Bob: Jon and Shelly Bergeron knew that their foster daughter had experienced some significant emotional scarring prior to the time that they became her foster parents. What they didn’t know was how those scars would start to play out in their foster daughter’s life over the years.

Jon: You know, I remember a day when it escalated to the point where we had to get her in a room. We had to keep her away from the windows because she was attempting to break the windows. It became an issue of safety for her as well as for the rest of us. Even with a professional background and having walked with parents through similar stuff, it was scary. It was very hard.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, August 25th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. We’re going to talk today about some of the challenges that foster parents can face as they attempt to deal with the scars that their foster children bring with them. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. I remember—this was years ago—I got the opportunity to speak at chapel at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. As I walked out, there was a guy who pulled me aside. He said, “You know, FamilyLife is really trying to encourage and promote orphan care, and adoption, and foster care.” He said: “But look, you guys have got to quit making it sound romantic. It is hard.”

Dennis: I don’t think we have painted this and airbrushed it over to make it this perfect Norman Rockwell painting—that’s how I refer to it frequently on FamilyLife Today. We have a couple, who are joining us, here on FamilyLife Today, who know exactly what we’re talking about. Jon and Shelly Begeron, welcome to FamilyLife Today, guys.

Shelly: Thank you.

Jon: Thank you—good to be here.

Dennis: You guys serve at Hope for Orphans®, which is a ministry FamilyLife has been in partnership with for a number of years—over a decade now. You, for a number of years, Jon, were a psychologist—more than a decade. You guys have got a magnificent
story of really how God led you into the whole orphan care—foster care / adopt a child—area of ministry.

**Bob:** Yes. Shelly, share a little bit of your journey with our listeners.

**Shelly:** Sure. It’s clearly God’s story because we tried to avoid it for about three years. We had been married 12 years by the time we got our first child—but before that—for about three years, we really felt God calling us to take care of some of these kids who didn’t have families to take care of them. So, we started the process of going to the classes for foster care—and were kind of hoping that one of us wouldn’t feel so encouraged to do it—and we both felt like that was still what we were supposed to do.

**Dennis:** Now, wait a second! Why were you hoping one or the other wouldn’t—[Laughter]—were you wanting out, at the beginning?

**Shelly:** Yes; yes!

**Dennis:** “Anything but this Lord!”

**Shelly:** Yes, that’s right. It was going to be easier—Jon was finally done with graduate school and we could just move on—or foster and be done with that—take these kids in, give them a home for a time, and then send them on their way.

**Dennis:** Yes, I was going to ask you that. When you engaged in the foster care training—which is quite extensive, by the way—was adoption on the radar, at that point?

**Shelly:** No. In fact, we were really the only people in the class who said, “We’re here just to foster.”

**Dennis:** Jon, there is around 450,000 children in the foster care system, at any time, in our nation. What’s the biggest misconception that the Christian community has about foster care?

**Jon:** I would say it’s the same misconception they have about adoption—it’s basically that loving is enough: “If I just take this child into my home / love them. That is going to be enough to really fix the problems that they are struggling with and heal the damage in a relatively short time.” I think there is a tendency, as is true for all of us, to look at our loving this child as the healing agent. I think, sometimes—we’re starting to see the gospel is lost, a bit, in that. We forget that: “No, God is doing the work. He’s using us, and certainly our love for this child, but that’s not the change agent.”

**Dennis:** So, you guys embarked—both praying a prayer, “Lord, help my spouse become disinterested in this process [Laughter] because we want to hit the easy-going
button, all the way to the finish line.” At what point did that change and you both locked on and locked in to foster care and said, “We’re all in”?

**Shelly:** I think, as we went through the process, we, literally, every week would say, “Do you think we’re still supposed to be doing this?” We both agreed we were and kind of would say: “Shucks! Now we have to keep going.” We had planned to take in a special-needs child. We said we would take one, between the ages of five and ten.

Two days after we were licensed, we got this phone call that there were two children who needed a home—a brother and sister. I explained, “No.” I said, “We would take one.” Then they said, “One of them is deaf.” I explained: “We don’t know sign language. So, we can’t take them.” They said: “It’s fine. He doesn’t know any either.”

We prayed about it and said: “Okay. I guess this isn’t long-term—this isn’t permanent. We can do it. We can take them in.” They asked if they could come in 30 days because they were currently in a foster home. Then, they called the next day after that. They said, “Could we bring them in a week?” Then, the day after that, they said, “Could we bring them tomorrow?” So—

**Bob:** Now, you had gone from saying, “Only one—got to be like this,”—they call and say they have two. They don’t meet your requirements. You said, “No, no, no.” Then, you prayed about it. Tell me about that prayer time.

**Jon:** I think, along the way, we really tried to approach all of this, and all of life, as being willing but being honest about our own reservations. That’s kind of what we talked about.

I guess, really, we were looking more for disconfirmation because we felt like—you know, God calls them to call us, at this time, with these kids. If there is something that is really not right about this, we want God to show us that. He didn’t at all. In fact, the more I remember thinking about it, the more I thought: “We can do this. We know how to learn. We can get books. We can get video tapes. We can learn this sign language thing.” That’s kind of what we did.

**Shelly:** It was tough. I went to the library and got every book on sign language I could get. Our, now, son—Tanner would sit there with us. He would see—if we would open the book—that he knew we were learning a new word. We would point and say, “This is table,” and look at the sign and learn the sign. He would be excited and would start to use it. His sister, who was hearing, who lived with us for two years, also would learn the sign, right along with him. She became just as fluent as he was.

**Dennis:** How old were these children?

**Shelly:** The girl was five. Our son, Tanner, at that time, was almost four.
Bob: And the girl did not have any learning disabilities?

Shelly: She did not. She was hearing. She had no physical disabilities. She had a lot of attachment issues and different problems, just related to the neglect and—

Jon: —just the hard place she came from. There were definitely attachment and behavioral issues that we began seeing the longer she was with us.

Bob: And you’re trained, as a child psychologist. You’re talking to folks, all day long, about how to deal with these issues. This should have been—just easy for you; right?

Jon: That was my thinking; yes! [Laughter]

Dennis: I was wishing we had a TV camera so our listeners could have seen that face. [Laughter]

Bob: That was a little bit like—deer in the headlights. [Laughter]

Jon: Well, I can share with you what I share with parents is—prior to doing that—I knew a lot about helping foster families and adoptive families. After that became my experience—I realized how little I really knew. That, I learned, was the beginning of my education.

I think God has utilized all of the challenges we have experienced to teach me things that I couldn’t learn any other way. I learned nothing in graduate school about all of this. What I did learn was pretty useless. I certainly took the principles that I learned—but applied them in a whole new way—because there’s some special challenges that you deal with when you’re talking about kiddos from these kinds of places.

Dennis: Okay. Shelly, you already spilled the beans that you adopted this little boy. What in the world happened to move this reluctant foster care couple to being all-in on foster care—to ultimately saying, “We’re going to learn sign language,”—to saying, “We want you to be ours,”?

Shelly: Again, God. It was God’s redemptive process, really, in our lives. This little boy stayed with us for two years. The judge, eventually, had the parents given unsupervised visits. What happened was—there was a weekend. Tanner was injured and had to go to the emergency room. At that point, we asked to go back to court and have only supervised visits. At that point, both biological parents relinquished their rights. That allowed us to adopt Tanner. We said we couldn’t imagine him not being in our lives, at that point.

Bob: And you chose to adopt Tanner but not to adopt his sister?
Shelly: That was not our choice. The state, at that point, had separated the children—which is very unusual. Because she did not have special needs, in the same way that Tanner did, they sent her back home.

Bob: Okay. Hang on because this is really starting to sound Norman Rockwell; alright? [Laughter] You bring home a couple of foster kids. You get the book out. He’s anxious to learn the words. You’re learning together—and, “They all lived happily ever after.”

Shelly: If only it were like that.

Bob: So, what were the challenges you guys started to face with Tanner?

Jon: With Tanner—interestingly, the challenges weren’t as immediate or as intense—more when we were fostering with his sister—were the most challenging. She, within a couple of weeks, began showing the attachment issues—and just the trauma of the separation and the stuff she had been through. It wasn’t long before we were having to put knives away, and protect our pet, and protect Tanner from the violent outbursts. This really tested both of us.

Bob: What would—I mean, give me an example of what that violence would look like.

Jon: You know, I remember a day when it escalated to the point where we had to get her in a room. We had to keep her away from the windows because she was attempting to break the windows. It became an issue of safety for her, as well as for the rest of us. It was scary. It was very hard.

Bob: If you had somebody coming to your office, saying: “This is what’s going on at home, Dr. Bergeron. What do we do?” What would you tell them?

Jon: Well, I would tell them a lot of things. [Laughter] But what I couldn’t speak to was what that experience is like and the kind of pressure it puts on a marriage. I mean, that was one of the things we struggled through, pretty early on; and I had talked to families about this. You know: “Be ready—that one of the defense mechanisms that these children use to survive is called ‘splitting.’ They begin to put a wedge because it feels safer for them if they can feel more in control. One of the ways they feel in control is to split mom and dad, as the power brokers in the situation.”

You know, even as a professional, I didn’t see it happening until, one day, in the midst of tears, we kind of figured out: “Oh my goodness! It’s happening. She’s setting me up as the hero.” I come home and it’s: “Daddy! Daddy, I’m so glad you’re home!” Three minutes earlier, she was threatening my wife’s life. It was challenging.

Dennis: The story and the plot thicken a bit. That takes us to China. Explain what the connection is with that vast country. Shelly, your grandparents had been missionaries in China?
Shelly: My great-grandfather was a missionary to China, and my grandfather grew up there. He had always loved it and talked about his love for the Chinese and the Chinese people. One day—it was actually May 5, 2005—we got an email about a boy who was about to age-out in China—who liked to play basketball, and who happened to be deaf, and who needed to be adopted.

I forwarded it to Jon. Jon read it and said, “Maybe we should pray about it.” I felt like that was unnecessary because I didn’t plan to adopt any more children. We prayed and said, “God, if this is what you want us to do, we’ll just take the next step.” We felt like that was what we needed to do—was just to take the next step. If it were to happen, great! —and if not, we just wanted to be obedient to God’s calling.

Dennis: Yes.

Bob: And aging-out—does that mean he’s about to turn 18?

Shelly: In China, 14. You’re not adoptable after you are 14.

Bob: Okay.

Shelly: Because he was deaf and an orphan, they didn’t really care about him. They pretty much let him do whatever he wanted to do—at the orphanage he was at—just before we got him.

Bob: Just what you’re describing there, I’m seeing flashing red lights, going, “If you’re going to open your home to a 14-year-old, who has been an orphan all his life in the system in China, who’s deaf, and who nobody’s cared about—

Shelly: We’re crazy! [Laughter]

Bob: I mean, I’m just imagining that you are inviting in somebody who has significant emotional / developmental issues that are going to start acting out, big time, in your home.

Jon: Yes. As a professional, that was not something that was unexpected to me. In fact, those were the first things I started going through and the first reasons I started to try to talk myself out of this because I knew, in all likelihood—he’s been physically abused, and sexually abused, and probably acted out because of what’s happened to him, and has probably witnessed all kinds of horrendous things, and been given very little supervision and training.

I knew what was coming. This is where my prayers increased in intensity: “God is this really what you’re calling us to?—because I’ve seen what that looks like and it’s scary. I need some huge clarification.” We talked about things like: “If he comes and he begins
to act out physically, are we ready for that? Do we know what we’re going to do? Do we have the ability to get him mental health care, if he needs that? Could we deal with sexual acting out, if and when that happens?” These are all questions that ran through my mind—largely, because of my professional training and experience—that I think not a lot of parents either know to kind of ask themselves or are willing to because it’s a scary proposition.

**Dennis:** I want to make a couple of points here. First of all, adoption isn’t God’s will for every couple. Secondly, you’ve modeled something that I think is really important. You were counting the cost of what could be and what likely would be. I mean, you knew there was going to be a cost to that. I think a lot of couples don’t really count the cost. There’s a sense in which you can’t, really, totally count the cost. But third, after all three of those things, you stepped out in faith, trusting God. I think that’s where it has to be confirmed. You felt like, unequivocally, God was calling you to give a child, who would be homeless, a home.

**Bob:** This was how many years ago?

**Shelly:** Three-and-a-half years ago.

**Bob:** And you brought him over. Did the challenges that we’ve talked about here—did they manifest themselves?

**Shelly:** They did. We actually got him three days before his 14th birthday—was when we adopted him. If we had been in China on his 14th birthday, we could not have brought him home. To be honest, there are days I wish we had gotten there on his 14th birthday. It’s not been easy! [Emotion in voice] It’s been a pretty hard three-and-a-half years.

**Bob:** Shelly, pretty transparent of you to say there are days when you wish you had gotten there on his 14th birthday and had not brought him home—a lot of those days?

**Shelly:** Some months more than others—they get less. Recently, they’ve been more often again. You know, I feel like that’s one of the things that God has brought about in our lives through this—is to let other people know adoption is beautiful, and it’s redemptive, but it’s so hard. This isn’t where I want to be. This isn’t what I want to be doing, but this is where God brought us. He is changing me through all that as well.

**Bob:** So, how are you different today?

**Shelly:** I’m a lot more patient than I used to be, I think; right? [Laughter]

**Jon:** Yes
Shelly: I’ve had to learn to let go of myself. I have had to learn to let go of spending time with my friends, spending more time with my husband than I would love to—I would love to have more time together—but this is a season of time when we can’t go on dates and be together because we need to be together / working to keep our kids safe, really.

Dennis: Jon, what about you? What have you learned?

Jon: It’s given me a picture of my relationship with God. This dawned on me one—I believe it was a Saturday afternoon when we were doing some yard work. I don’t remember the trigger, but my son became angry about something. We were out working in the yard—this was often one of the things that would help him to regain some composure—and it often took hours.

At one stage, he was screaming and signing at me a lot of angry things: “I want to go back to China. You don’t love me. You aren’t my real dad. I hate you.” I remember him picking up the garden shears and threatening me with those—and these are the ones that look like a giant pair of scissors. I felt the Spirit saying: “You need to show him that you aren’t afraid of him and that he can’t control the world, including you, with this anger.”

In the midst of that, what God showed me is—I kept hearing Him say: “You know, Jon, this is you. This is what you do when I try to love you. You rage against My love. You feel that My ‘No’s,’ are mean, and hurtful, and angry. You misunderstand what I’m trying to do in your life, and you don’t submit to My loving authority.” I began to see my core rebellious nature in a new way that I had never really seen before. It was powerful in my life.

Bob: So, is there any payoff to this in the present, or is the payoff just what you’re hoping for in the future?

Shelly: There is payoff. We see glimpse of beauty. I’ll tell you a quick story. One time—it was Jon’s birthday—in January. This is a boy who holds on to everything he has because he had nothing his whole life. I took him to the store—he had a gift card. I went to another store. He came down and he said, “Look what I bought.” It was a case for an iPhone®. I was ready to be furious—but God helped me to hold my tongue—because I thought he was trying to say, “See, when I get my new iPhone, here’s a new case for it,” because he’s always begging for more.

He said, “I bought this for Dad’s birthday.” You know, kids have these milestones in their lives. [Emotion in voice] That was a huge milestone because it was his gift card—it was his money—and he used it to buy something for somebody else.

Dennis: Speaking of payoff—if he had aged-out three days later, at 14—would he have ever seen a real family, who attempted, in its imperfection, to love him? He would have
never experienced that. He would have become an adult, if he would have lived long enough, without ever knowing a father’s love or a mother’s love.

**Shelly:** If he had lived long enough; right.

**Dennis:** To me, I think we’ve got to look past the momentary. I’m sorry—I’m not minimizing what you guys have been through—but it’s what is in Scripture. We’ve got to look past the momentary light affliction to what God has called us to do—and protect the family—not being too idealistic to think you can ignore certain things—but, at the same time, love well—just attempt to love in the power of the Holy Spirit. Keep on loving, even when it’s not responded to.

**Shelly:** That is the only way we can get through every day. That is true.

**Jon:** If I can answer that question, I think the payoff—one of the payoffs I’ve seen / one of the real benefits and redemptions in all of this—is the way that our experience, our sufferings, our challenges and difficulties have allowed us to enter into other peoples’ lives in a way that never would have happened had we not walked the same road they are walking / or a very similar road.

We’ve experienced this is many different ways—probably some of the deepest are the group of people at our church—who have also been adoptive or in foster care and share some of these heartbreaking stories and share some of these seemingly insignificant victories—but because they know / they get it—they understand that buying a phone case is world-changing. That level of relationship and experiencing God’s love within those relationships—has been tremendous for me and a real benefit.

**Bob:** Hope for Orphans—you guys are going to be doing just that—you’re going to be getting together with other adoptive families for an event in September called *Rooted*—where you’re going to talk about strategies, and what parents can do, and what families can do when there are these kinds of issues because of adoption.

I want to encourage our listeners: “If you go to FamilyLifeToday.com, and click in the upper left-hand corner of the screen, where it says, ‘GO DEEPER,’ the information you need about the *Rooted* conference is available right there. You can get more information.” Again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click the button that says, “GO DEEPER,” in the upper left-hand corner of the screen. There’s also more information about resources available from Hope for Orphans. You can order resources, online, or you can call 1-800=FL-TODAY—1-800-358-6329. That’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.” Ask about the upcoming *Rooted* conference or ask about the resources we have available for adoptive parents or for parents who are thinking about adoption.

Now, I want to give a shout-out today. I want to say: “Happy 13th Anniversary to Gar and Amber Baker, who live in Bethel Park, Pennsylvania.” Today is their wedding
anniversary. They are Legacy Partners, here at FamilyLife. We wanted to just take a
minute and say: “First of all, thank you for being Legacy Partners; and then, second, I
want to wish you a very happy anniversary—way to go—way to model the marriage
covenant and show what a strong, healthy marriage looks like. We’re proud of you guys
and we are grateful for your support for this ministry.”

We are listener-supported—couldn’t do what we do without folks, like the Bakers, being
a part of this ministry. We are grateful for you. This is the last week of our fiscal year. As
I’ve mentioned, over the last couple of weeks, we’re hoping to end our fiscal year in a
good, solid, healthy financial position. Recently, we’ve had some friends step forward
and they have said, “We want to help out.” They have agreed that, this week, they are
going to match whatever donations come in, at the end of our fiscal year, dollar for
dollar, up to $100,000.

So, would you consider, today, going to FamilyLifeToday.com—clicking the upper right-
hand corner of the homepage, where it says, “I Care,”—make a fiscal yearend donation
to help support FamilyLife Today? Your donation will be doubled, thanks to this
matching opportunity. You’ll help us end the fiscal year strong. Or you can call 1-800-
FL-TODAY to make a donation by phone. Or you can mail a donation to us. As long as
it’s postmarked by the end of the week, it’s eligible for these matching funds. Send your
check to FamilyLife Today at P O Box 7111, Little Rock, AR. And our zip code is 72223.
“Thanks, in advance, for your support,” and, again, “Happy Anniversary to the Bakers in
Bethel Park, Pennsylvania.”

Tomorrow we’re going to continue to talk about some of the hard-case adoption stories
and what parents can do so that they can love their kids well, even when things are
hard. We’ll be back with Jon and Shelly Bergeron tomorrow. We hope you can be here
as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production
team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We will see you back
tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas.
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