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love and loss in foster care

*EMBRACING THE FEAR, HEARTACHE, AND JOY IN THE
UNCERTAIN JOURNEY OF FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION*

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introduction

One of the most common reasons people give for not becoming foster parents is fear—in particular, *the fear that they may fall in love with a child who is placed in their home, only to experience deep pain* if that child is reunited with birth parents or moved to another home. The mere thought of loving and then losing a child is enough to cause many people to shy away from foster care, and so they do. If you're honest, this fear might nag at you, too.

There is no way around it. There is plenty of uncertainty in the lives of foster parents and plenty of potential for real pain. We don't know what challenges and behaviors children and youth might bring with them into our homes, nor do we have any idea what the outcome of a given case will be or how long it will take to achieve resolution.

The truth is, parenting any child involves uncertainty.

The question is this: Can we trust God in the midst of our uncertainty, whether parenting our biological children or parenting—temporarily or permanently—children placed in our home through foster care?

Consider this scenario. If a close friend or a relative fell on tough times and asked you to take her child into your home until she was able to get on her feet again, would you do it? Of course you would, most likely with little hesitation. You would not only welcome the child, but you would also support the biological parent while she tried to get her life back together. When the time came, it's likely that you would celebrate as you brought the child back home again, crying tears of joy, giving hugs all around, sincerely pleased to be a part of the happy reunion. And you would probably do all this, among other reasons, because you hope that others would do the same for you in a similar situation.

Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves (*Luke 10:27*), and the parable of the Good Samaritan shows us that our “neighbors” include even those with whom we would not normally associate (*Luke 10:29-37*). So, when a woman across town loses custody of her child and that child needs temporary (or permanent) care, does God not expect us to treat her as we would treat our friend, and as we would hope others would treat us? Shouldn’t we support the biological parent by providing a safe home for her child?

In Jesus’ account of the sheep and the goats (*Matthew 25:31-46, ESV*), we hear the King say, “Come ... inherit the kingdom ... I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

The words are easy to read but much harder to do.

We know that God wants us to care for those less fortunate, but what if we get hurt in the process of caring for a child in foster care? What if we fall in love with a child, then have to let him go?





adoption is the exception

When a child enters the foster care system, the initial case plan is almost always reunification. There are exceptions, of course, but in an overwhelming majority of dependency cases, it is considered in the child's best interests to be returned to his custodial parent or primary caretaker, provided that it can be done in a safe and timely manner.

Letting go of a child you've cared for over an extended period of time will no doubt be painful, and it is good to recognize that concern and be honest about it. But we mustn't let fear paralyze us. Remember that God does not give us a spirit of fear (*2 Timothy 1:7*). What He asks is that we trust Him. If we are open, God can use even our times of pain to teach us and draw us closer to Him.

God's Word is clear. He cares for orphans, and He expects us to do the same (*James 1:27*). We also know that God loves families. According to God's original design, children would be raised by the mothers and fathers who brought them into the world. There would be no orphans.

Yet marriages are torn apart by divorce and separation. Children are orphaned by death, abandonment, abuse and neglect. Some are castoffs, unwanted and marginalized.

God tells us to make provision for orphans.

Still, mere provision isn't the ideal. Families are. *Psalms 68* says He is a father to the fatherless, and that He sets the lonely in families. Adoption is a beautiful picture of what happens when God places an orphan in a permanent family.





the challenge before us

Knowing that God loves orphans and wants them to be raised in the families He loves, we could easily conclude that adoption is the best way for us to serve children and youth in the foster care system. *But this viewpoint ignores another aspect of God that we often overlook when we consider foster care:*

God desires restoration and reconciliation.

God reconciled us to Himself through the work of Christ. He adopted us into His family in spite of our sin. All was, and is, forgiven. Yet when we think about the possibility of biological parents being reconciled to their child, we often shudder at the thought. We sympathize with the foster parents who have grown to love that child—and now have to hand the child back over to a former abuser or neglecter.

This is the challenge before us: to care for that child day in and day out, feeding her, holding her, praying with her, encouraging her, supporting her—in short, parenting her—and then watching, waiting and wondering if her birth mother will get her life on track in time for the courts to return her child to her. As we grow more and more attached to that child, we may even find ourselves silently, and sometimes vocally, hoping that her birth mother fails.

Yet if we truly believe in the biblical principles of restoration and reconciliation, we must commit ourselves to supporting and even encouraging a parent-child reunification (if, of course, it is in the child's best interests).



facing our fears

We are friends with a couple who have been foster parents for several years. Though they have fostered more than 10 children, they have adopted only one. When each new child comes into their home, they reach out to the birth parents or relatives, encouraging them, supporting them, and mentoring them in how to best care for their child. Is this risky, even costly, on their part? Some might say yes, but as with the parable of the Good Samaritan, loving our neighbor sometimes involves risk and personal cost. Yet, it's what we're supposed to do.

We must commit ourselves to supporting and **even encouraging parent-child reunification** if it is in the child's best interests.

The next time you're praying about possible involvement in foster care and adoption, be honest with God about your fears.

Is it possible that He wants you to demonstrate His reconciling and restorative love to a struggling birth mother—a parent who is trying to do her best for her child but perhaps just doesn't have the right skills or support to be successful? Maybe she came from a broken home herself and simply needs someone to show her how to be the parent God created her to be. Maybe God wants to see her family reunited, and maybe He wants to use you to help bring it about.

Just imagine the joy if the birth mother is able to resume responsibility for her child. Imagine, too, the blessing for you and your family as you realize that God used you to help bring healing and wholeness to her life and her child's life.

Several years ago, we were asked to foster a little girl whose birth parents had allegedly abused her. As we became familiar with her and got to know her parents better, it struck us that something didn't seem right about the case. We began to talk with the social workers, and the more we learned, the more we believed that this little girl had not been abused at all. Indeed, the girl's parents were both very loving and protective of her.

We supported the parents in their reunification efforts, and told the social workers that we did not believe the little girl should be in foster care. Though we never learned all the details, the possibility emerged that an angry relative had falsely reported the parents for child abuse because of a family disagreement. The little girl eventually was reunified with her parents, and when we saw her at a picnic some time later, she and her family were doing very well.



parents needed

In a typical year, approximately 50,000 children and youth transition from foster care to adoption. Yet the number of children in foster care who are either reunified with parents or placed with relatives each year is nearly triple the number of those adopted. This confirms what many already suspect: the possibility of loving and letting go of a child as a foster parent is great.

And still, there remain countless thousands of children and youth who are still waiting for adoptive families.

In fact, more than 25,000 kids in foster care turn 18 every year, “aging out” of the system without a permanent family. Clearly, there is much more room for adoptive families to step forward.

Only God holds the future. He doesn't promise permanency through adoption for every child placed in our home. He simply asks us to help those in need—despite the risk of pain. So how do we handle that pain when it comes? Well, we need to go back to the Bible.

We know that we will encounter suffering as we follow the Lord in loving and serving others. Yet Peter says we are to rejoice in our sufferings (*1 Peter 1:6-7; 1 Peter 4:12-16*). Paul tells us to glory in our sufferings (*Romans 5:3-4*). James tells us to consider our trials pure joy (*James 1:2-4*). As much as you are able, then, when you experience pain and loss in loving and letting go of a child placed in your home, rejoice. Remember that neither trouble nor hardship can ever separate you from the love of Christ (*Romans 8:35*).

Finally, it may be a cliché, but we have to ask ourselves: If not us, then who?

Children and youth in the foster care system need to be placed somewhere, whether for the short term or permanently. Every child deserves to be loved and nurtured and valued, not simply treated as a boarder. Children need provision and protection, of course, but they need so much more. Food and shelter provide and protect, but love heals and transforms.





it begins with hope

When we take an honest look at the future, we must admit that it's all unknown. Yet we wake up each day with hope, thankful for another day. Foster care is no different. Every day that a child is in your home is another day to love and serve God by loving and serving that child.

As you move forward in your foster care or adoption journey, continually ask yourself: Where do I place my trust? Do I trust the system's ability to give me a child who won't ever be moved from our home? Or am I placing my trust in the Father to the fatherless, who loves that child more than I ever can, and who knows and wants what is best for him?

To become a foster parent is to open yourself up to the very real possibility of pain and loss. The bottom line is this: If you answer God's call to care for a child, can you trust Him no matter the outcome? Will you?

If the answer is yes, then don't let fear hold you back for one more day.

A child is waiting.

Every day that a child is in your home is **another day to love and serve God** by loving and serving that child.



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