



The Orphan Crisis

Orphans are easier to ignore before you know their names. They are easier to ignore before you see their faces. It is easier to pretend that they're not real before you hold them in your arms. But once you do, everything changes.

DAVID PLATT, *RADICAL*¹

Sara's Story: When Everything Changes

I will never forget the first time I saw her face. I was sitting in the car, waiting to pick up my son from preschool. The director of our adoption agency had just called to tell us about a baby girl who needed a family. She emailed the photo, and I looked at it on my phone as I sat in the parking lot. Ayana was fifteen months old and HIV positive. She was born to a young woman who had been raped and who was now dying of AIDS. I wanted to fly half way around the world and to wrap my arms around the mother and daughter, to promise her that Ayana would be safe and loved.

Before we heard about Ayana, my husband and I had never considered adopting a child who was HIV positive. We knew very little about HIV and were scared about what it would mean to have a child living with HIV in our home. At first, we said no. But as we learned the truth about HIV and prayed for Ayana, our hearts

¹ Platt, David. *Radical*. 1st ed. Colorado Springs, Colo.: Multnomah Books, 2010. Print.





changed. After two months, we said yes. I called the adoption agency to let them know we wanted to adopt Ayana.

The next day, I got a phone call that forever changed my life. Ayana was dead. She had burned her hand playing too close to the cooking fire. The burn had become infected. Her little body, weak with malnutrition and untreated HIV, could not fight the infection. The orphanage had taken her to the hospital, but it was too late. She was gone.

In that moment, my heart broke. In my head, I knew about the impact of HIV in Africa. I knew the statistics about AIDS orphans. I had a degree in international relations and had spent years working in relief and development. But in that moment, the once incomprehensible statistic had a face, a name, a story. I was overwhelmed with grief and then anger at the evil and injustice in Ayana's little life. In time, these feelings grew into a passion to make a difference in the lives of orphans – one child at a time.

A few months later, a young American woman living in Uganda named Kristin² heard about a little girl who was begging on the streets. Kristen went to visit Zahra. What she saw alongside a busy road in Kampala would change the course of both their lives.

What made me stop for her was that she was so sick, to the point of dying. At 5 years old, she weighed less than 20 pounds and her eyes were hollow. She was filthy, and she sat in her own urine. Her legs wouldn't move and her left arm was paralyzed. She was totally helpless.

When Kristen tried to pick up Zahra, the tiny girl fought her arms and sobbed fearfully. Zahra had spent her days on the side of the road, holding out her hand to beg for money. Kristen remembers the hard truth underneath the tiny girl's tears: 'She had been exploited. She knew that if she had money in her hands, she would be fed a small meal. If she didn't make anything that day begging, she would starve.'

Kristen knew the situation was too terrible to walk away: 'I had a gnawing sense that God wanted me to do more for this little one.' When Kristen returned to visit Zahra for a second time, the girl looked worse. Kristen took immediate action to become Zahra's foster mom, figuring that the child could live with her temporarily until she figured out a safe, long-term plan.

The next few days were some of the hardest of Kristen's life: 'as soon as I picked Zahra up, I noticed she had a high fever and

² Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the child and adoptive family.





was shaking violently. Her entire body was damp and she looked terrible. I was terrified that she might not even make it through the first night.’ Kristen got on a motorcycle and took Zahra to the nearest clinic. She was started on intensive IV treatment for malaria and dehydration. That night Zahra had a seizure and her body went from scorching hot to dangerously cold.

‘I prayed like I’ve never prayed before,’ Kristen remembers. ‘After a few days with Zahra where we both fought for her life, I knew there was something special about her. I have always wanted to adopt, but didn’t think this was something I would do before getting married. Within a few weeks of having her in my care, I knew that God was calling me to be her mom. I knew that He had been preparing me for Zahra all along.’

I met Kristin and Zahra a few weeks later over lunch in Uganda. Our family had brought a bag of clothes and shoes for the girl who was still tiny but now growing quickly. Kristen decided to adopt Zahra despite an uncertain future. Kristen was scared of what caring for a child with special needs as a single mother might look like, but she resolved to submit herself completely to God. As Kristen wrote on her blog the week she decided to adopt Zahra:

This week I am choosing love. Crazy, beautiful love. I know that this is a good choice. Love is always a good choice. I think that this choice will allow me to be a small part of God’s redemptive plan. That it will open me up more and more to His will and that my heart will gradually soften and melt so that my love can be more easily shared. That it will drastically change the rest of my life.

What unfolded over the next year is nothing short of a miracle. In less than six months, Kristen completed the adoption process and was able to bring Zahra home. Kristen said yes to God’s call to adopt Zahra as a single mom – but before the adoption was complete, God had a plan to provide Zahra with a mommy and a daddy. As she walked through the difficult adoption process, Kristen reconnected with an old friend, Thomas. They fell in love. After visiting Kristen and Zahra in Uganda, Thomas asked Kristen to be his wife. They were married just a few months after Kristen and Zahra returned home from Uganda.

In Uganda, doctors believed that Zahra would never walk or talk. Since coming home, she has been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, epilepsy and hearing loss. But Zahra is strong and learning





to do things the doctors said were impossible. Zahra can walk, run, jump, swim, and dance. She can talk, sing, write her name, and count to forty. She attends school and receives the medical care she needs. As Kristen and Thomas reflect on the last year, they believe ‘the biggest impact on Zahra’s life has been the power of love and acceptance: knowing and believing that she is worth it. She is a unique and special little girl and we are honored that God chose us to be her family.’

It only takes one to change the life of one.

This is a book about millions of children who are fatherless. Like Ayana and Zahra, every one of these children has a face, a name, a story. The stories of Ayana and Zahra illustrate an important truth: children who have been orphaned, abandoned or separated from their families are among the most vulnerable people in the world. Without protection and provision, orphans and vulnerable children often have no future. Like Ayana, thousands of these children die every day of hunger and preventable disease. Yet like Zahra, each of these children has the potential to thrive with the love of a family.

Before you become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem, remember it only takes one family to change the life of one orphan. Of all the numbers I will write about in this book, *one* is the most important. What you do with what you learn in this book can make all the difference in the world to one child – or one family.

The Christian Adoption and Orphan Care Movement

About ten years ago I went on a mission trip to Guatemala. At the time, my husband and I were hoping to start a family, but struggling with infertility. When I began to feel queasy after eating food in a rural village in Guatemala, I hoped the feeling was morning sickness – not food poisoning. On the flight home, there were half a dozen American and European couples bringing home newly adopted babies. A seed was planted: if we could not have children of our own, we could adopt. At the time, most people who considered adoption did so in response to infertility.

Over the last ten years, however, the evangelical church has awoken to God’s heart for the fatherless. Christians have opened their eyes to see the millions of children around the world who have lost one or both parents to AIDS, violence or poverty. A growing number of churches are responding with great compassion to





launch orphan care ministries. Likewise, an increasing number of families are pursuing adoption not because of infertility, but in response to God's call.

Thousands of Christians have discovered God's heart for orphans. Influential evangelical pastors, including John Piper, Rick Warren and David Platt, have challenged their congregations – along with millions of evangelical Christians across the United States – to consider what the Bible teaches about orphans and adoption.

In 2006, a few dozen Christians interested in adoption and orphan care gathered in Little Rock, Arkansas to plan and pray 'about how God would have them care for orphaned and vulnerable children.'³ This was the first Orphan Summit and the birth of the Christian Alliance for Orphans.

Since 2006, the Orphan Summit has been an annual event. In 2012, the Summit was attended by more than 2,000 people.⁴ The Summit is the largest of dozens of adoption and orphan care conferences held across the United States, including Together for Adoption and Created for Care.

The adoption and orphan care movement is not confined to America. Over the last eight years, the Christian Alliance for Orphans has grown to become 'an international movement of concerned Christians and churches.'⁵ Orphan Sunday began as a movement of churches in Zambia, where pastors called their congregations to care for the orphans in their communities. Orphan Sunday spread to the United States in 2003. In 2009, the Christian Alliance for Orphans took up the cause, promoting Orphan Sunday across the nation and around the world. Orphan Sunday provides an opportunity for churches to spotlight God's heart for orphans and how ordinary people can get involved in adoption, foster care and global orphan care. In 2011, more than half a million Americans were involved in Orphan Sunday. By 2013, Orphan Sunday was celebrated in dozens of countries around the world, including Australia, Brazil, Philippines, Rwanda, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.⁶

3 Carr, Johnny, and Laura Captari. *Orphan Justice*. 1st ed. Nashville, TN: B & H Publish Group, 2013. Print.

4 Medefind, Jedd. 'ECFA Article On The Christian Orphan Care Movement'. *Christian Alliance for Orphans*. 2012. Web. 13 Jul. 2012.

5 Carr, Johnny, and Laura Captari. *Orphan Justice*. 1st ed. Nashville, TN: B & H Publish Group, 2013. Print.

6 Orphansunday.org. 'Orphan Sunday Map'. *Christian Alliance for Orphans*. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2014.



Five years ago, our family began considering adoption. We brought dinner to friends who had just adopted a child from Ethiopia and asked for wisdom. They gave us a copy of Russell Moore's *Adopted for Life*. This book opened our eyes to the truth that Christians are adopted by God – and left us with a deep conviction that we were called to adopt. At the same time, I began reading the blogs of dozens of adoptive families. The awakening of the Christian adoption and orphan care movement has coincided with the growth of social media. Blogs have had a powerful voice in inspiring thousands of families to consider God's heart for orphans.

As a result of these influences – and what I believe is a movement of God – thousands of Christian families are stepping up to care for orphans. While the Christian adoption and orphan care movement is diverse, its supporters share several important beliefs. First, God cares passionately about orphans. Second, Christians are adopted by God and this is central to understanding the Gospel. Third, Christians are called to be involved in adoption and orphan care in response to and as a demonstration of the Gospel.

Some within the movement argue that adoption itself is evangelical in nature:

The ultimate purpose of human adoption by Christians, therefore, is not to give orphans parents, as important as that is. It is to place them in a Christian home that they might be positioned to receive the gospel, so that within that family, the world might witness a representation of God taking in and genuinely loving the helpless, the hopeless, and the despised.⁷

Christian families and churches are responding to what we believe to be a vast and overwhelming crisis. We have been told there are 151 million orphans: children who are alone in the world, without the love and protection of a family.⁸ When we hear the statistics, we imagine a world full of vulnerable children who are growing up in orphanages or on the streets.⁹

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

8 This is the estimate of the number of orphans, including single and double orphans, as of April 2013. This is the statistic we use throughout the book. Childinfo. 'Orphan Estimates'. 2014. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.

9 Throughout this book, we have made the decision to use the words 'orphan' and 'fatherless' interchangeably. The Hebrew word *yathom* is used throughout the Old Testament to describe an orphan or a fatherless child. The Greek word *orphanos* in James 1:27 has the same meaning. While we understand terms orphan and fatherless can be perceived as hurtful, no harm is intended. We use these terms to reach a certain audience where the terms orphan and fatherless are understood to mean children who have experienced the death of their parents or separation from their families by being institutionalized or living on the streets.



As Christians, we believe God designed children to grow up in families. We assume that without adoption, these children will grow up without families. And so we compare the number of Christians in the world – nearly 4 billion – with the number of orphans – 151 million – and conclude that adoption is *the* answer.

If this assumption was true and if the orphan crisis was as simple as 151 million children waiting in orphanages or on the streets for new families, then adoption would be the best answer.

But we recognize the solution to the orphan crisis is not this simple. We assume the orphan crisis has overwhelmed the capacity of many communities. Domestic adoption is still rare in many developing countries. Many countries are closed to international adoption. Adoption is not an option for every child who has been orphaned or abandoned. So in response, we pour resources into building orphanages. We visit orphans on short-term mission trips and provide for their needs through monthly sponsorship. We accept that these are the primary ways to care for orphans who cannot be adopted.

Often when we are told about the orphan crisis, we're overwhelmed with statistics and challenged to do something. We believe that doing almost anything is better than doing nothing.

But are these assumptions true? Are there truly 151 million children in the world today who are growing up without the love of a family? Is international adoption the only hope for these orphans to have a family? In circumstances where adoption is not possible, shouldn't Christians build, support and visit orphanages?

How we answer these questions is important. If we misunderstand the nature of the orphan crisis, our response, however well-intentioned, might harm the people we want to help. The Bible calls Christians to defend and care for the fatherless. But effective obedience to this Biblical command requires asking deeper questions. Good intentions are not enough. In our enthusiasm to do something, our response to the orphan crisis runs the real risk of exploiting vulnerable families and children.

In James 1:27, we're told 'religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.'¹⁰ The word visit in the Greek is *episkeptomai*, which is also used to describe a doctor visiting a sick patient. The Greek

¹⁰ *The Bible, English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2014. Print. Unless otherwise specified, all Bible verses quoted or referenced in this book are from the English Standard Version.





word for affliction is *thlipsis*, which means both physical need and anything that burdens the spirit. A good doctor diagnoses a patient's problem while also caring for his physical needs and providing comfort.

If we are to follow the words of James 1:27, we must be like a good doctor visiting a patient. It is good to meet the physical and emotional needs of orphans and widows, but we must not stop there. The orphan crisis is a symptom of a far deeper problem. Like a good doctor, we cannot be content with just treating the symptoms. We must seek to diagnose and heal the brokenness at the root of the orphan crisis. In this chapter, we will examine statistics about the fatherless in the world today, but we will not stop there. We will go deeper, exploring the reasons why children and families are vulnerable.

Who are the fatherless in the Bible?

This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.' (Zech. 7:9-10, NIV)

From beginning to end, the Bible is a story about God, who calls Himself a Father, adopting a fatherless people. God's people are called to protect and provide for the fatherless in response to what we have received and as a reflection of the Father's heart.

God's compassion is not limited to the fatherless. Throughout the Bible, we see God's heart for the vulnerable, including orphans, widows, immigrants, and the poor. In ancient Jewish culture, these four groups of people would have been at risk of starvation and exploitation. God likewise called His people to protect and care for orphans, widows, immigrants, and the poor.

When the Bible speaks of the fatherless, it refers to children who would have been highly vulnerable in ancient Jewish culture. God designed children to grow up in families and with loving, protective fathers. The fatherless in the Bible represent all children who lack the protection and provision of a father. In a similar way, widows would have been vulnerable to exploitation. Men as husbands and fathers are called to protect and provide for women and children. Especially in a patriarchal society, widows and orphans were particularly vulnerable because they lacked the very person God intended to care for them.





Who are the fatherless in the world today? Just as the people of Israel were called to protect and provide for orphans, widows, immigrants, and the poor, God's people today are called to care for the vulnerable in our communities and around the world. This includes refugees, migrant workers, and the homeless, as well as some single parents and elderly people.¹¹ It includes the victims of trafficking, forced labor and sexual slavery. It includes people living in countries devastated by war, political oppression and violence. It also includes orphans and widows.

The Orphan and Widow Crisis

It is interesting that the Bible seldom separates orphans and widows. From Deuteronomy to James, God calls His followers to defend and care for orphans and widows together. There is an assumption that widowed mothers are caring for fatherless children – and that these families are vulnerable.

Yet as we Christians have opened our hearts to orphans, we have largely separated orphans and widows. We picture orphans as children on the other side of the world, living alone on the streets or in crowded orphanages. At the same time, we picture widows as the elderly grandmothers down the street. We have largely ignored that fact that the vast majority of the world's orphans live with their widowed mothers or fathers. Our hearts are broken over the world's orphans – but we've missed the world's widows. The truth is there is an orphan *and* widow crisis.

As we consider the following statistics, it's important to understand that truly reliable statistics do not exist. To try to define the scope of the orphan crisis, researchers have to make estimates using limited, imperfect tools. Nevertheless, considering statistics about the orphan and widow crisis is helpful because it gives us a panoramic view.

According to UNICEF, children are considered orphans if they have experienced the death of one or both parents.¹² By this definition, there were an estimated 151 million orphans in the developing world including Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America in 2013.¹³ This number includes 'children who have lost both parents, but also those who have lost a father but have

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

12 UNICEF Press Centre. 'Orphans'. N. p. 2008. Web. 22 Mar. 2012.

13 Childinfo. 'Orphan Estimates'. N. p. 2014. Web. 3 Feb. 2014.

