traumatized, anxiety-ridden English-language learner could. That January evening in 2005, he expressed his fear of being abandoned by letting the front door bang shut behind him and running into the darkness.

"Daniel! Come back!" I called out to him. "I just didn't hear you. You *do* belong here!"

I ran after him—down our snow-covered rural Wisconsin driveway, down the road lined with pine trees—breathing in air that pierced my lungs like icicles.

"It's too cold, Daniel. You can't run away in your socks!" I shouted in typical mom fashion, as if common sense would make a difference.

I barely got the words out as I quickened my stride. I was forty-two and not an athlete, yet here I was chasing down a pre-teen who could run circles around me. I came close enough to snag my son's sweater, but he simply took it off, leaving me standing there incredulous, the sweater hanging limp from my fingers, my breath visible in the night air.

There was just enough moonlight for me to see Daniel's bare-chested, thin body as he stumbled on, arms flailing. He was crying and moaning with a depth of sorrow I couldn't comprehend. The cold air on his chest must have impeded him, because with a final burst of speed, I was able to grab my son and wrestle him into the snowy ditch. Slowly I led him back to the house—he'd given up the fight. I was shaking with exhaustion as I looked to the clear, cold sky.

I'm too old for this, Lord! I'm just way too old for this.

My lungs ached from the freezing air. My body hurt and my soul was frightened. What if Daniel would never trust me?

This wasn't a scene I'd expected as my husband and I began preparing for adoption in 2002. What had I expected? Nothing, I thought. I wasn't looking for new children to fulfill my dreams. After all, I'd already given birth to Anna and Ben, and Jeff and I had experienced many storybook—and stressful—parenting moments. For fourteen years I'd enjoyed the special fun of loving and raising a boy and a girl. My house had seen its share of Tonka trucks, Barbie dolls, birthday parties, ear infections, Lyme disease, and surgeries. No, I didn't believe I was taking anything for granted. I wasn't wishing for children with any particular qualities as my husband and I obeyed what the Lord had called us to do.

In hindsight, I realize that I *did* have expectations. I expected our new children to trust us. For Daniel, who had been deeply hurt by every adult he had ever loved, developing that confidence in us took more than a year. I'd also assumed I'd have another daughter who liked to talk a lot and share all of her feelings with her mother, but I was wrong. I expected all of my children to become instant best buddies since they were so close in age. I didn't consider how major personality differences, emotional-maturity gaps, and living with a traumatized sibling would affect these relationships. I expected our love and knowledge as parents to heal every wound our new children might have. I wish I could tell you that this expectation was fulfilled, but it wasn't.

I'm not the only adoptive parent who has been taken by surprise. I'm sure the couple who adopted a neglected, abused two-year-old boy hadn't expected his first words to his new father to be "F— you!" And the parents who had provided the foster-care system with a long list of criteria for a child didn't expect God to say, "Do you trust Me to choose the child?"

As the mother of biological children who are now in their twenties, I can tell you that surprises and unmet expectations are the norm for all the children we raise. Life throws all of us more than a few curveballs, and that brings us to the next point.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

It's not news that our expectations and reality often collide. That perfect job requires us to work with (surprise!) imperfect people. After moving into the house of our dreams, we discover cracks in the foundation, noisy neighbors, or an unpleasant, recurring odor from a manufacturing plant located miles away. When we welcome children into our lives, we may dream of what those baby boys or girls may become, but God has a way of showing us that our children are uniquely created in His image, not according to the fantasies in our minds.

Why does a couple initially mourn when their child is born with a disability? Because their expectations of having a healthy newborn weren't met. Why does a father feel a loss when his son isn't interested in his favorite sport? Because his expectation of enjoying football with his boy wasn't fulfilled.

It's important to realize up front what your assumptions about adoption may be, because they will affect how you treat and respond to your new child, as well as the health of your marriage and even your relationship with God. If you're considering adoption, ask yourself, "What are we expecting from this?"

Hopes of buying frilly little-girl dresses or providing a perfect playmate for an only child shouldn't be foremost in your mind as you approach this journey. I like frilly girl dresses myself, so I enjoyed buying one in anticipation of my daughter Masha's arrival. But I'll never forget the look on her face during that first week in our house after she donned the dress for church.

I asked the college student interpreting for us that week to ask

Masha if she liked the dress. The Russian-speaking student translated my daughter's words as "Yes, I like it," but Masha's body language was clear. She hated this horrible, flouncy thing! Her expression was the same as Ralphie's when he was forced to wear the pink bunny suit in *A Christmas Story*. As soon as I realized how she truly felt, I took her by the hand to her room, showing her with my actions that she could wear something else. That frilly dress disappeared, and we've often laughed about that day.

Of course you'll be excited about bringing home a new daughter or son; just don't set yourself up for disappointment by expecting all of your dreams to come true. The girl you adopt may not only hate dresses but may also seem to hate *you* as she hurls all the pain and rage of her considerable losses your way. The child you may already have at home and your new child might have completely different interests and be jealous of each other. The kid you pictured following in your footsteps as an academic whiz may need special education at school.

Adopting a child won't solve your problems, fix marriage difficulties, or magically dispel that grief you feel because of infertility. In fact, adopting a child is likely to add stress to your life, just as caring for a newborn does. While adoption will certainly allow you to love, care for, enjoy, and raise a child—your child—expecting this little boy or girl to heal your inner wounds, erase your disappointment with God, or mend a relationship is clearly unreasonable. Though you may know all this, you may long for an easy solution and create one in the recesses of your mind.

If you're married, consider how you felt during the honeymoon period. When we fall in love with our spouses, we often think irrationally. I know I did! I thought Jeff could do no wrong, that he was perfect. I expected him to make me happy all the time, to solve all of my problems, and to basically be

God! After I surrendered my life to Christ, I realized what I had unconsciously required of my husband. Only God can fill the role we sometimes unwittingly grant to spouses and children.

When Kimberley Raunikar Taylor and her husband adopted their first child (a toddler) after years of infertility, they decided to keep expectations low.

“Preparing our hearts and minds to accept the absolute worst scenario in an adoption situation helped us to not place false expectations on our adoption,” writes Taylor in her book *The Intentional Family: Celebrating Adoption*. “So when the trials came, we were not shocked and were more able to cope with the situation. Conversely, when the blessings came, we were more able to appreciate them as well.”¹

During the first year with their son, Taylor reports that she and her husband were “challenged more emotionally, physically, and spiritually than we had ever encountered in our lives. But gradually, things got better.”²

EXPECT STRONG EMOTIONS

Along with unexpected situations come unexpected emotions, both wonderful and terrifying, and your responses, both positive and negative. There may be the sky-high joy of holding your child for the first time and bringing him or her home after a lengthy adoption process, as well as the deep satisfaction of meeting a neglected child’s needs.

Like Jeff and me, you may experience the peace of knowing you’re doing what God has called you to do, the total delight of recognizing your son’s sense of humor, or the surprising feeling when that intense protective feeling for your daughter kicks in for the first time.

We discovered Masha’s and Daniel’s senses of humor immediately. The adoption agency we used flew orphans to the United

States for “visits”; it was a way to fulfill Russia’s adoption regulation requiring prospective parents and children to meet on two separate trips.

On the first day of this monthlong visit in our home, my husband explained the house rules to Masha and Daniel (Anatoliy at the time). One was “Laugh a lot.” Before we knew it, Daniel was making funny faces as he stood behind the couch, acting as if someone were pulling him down. Masha loved transforming her face with generous amounts of cellophane tape, making her nose look snout-like. My husband joined in the slapstick, and by the end of the month, Daniel had declared, “Papa goofy!”

There may also be times of intense despair as you try to bond with your child, when you’re weary of trying to connect to a little girl or boy who desperately wants to cling to you one minute and then rejects you the next. Maybe, like me, you’ll find a child’s constant challenging behaviors toward you so provoking that you lose your temper and throw a phone against the wall, then later find yourself overwhelmed with shame and hopelessness because of your reactions.

Clinical social worker Sharon Roszia explains that children who have experienced trauma speak about their past through behavior:

The child’s strong, reactive emotions, based on that early trauma, are “catchy” and can quickly create trauma in the family. . . . Having parented traumatized children myself, I know that the child’s feelings of helplessness, avoidance, isolation, and rage are easily triggered in the new family. I remember such a moment when I was enraged with one of our children. I glanced at myself in the hallway mirror and saw the face of a raging shrew staring back at me! I had never met that part of myself before.³

If you're hit by strong negative emotions, use that as a cue to take a break. Then ask God for self-control and understanding about what's happening in your child's spirit and in your own. Seeking professional advice can bring needed clarity into these relationship dynamics.

EXPECT TO HELP YOUR BIRTH CHILDREN

If you already have children at home, realize they will also need time to adjust to a new sibling and will need your help to do so. Jeff and I discussed the idea of adoption with Anna and Ben and asked them to pray about it. Though they agreed to move ahead with the adoption and were willing to share their bedrooms, they certainly couldn't imagine what life would be like with two younger kids permanently in the house. Suddenly Anna and Ben didn't have their parents to themselves. Masha and Daniel were not only loud and noisy but also broke some of Anna's and Ben's belongings. Home life definitely changed for my two oldest children!

Let your biological kids know that adjusting might be hard and will take time. Don't expect them to bond immediately with your new child, but consider ways you can promote connection between the kids. You might assign common jobs or projects they can do together, or have your children teach the newcomer how to treat a pet or play a favorite game.

Make sure to schedule regular alone time with your biological children, no matter how much time and energy your new child demands. It's easy to become overwhelmed and not do this; I know because it happened to us, and we regret it. Your birth children need your help to process the changes of a different family structure and any trauma behaviors your new child might display. I remember my fourteen-year-old daughter crawling onto my lap during those early days, seeking security from her mom who was suddenly so busy with two other little people.

Your birth children need some “normal” time with their parents—just you and them. This gives them a break from the new family dynamics. Ask them how they’re doing, listen to them, and validate their feelings. Take any actions needed to assure them of your love.

EXPECT A DEEPER JOY

Many times, hard-won victories for you and your new child will follow a moment of despair, and that will produce a deeper kind of joy. That January night when Daniel ran from our house (as he had many times before) was one of those moments for me. I could have given into doubt as I often had during the recurring stressful situations of our first year together, but on this particular evening, I was able to choose hope instead.

After I lugged this dark-eyed, handsome boy through our front door, I put my arms around him. I knew I needed to show him—once again—that I loved him. After he finally started to relax, I led him to our secondhand rocker-recliner, and I rocked this twelve-year-old like a baby. I told him (again) that I loved him. I assured him (again) that I would never leave him. I reminded him (again) that I would always be his mom. This calmed and reassured him (again) that his new parents weren’t going to send him back to Russia. After almost a year of mothering him, Daniel was able to tell me, “Mom, I’m beginning to believe you.”

You can also expect a deeper joy as you seek God during the adoption process and move closer to His heart. James 4:8 says, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” It seems as if God uses our earthly adoptions to communicate to us in profound ways.

This was the case for pastor and author Francis Chan after he and his wife decided to adopt a girl they were fostering. The joy

came, Chan said, when he heard from God as he spoke to his soon-to-be daughter.

After a social worker asked how long the foster girl could stay in his home, Chan said he looked into the girl's eyes and told her, "Honey, don't worry; you can stay here as long as you like. You can be one of my daughters. Do you see how I treat my daughters? You can be one of them. I see you as my girl. Everything I have is yours."

At the same time, Chan felt God saying, *Francis, don't you see that this is what I say to you? Why do you still sometimes have a hard time believing that? Why do you think you—as a human being—can look at this girl and say, "Everything that's mine is yours; I'll take you as my own"?* Do you not believe that I've said that to you?

Chan says he had a childhood that left him feeling insecure, but in that moment God reminded him—His adopted son—that he was completely secure in God's love and provision. "It was one of those moments in my life where I just felt like God was reassuring me," Chan reflected.⁴

While no one can be prepared for every possibility as a parent, life may be less traumatic for you and your family if, as a couple, you examine your expectations of adoption. The One who created you and knows your inmost being is able to reveal any unreasonable assumptions you may have about adopting a child, so pray separately as well as together about the issue. Ask God to show you how to approach adoption in a healthy way. Doing this can help you draw closer to the Lord as you seek to discern how He wants to use you and your family to care for orphans.

And remember, the unexpected things in life can be beautiful. As a kid, Masha didn't care for frilly dresses, but she could clean a bathroom until it shined (every mother's dream!), and she liked poetry. Both were welcome surprises. Letting go of unrealistic

expectations allows you to focus on who your child really is and what he or she really needs.

Rest Stop

1. As you examine your expectations for adoption, ask the Lord to examine you. “Examine me, O LORD, and try me; test my mind and my heart” (Psalm 26:2, NASB).
2. Write a list of expectations you may have for a child. Then consider Lamentations 3:24: “The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.” As you pray for a child, are you placing your hope—or expectation—in God alone?

Think about one of your hopes for a child and insert it into the last part of this lamentation. For example, “Therefore I will hope in *having a boy who loves baseball.*” After you list all your expectations, strike a line through them, replacing them with “Therefore, I will hope *in God alone.*”

Pray together as a couple, surrendering your lists to the Lord. Ask God to align your expectations with the child He has chosen for you.

3. Begin your journal on the next page.

