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1

The Orphan Crisis: A Cause Bigger Than Ourselves



A father to the fatherless,
a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.

Psalm 68:5

Globally, more than 153 million children have lost one or both parents and are, by definition, considered orphaned.¹ Added to that number are millions more street and trafficked children with no parental influence in their lives, easily making the estimated number of orphaned and abandoned children well into the hundreds of millions. Orphan's Hope ministry paints a powerful picture:

It is hard to grasp such large numbers, so picture being on a very long road trip. If you had these orphans hold hands in a line, you would see more than 1,700 orphans per mile. If you were to follow that line of Orphans holding hands, driving 60 mph, you could drive 24 hours a day seeing 1,700 orphans every mile, hour after hour, day after day without stopping for over two months.²

Our lives are busy. We have obligations. We have to work. We need to play. It takes so much time to manage all the activities and “things” in our lives; time just seems to slip away. The 153 million orphaned children are somewhere out of view. Except for the occasional late-night, fund-raising infomercial that invades our home with pictures of emaciated children with distended bellies, orphaned children seem somehow remote, in countries we will never visit. We don’t see them. We don’t hear their cries.

How do we see orphaned children through the eyes of our Heavenly Father?

Sometimes it can be hard to imagine the hardships that go on around the world. We sit in our comfortable homes, with pantries full of necessities, and it seems strange that most of the world doesn’t have a pantry, let alone food to fill it. However, for millions of children in Africa this is their reality. Hunger is a part of their daily lives. Then add the fact that many of these children are also orphaned, either by death or abandonment . . . it’s almost more than we can bear. It’s hard to go there mentally and we protect our hearts by pretending it doesn’t exist. But it does. Children are suffering.³

We, as Christians, are called to be more than just observers in this global crisis. We are the body of Christ, called to care for the orphaned children in our world. We are called to be the voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. We are to rescue orphaned children and be willing to jump into the muck and mire to help lift these treasured ones out of hopelessness. Not everyone can sell all their belongings and move

to Bangladesh to serve orphaned children (although some will be called to do so). But God *is* calling each of us to help orphaned children in their distress.

Response requires commitment and sacrifice. It requires active participation. Exploring the global orphan crisis will touch your heart and cause you to want to do something—anything—to make the life of an orphaned child a little easier and to give him or her the opportunity to see Christ through the acts of kindness and love.

All of Me

When I started writing this book and talking about how to help orphaned children, a friend jumped to a speedy conclusion and said to me, “So you are going to tell me that you want my money, right?” as if that alone would solve the orphan crisis. I didn’t think quickly enough in the moment to reply with anything notable, but after praying about it, I thought that perhaps God might have responded with something like this:

I don’t want your money—the orphaned children want your heart!

I want you to see the face of the six-year-old boy who lost both his parents to AIDS and lives all alone in the bush of Uganda. I want you to feel the pain of a nine-year-old orphaned girl who is unable to escape from her captor and is forced to have sex with faceless “johns” multiple times each day. I want you to be heartbroken when you hear the sobs of the lonely, disabled girl as she cries herself to sleep night after night because she knows that no one will ever “pick” her. I want you to feel the gripping fear of the young man aging out of a government-run orphanage as he realizes that once he walks out the door he has no earthly possessions, no home, no job skills, and no one in this world to turn to.

When your heart breaks, like my heart breaks, when your eyes are opened to the things you don't want to see, when you feel my children's pain and it becomes unbearable, then—and only then—can I use you to change the life of an orphaned child. No, I don't want your money—I want your heart!

Defining the Orphaned Child

The term *orphan* can be quite confusing. In the past, *orphan* described a child who had lost both parents. The AIDS crisis changed that. More than a decade ago, the World Health Organization and the United Nations determined that, due to the AIDS epidemic, when a child loses one parent to the disease (leaving the child as a “single” orphan), it is only a matter of time before the surviving parent becomes sick and could succumb to the disease as well, resulting in the child becoming a “double” orphan.

The words *fatherless* or *motherless* describe the child who has lost one parent. Particularly in developing countries, if a child loses one parent, the life of that child can be significantly altered, putting the child at considerable risk. If the father dies, often the mother and children lose rights to ownership of land and other possessions. Conversely, if the mother dies, the father who has to work to provide for the family isn't able also to care for the children, so there is a significant caregiver void. Being a single parent in any culture is difficult, but being a single parent in a least developed country often brings dire consequences.

The term *orphan* is common in much of the world but feels awkward and strange in a developed country. In a suburban setting you would probably not call a child an “orphan” if a child's father dies but the child still has a mom. What about a single mom or dad? By global definition, a child of a single, divorced mom is technically considered an *orphan*. A single mom in a developed country might be offended at the thought; it doesn't exactly hit the descriptive nail on the head. But in a least developed country, where a single mom experiences severe economic hardships, des-

ignating her children as *orphans* might be very appropriate. Such is the blanket nature of definitions: They fit well in some situations and not so well in others. In any case, the situation surrounding the orphaned child will look very different in a developed country versus a least developed country, which we will look at in the pages ahead.

For ease of use, we will use the words *orphaned child* when we are talking about a child who is left orphaned, fatherless, motherless, or abandoned. I tend not to say that a child is an orphan, as I really dislike that label. I prefer to say, “a child is orphaned.” It is a slight difference, but I want the term to describe the child, not to become the child. Being orphaned is a state of circumstances, but it doesn’t define who the child is.

Unique Challenges for Orphaned Children

Numerous complicated issues result from a child losing one or both parents, which might include: a lack of protection, neglect, abuse, mental health issues, lack of education or resources, poverty, higher rate of suicide, and increased susceptibility to disease. In the best circumstances, relatives step in to care for the orphaned child. Some children find shelter in an orphanage or foster home. Worst case, they are abandoned, left to fend for themselves or die trying.

In many developed countries, except for a small contingent of private and Christian child welfare organizations, we have largely depended on the government to care for our country’s vulnerable children. As helpful as this is in developed societies, systems are often flawed and can cause more complications for children who are already in a vulnerable state. Part of the problem of depending on government systems is that it gives us the false assumption that we are absolved from responsibility. This could not be further from the truth. As human beings, and specifically as Christians, we have a responsibility to be part of the global orphan solution, and governmental policies are no substitute for our wholehearted involvement.

The global orphan crisis is so enormous that we need an “all hands

on deck” approach to orphan care. Globally, government organizations, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and various religious groups are engaged in the orphan crisis. Hundreds of thousands of benevolent people and organizations are mobilized, fighting on the front lines in many capacities. Within the global Christian community, thousands of organizations are already engaged. Through their faithful and visionary leadership, their numbers are growing and more churches and individuals within the body of Christ have started to respond. In total, what these organizations are doing is admirable and inspiring, but it’s not enough. More needs to be done to solve the crisis. Millions and millions of children are still in desperate need.

Christ-Centered Worldview

To understand the philosophy I base my beliefs on, you need to know that I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I came to know Jesus at a very young age and have spent my life as a devoted follower. I have not built my spiritual beliefs around a “religion,” but rather have a personal relationship with God that has become the foundation of my worldview. God created the universe with precision and intentionality, with nothing random in His design. In a God-centered worldview, every person has infinite value. God uniquely created every individual, throughout all of history, and for the rest of time, and He values each person. God, the Creator of all things, has a purpose for each and every human being.

Those with a Christ-centered worldview also subscribe to the idea that the sins of humankind created a great divide between humanity and God. Because of our Creator’s love and compassion for us, God sent His Son, Jesus, to stand in our place to pay for our sins and die on our behalf. We have been given the choice to choose God’s forgiveness or to choose our own way. That choice determines our values and beliefs in this age and our future in the age to come.

A person who holds to a Christ-centered worldview believes the Bible is a unique book, inspired by God and relevant for all of life.

Because of God's Word, we have everything we need to live a life that is honoring to Him and to be a blessing to others. When a person who holds to a God-centered worldview struggles to understand a complicated issue, the God-inspired Bible provides clarity and direction.

The Bible is an instruction book for everyday life but in specific areas as well. In the Bible, more than two thousand general verses deal with compassion and justice. Forty-four verses specifically use the words *orphan* or *fatherless*, giving us instruction and clarity in our role with the orphan crisis. Not every verse addresses how to care for orphaned children, but most do. Through my study, I realized that all people with a God-centered worldview, not just those who are "interested," have a responsibility to look after orphaned children. I am more convinced than ever that we live in a time when the orphan crisis is truly a "crisis," and by the very definition of the word, we are at a "critical stage or turning point" compelling us all to take action.

We all know that evil is pervasive in our world. Unfortunately, we will have to look evil right in the face, because it is evil that exploits orphaned children. That doesn't mean that the evildoers have no value. They need God, just as we all do. However, if they choose evil and harm innocent children, they must be stopped. Throughout this book we will look at what we can do for orphaned children and recognize the tremendous evil that threatens to harm them. Though the odds are against us, this battle for the lives of orphaned children cannot be lost.

There are, of course, those who do *not* adhere to a God-centered worldview; perhaps you are one of them. The call to action in this book is written for all people, and I invite you also to be a part of the orphan solution. Sometimes I will address those who hold to the same worldview as I, times when I call Christ-followers to action. It is my hope that you will not throw out the intentionality and significance of this book just because we differ in our worldviews. This cause is bigger than any single person, community, country, or religion. Thank you for respecting my choice to write from my perspective.

You Have a Role in the Global Orphan Solution

Are you feeling overwhelmed by the crisis? Let me assure you that we are just one part of the overall solution. The big picture is God's.

We are the willing vessels that can be used by God to be one piece of a much larger puzzle. We have different roles. Some will adopt. Some will foster. Some will be in a ministry on the front lines. Others will be in the background supporting those on the front lines. Regardless of the role you play in the big picture, you can significantly support an orphaned child. No one role is more significant than another. Every role, regardless of visibility, is as important as another.

In our culture we tend to have a “rock-star” mentality and view those in the up-front roles as more important than those in the support roles. That is certainly not God's view as evidenced in the Bible. I had a wonderful moment of clarity on this topic some years ago.

In the late '90s I was working as the director of operations in a student ministry at Willow Creek Community Church. It was a large ministry of about seven hundred students and more than a hundred volunteers. My role was to support the ministry's infrastructure in planning activities, events, fund-raising, etc. Ironically, if I was doing my job well, I would make it look so easy that no one would know I was doing my job.

In one moment of blazing clarity I realized the importance of the team concept and my role within it. It was during a large event one evening and the auditorium was filled with hundreds of people. I stood at the back of the auditorium and marveled at the presentation going on. Dozens of people had developed the program, shot the video, practiced the worship music, coordinated the message, practiced the presentation, and organized every detail from beginning to end. In the big picture, my role in this event would never be noticed by anyone in the auditorium, but without my part the event would have been chaotic. I felt complete fulfillment knowing that my part was a small part of the big picture, though I never stepped on the stage.

While few of us will ever step on “stage” to declare the importance

of caring for orphaned children, your role, large or small, is part of God's plan. I encourage you to step out in faith and fulfill the role God has for you in the life of an orphaned child.

Where Do We Start?

It's very simple: We all need to do our part. Not too many years ago we were all overwhelmed with the idea of recycling. Now it is second nature. If I throw a plastic bottle in the garbage, I feel guilty. Addressing the global orphan crisis is a matter of retraining ourselves to make small changes that eventually have large consequences.

Every person can make a positive contribution toward improving the life of an orphaned child by taking these four critical steps:

1. Understand the global orphan crisis (you're reading this book, so you are on your way),
2. Know God's heart, and embrace His instructions for orphan care,
3. Evaluate your strengths, talents, and resources to be part of the bigger plan,
4. Create an action plan, implement the plan, and stay open to God's leading.

As we unpack these steps, you will find that *you* are uniquely gifted to participate in alleviating the suffering of orphaned, abandoned, and at-risk children. Your involvement won't look like someone else's involvement. Whether you contribute by creating jobs for orphaned teens or stick postage stamps on fund-raising letters, each and every contribution is important and will serve to change the life of an orphaned child. This side of heaven it is difficult to grasp the importance of our roles in this venture. I really hope you will open your heart and mind and actively ask God to make His will clear to you. You might be thinking you have some skills and experience that would be a perfect fit, and that is wonderful.

You might also be thinking you have no idea how to help or what you might do. Believe me, I've been on both sides of that equation! As skilled and prepared as I am in some areas of my career and life, I feel inadequate to guide you on this global orphan journey. While my story is still evolving, what I have found so far is summed up in this truth: "God doesn't always call the equipped; He equips the called." God has given me a passion and a heart for children, especially those who are most vulnerable. I'm excited to see where God takes me on this journey, and I hope you are open to joining me on this exciting adventure as well.

You also have the opportunity to bring others along with you in your journey. My husband, David, has a real soft spot for ministries that offer donation matching programs. He enjoys the benefit of doubling his investment for a good cause. The same can be true for you. You can double, triple, and significantly multiply your efforts by bringing other individuals, churches, and organizations along with you. You have the opportunity not only to change one child's life, but to change a multitude of lives. *The Global Orphan Crisis* is designed as a guide for your personal journey or as a small group study so that you can learn together and encourage one another.

Remember as we continue to learn about the global orphan crisis, the overarching point is simple: Just do something!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. What has been your global or local experience with orphaned, abandoned, and at-risk children?
2. When you think of an orphaned child, what do you picture in your mind? What is the setting? What does the child look like? What is the child's situation?
3. How do you think an orphaned child's life looks different in a developed country from how it looks in a least developed country?

4. What comes to mind when you think of 153 million children being orphaned, abandoned, and at-risk?
5. What information in this chapter especially caught your attention?

ACTION POINT: SEE THE FACES

Many orphanage websites contain listings of children waiting for adoptive parents. Most of those children will go through their whole childhood waiting. Although I can't personally adopt these precious children, something that I *can* do will impact their lives significantly and that is to pray. Out of the hundreds of children whose profiles I viewed, I chose two to pray for. Ivan is an eleven-year-old boy with haunting eyes. Ana is a fourteen-year-old girl who has a sweet smile. Both are from Russia and look just like kids I would see in my neighborhood.

You, too, can do an Internet search for child sponsorships, adoptable children, kids in foster care, or children in orphanages. Pick a country of interest. Then explore the sites to see the children who are currently adoptable or who need sponsorship in that country. Look at the faces of the children, read their stories, and allow God to speak to your heart through their eyes. Then choose one or two children and print out their pictures and stories. Put their photos in a place of prominence by your computer or in your office, and commit to pray for them every time you see their faces.

Note: If you are in a small group study, bring your photos with you to your next discussion so you can share your children-in-prayer with the group. Tell everyone why you chose the particular children you did.