

Episode 3 Transcript- "How Open Adoption Made My Family Great"

Audra Haney: You are listening to the Newborn Promise Podcast, a production of Graham Blanchard Inc. This is episode 3, "How Open Adoption Made My Family Great." For today's show notes, guest bios, and more information on "Your Newborn Promise Project", please visit GrahamBlanchard.com.

Audra: Well, welcome to the Newborn Promise Podcast. This is Audra Haney and we are so happy to have you today, as we dive even deeper into our discussion on adoption. Last week we spoke with Erica Ho about her personal and professional experience with adoption. She had a lot of great insight and encouragement for those who are seeking an international route. So, this week we wanted to talk with a few guests, who have pursued domestic, open adoption. And, I'd like to pause right here and say that I know we are launching our podcast with some really untraditional parenting topics like adoption, infertility, we will have an episode on miscarriage and infant loss in the future. And, these are not always light or easy topics to digest. So we want to be careful to point out that we aren't treading on these harder places to be a discouragement to you during your pregnancy or your family planning. However, we do want to shine some light and be an encouragement on some topics that are easily ignored but are so very common in the family story of so many couples. We really want to be a brave voice, on some topics that have often been met with silence.

And that being said, we also know that our episodes certainly aren't exhaustive on any one topic. So, our prayer is that this is just a starting place for you. A place to consider next steps and a catalyst for prayer to go to your Heavenly Father on some of these issues, who through His Holy Spirit gives individual, tailor-made wisdom for each and every unique family and all of its members.

Case in point, these two amazing families we are talking to today: Julie Russi and the Stockhaus Family. Julie is from California and the story of her family didn't start the way she expected. Her lifelong dream was to be a mom, but when she saw negative pregnancy test after negative pregnancy test, she and her husband Zack really to examine their perception on what being a parent was all about.

Audra: Julie, you and your husband Zach dated in college and went on to get married. And, when you went on to start your family, you didn't expect getting pregnant to be very hard. But, tell me about that experience and some of the emotions you faced in trying to start your family.

Julie: I always wanted to be a mom, that was really my dream and that was what I wanted to do. So, when I was 27 years old we tried to start our family and for two years we tried to get pregnant and never once did I get pregnant. And, I was completely devastated. It just seemed that everyone around me was able to conceive so easily and just have babies and you know when you are in those years where

people are starting a family, I was looking around and it seems like everyone around you is pregnant and I had a really hard time. Every time I saw a pregnant woman or someone would tell me that got pregnant, I was crushed.

Audra: After seeking some medical help, what did the doctors tell you were the next step options?

Julie: The basic, non-invasive treatments wouldn't work for us and the doctors recommended IVF and they said, in our case, even going through those treatments, we still only had a 25-30% chance of that working. And, at the point in our lives, we were young professionals, my husband was building his career, and we only had a certain amount of money to move forward with our family. The cost of our treatments and the cost of doing a domestic adoption were about the same.

Audra: Julie, what were some of your initial thoughts on adoption?

Julie: Well, fortunately, I had always wanted to adopt ever since I was young. I remember growing up and you know hearing stories, and seeing movies, and meeting people and just knew I want to adopt a child someday. So, it was always in the back of my mind. And, luckily, my husband and I talked about it a head of time. We talked about it in our pre-marital counseling and we discussed it. We both wanted to adopt. We just assumed that we would go on to have children naturally and that would be no problem and then we would potentially adopt later when we were older.

Audra: And, ultimately, you and Zach decided to go the route of adoption, rather than choosing to go through the IVF. That seems like a really big, emotional decision. Tell me, how did God help you arrive at that decision?

Julie: I really had to ask myself the question, "What was really important to me?" Was it that I really wanted to be pregnant, which I did, but what I did I really want? And, what I really wanted was to be a mom. And when I held tight to that, that I wanted to be a parent and I wanted to raise children with my husband, that was important, suddenly how we became parents wasn't as important. And of course, I had to mourn that loss of not having our biological children and not carrying that child. But, God had already put that seed of adoption in my mind and so we decided to go ahead and invest our time and money in adoption.

Audra: So, there seems to be a lot of options out there when it comes to adoption--international, domestic, open adoption--and that is what you guys went was the domestic, open adoption. Tell me about that decision.

Julie: Well, when we decided we were going to go ahead and pursue adoption, we looked for agencies and we had family friends that adopted through this Christian agency and they had a really good experience. And, based on their recommendation we went and signed up for a class and we went and got educated. So, we started

there; learning about adoption and what are the different types. So my husband and I chose open adoption because we wanted an infant. The way adoption has changed over the years, it used to be really closed, and the current thought is that it is healthier for everyone involved to have an open adoption. Having fewer secrets and just more known and building relationships with people is healthier for everyone involved.

Audra: So, with domestic open adoption, I know that there is some communication with the birth families. And, with every adoption that can vary, the level to which you communicate, but how did you initially feel about having open communication with the birth family?

Julie: I had some concerns and fears and you are not really sure what you are getting yourself into. So, I was praying a lot and a verse that God brought to my mind was Phil 2:3-4 and it says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition, or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only towards your own interests but also to the interests of others." And, those verses really changed me and shaped me where I started to think about the birth mothers and the birth families, and trying to imagine who they were, what are they going through. This must be really scary and frightening for them. So, when I would get nervous or scared, I'd pray those verses and think about that and it was during that time that God just gave me a total heart and compassion for the birth family. It really changed everything. So, instead of going into this process of "Okay, I want to be a mom, let's adopt a baby, it's all about me." It just transformed me into realizing that this is not about me. This is about creating the best possible family for a child that we can and that the more can love and care about each other as all of the adults in the family involved, the better it is going to be for the child, as well as us.

Audra: And Julie, you really ended up having a special connection with your son's birth mother. Tell me about that.

Julie: So, what is amazing is that we met our oldest son's birth mother and she was still pregnant. And, as we had a chance to get to know her, like I said, we both ended up caring about each other a lot. Amazingly, she was scheduled to have a C-section and she invited me to be there with her in the hospital with her during the C-section. I never imagined that when we went through adoption that I was actually going to get to be there when my child was born. That was so cool. So I just feel so blessed that she let me be there and be a part of that. So, the two of us were together from the very beginning.

Audra: And Julie, tell us about your family today. You guys pursued adoption again after your first son, and then you added some more after that. Tell us about the beautiful way God has built your family.

Julie: Today, we are a family of 6, which I never thought would happen when I was crying over not being able to have a baby. My oldest two sons we adopted as infants.

They are both African American, my husband and I are white. And, so we did have a good experience with our oldest son and we went ahead and pursued another open adoption. Our oldest son was only 18 months old, but you never know how long adoption takes, so we went ahead and did the paperwork and found out that our son was a preemie and he was 5 weeks old and in the hospital. We ended up basically with our sons being 20 months apart and raising a two year old and a baby that was an infant was a really challenging, but really cool.

We had our two oldest sons and they were amazing. And, we had always kind of dreamed of having a larger family. So, I was still young enough that it was possible to go back and attempt some of the infertility treatments that we didn't do before, and so that is what we decided to do. We were like, "Hey, we have this awesome family. We have these two fantastic boys. Let's go ahead and try the fertility treatments. If they work, great! We will have a larger family. If they don't, that's okay, we are parents and that's what we wanted. We've got these great kids and that will be okay." And, I know a lot of people that have gone down the road of fertility treatments and it hasn't worked. And, I didn't really think it was going to work for us, and it did, on the first try, and I gave birth to twins! So now, we have 4 sons and this really cool diverse, mixed, ethnic family. I think it is awesome. I love these guys!

Audra: And, today, you have such a great heart for adoption and helping families that are thinking about going through the process or are in the process. What would you say to married couples that are starting out and they are thinking about family planning. What is your advice for them?

Julie: I think as you are starting your family and thinking about your family, I think you should go ahead and discuss adoption and foster care and think about that and think if that's something that God has put on your heart. Is that something you have interest in? Is it something you are curious about? Have you thought about it before? So before you've started your family, I suggest you sit down and talk about it and see where your hearts are. Is it something that you want to do? It's easier to kind of have that conversation ahead of time before you run into infertility issues to know where your heart is already towards adoption.

Audra: And Julie, I know that your infertility journey was so hard, but looking back what would you say to God's faithfulness in all of it.

Julie: So God knows what He is doing (laughs) and He used the pain of infertility to really strengthen my faith and help me to dig deep. So, it has been an amazing journey, which of course is not over yet as we are still raising our children and continuing our relationships with our birth families. God is still using that to grow us and change us, and continue to put more compassion into our hearts for others. I think God can use anything. For my husband and myself, He used infertility to radically change us and make us better. And, I'm really grateful that we've had opportunities to push ourselves and grow ourselves spiritually and emotionally that we wouldn't have done otherwise. So, I just feel like, on this side of it, we become

better people because of it and certainly have a stronger faith because of the infertility and the journey that God took us on.

STATION BREAK: This is Audra Haney and you are listening to the Newborn Promise Podcast. Today, we are discussing open domestic adoption with couples that chose the process for various reasons. As with Julie's case, many couples are gently led to adoption through infertility, some maybe after having biological children in the home. But, for some couples, like Chris and Shauna Stockhaus, God leads them to adoption first, before trying for biological children. And, while it may not be the most traditional route, Chris and Shauna shared with me why it really was the best route for their family. Today, they have two boys adopted from California's foster to adopt program.

Audra: Chris, for you and Shauna your family story is not the typical one. How did God give you a heart for adoption to begin with?

Chris: I think it started when we began going on international mission trips through our church. We went to Kenya a couple of times and through that, God began to develop our heart for those who have less. And, we actually bumped into a family here in the Bay Area who was fostering some children and had adopted a couple. We were so fascinated by their journey, their story, their family, and what God was doing. It was so interesting to us and something that we thought was amazing and was in line with where we felt God was already taking us, in terms of building our family in a way that also helped those who are in need or struggling, orphans.

Audra: And Shauna, I think your story is really unique because you wanted to pursue adoption before trying for biological children. Tell me about that decision.

Shauna: I think the thought of starting with fostering and adopting first before trying for a biological family almost made us like that idea better because no one we know had done that so it just was intriguing. And, it was on our heart, so it was just a matter of which do we do first? And, we thought, "Well, let's just get that process started and see how things go."

Audra: So after you guys kind of settled into this idea of foster to adopt, what was the first step in that process?

Chris: Shauna had first brought the idea to me of what if we did foster to adopt and I was like "Yeah, that seems cool, but let's find out more." So we went to an orientation meeting through our county social services department. It is just an informational meeting about the process works and in that meeting, as they were explaining how they do foster care, how they do adoption, what their programming is, how long it takes, all that kind of stuff. We in that meeting just had total clarity together that we wanted to do this. We were so immediately excited about it and

then God's Word obviously confirms that this fits within His plan of what He asks us as followers of Christ to do. So, the confirmation was immediate.

Audra: Did you guys have a long waiting period with foster to adopt?

Shauna: Not really. It was just God's gift of grace to us in this process. Not only were we incredibly excited, we moved immediately on filling out the paperwork and our first phone call about a child that needed a home was only 5 months later and he was in our home within two weeks and adopted within 6 months. So, that happened very quickly, quicker than if I was pregnant and delivering. So, it just again, we didn't have to struggle through some of the waiting and concerns and fears that can definitely pop up along the way in the process.

Audra: You know, and I know one of the advantages of domestic adoption is that other than shorter wait periods typically, is that is it a little more financially possible. Is this a good option for those who maybe feel inhibited by the cost of an international adoption?

Chris: In California, we actually get a check for each boy until they are 18. And so, we can put that away in a college fund, use it to help pay for the expenses. I know the state is trying to provide a lot of incentive for families to go down this road and make it as easy as possible. Now, there are people who take advantage of that and they abuse that, be it by taking a bunch of kids just for the money, but obviously I don't think anyone on this call would have that motive and that is not what they are thinking. And, I know a lot of the states have adopted that, of helping financially with any families who take in foster kids to make a way to make it more financially possible for them to be able to help.

Shauna: There are nearly 62,000 foster care children in our system in California and about 16,000 of them have been waiting for about 3 years for a permanent home. So, those numbers are sad to read and learn about and I think that is why California at least, we can really speak to California, they do have these incentives, or they are pretty desperate to get people to jump in and help in this way. And, it is a big undertaking, so it is nice that they are trying to offer something.

Audra: And, tell me about your family today and the way the Lord has formed it.

Shauna: So our oldest son, came to us when he was 20 months old and he is 11 now. And then, our second son is 8 years old and we got him when he was 10 months old. I mean, we get a lot of people that kind of praise us and say that we are a blessing to our boys and we just do not look at it that way. I mean, they made our family complete and so great and they are just amazing boys. So amazing. They teach us so much, as every child does.

Audra: What have been some of the most surprising challenges along the way? Some things maybe you didn't expect going in?

Chris: Yeah, I think a couple of the biggest challenges are for us, working with biological family members. That is stressful, that does create a lot of fear. We went into it, kind of idealistic, like, "This is a ministry and we are going to reach out to biological family members and God is going to use that to help them in some awesome ways." Which is true, but then the more we got into it the more we were aware of how hard that is and how many emotions there are when you are interacting with biological family member but this is your child that you've adopted. It is emotional, it is draining, it's a very restorative process and it is beautiful, but it is so hard.

And, the other challenge that we had was adopting African American boys and being multi-ethnic family and encountering those issues and becoming aware of what it is like to live life as a black boy. And, we growing up in white families, we were very naive to that experience. We just had no idea, so watching how our boys live life and how they experience life now that they are 11 and 8 and the differences that there are, us having to get educated on how to be good parents and coach them through that and having to make friends with other African American families, so that we can have other people in their lives, who can speak into some of their experiences.

So, those are two of the biggest challenges outside of the normal parenting challenges that everyone faces. That this journey has brought us into and it's made us better, it has stretched us and made us grow, it's made us have to get outside of our comfort zone. All of which has drawn us closer to Christ and so we wouldn't trade one day for anything, but those are difficult situations to be in.

Audra: And how has God's grace really helped you in these difficult situations?

Chris: I think His grace in these moments is just our dependence on Him, because without Him we are not equipped, we are not capable; we are not sufficient to be able to offer everything that our boys need. So, when we encounter some of these challenges and these things, some of these things that are outside of our comfort zone, that create fear, what it causes us to do is be dependent on Him. And, that is God's grace. Anytime God causes you to be dependent on Him, He is being extremely gracious to you because being dependent on God will create so much positive change, and so much joy and peace in your own life when you go through that process. So, God causing us to go from kind of confident, bold people to, "Wow! We don't know what we are doing and so many times we are in over our head," we are more dependent on God and Jesus now because of this journey and I think that's God's grace.

Audra: That is so powerful. And, even though there are challenges, just tell me today about the joy and blessing of your decision to bring these two boys into your home.

Shauna: Yeah, I think um, just what He continues to teach us is just unbelievable. It is a gift that I'm just so thankful for. That our eyes have been opened, our awareness

has increased. You know, just what you think you are capable of and then He stretches you more than that. It is pretty amazing to experience that and we know, we've been Christians long enough to know that sometimes it takes stepping out of your comfort zone, you know to experience that. It is just an unbelievable gift.

Chris: There is just so much joy. I mean, they are yours. You pour so much of your life into them and so to see them laugh, to see them experience joy, to see them experience sadness and to teach them, it is who we are and they are just a part of us. So, we are thankful for the challenges that comes with adoption and a multi-racial family because we can continue to grow and learn. So, we are thankful.

Audra; We are incredibly grateful for these beautiful, heart-felt interviews from Julie and the Stockhaus family. We have actually asked Chris to close out our time today, saying a prayer for couples who are considering a similar adoption journey.

Chris: Jesus, we come before you now so thankful for who you are and all you continue to do for us. Lord, your grace and your blessings are amazing. We thank you for what you did on the cross and we thank you for forgiving us for our sins. We ask you that you continue to, everyone listening to this and you'd continue to call us to obedience. Help us to believe in you more and more each day Lord. I pray you would clarify each and every one of us our calling, our purpose. Why did you put us on this earth? What are you asking us to do?

And, your word speaks very clearly about how we are to care for the orphan. We are going to care for those in need. We are to care for those who are suffering, who are hurting. I pray that everyone who is listening to this, you would clarify their calling, clarify their purpose and give them great joy and passion to whatever you are calling them to Lord. And those who are considering or going down the path of adoption, those who are considering going down the path of foster care. Lord, I pray that you give them courage and boldness. I pray that the fears that they have which are totally normal that you would overcome those Lord. If you are calling them in this direction, that you'd provide them with the relationships and with the information that they need to take the right steps forward to take the next steps and pursue whatever it is that you are calling them to Lord. Give them tremendous faith.

Help them to trust in you in whatever difficult situation you may bring them into, that you will carry them through and that you will give them all that they need. Lord, I pray for those who are parenting and I pray that you give them rest. I pray you build up marriages, and that the couples would always prioritize their marriage first and that they would parent out of a strong and healthy relationship and that you would cause us all to grow each and every day and that we'd all be dependent on you and that we would be humble.

Lord, I thank you for every family that is being built. I thank you for every family that is going to be built by you God. And, I pray that we become more and more faithful as a people and more in line with what you have asked your church and your

people to engage in Lord Jesus. We love you and we pray all of this in the power of your great name. Amen.

Audra: Please join us again next week as we discuss adoption after the kids are grown, with Dale and Tami Heim. Remember, you can get today's show notes, guest bios, and more information at GrahamBlanchard.com