Bob: Mike Berry says when he and his wife, Kristin, decided they were going to adopt children, they had no idea what they were getting into.

Mike: I would say Kristin had a more realistic perspective than I did. What we didn't have was—we had no trauma knowledge—in terms of some of the trauma history our kids went through. How trauma changes the brain and how it dictates behavior—we had no clue. I was the person—I immediately went to the “super-hero” complex—the rescuer. Like, “we're going to do this!”

Now I am the super-hero that is going to swoop down and pull this child out of the dark, awful place and I'm going to be the hero—I'm going to walk into our church and everyone's going to applaud for me. I know, it's ridiculous—and a lot of people struggle with that.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, May 13. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine.

Adoption is a wonderful thing. It's also a very challenging thing, as we'll hear about today from Mike Berry. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. You know, we've talked a lot about adoption over the years on FamilyLife Today, but I don't think I've ever met anybody—much less interviewed somebody—who adopted a 24 year old. That's a pretty unique situation, but that's what we've got going for us today.

Dave: Yes. It really makes you want to hear that story behind the story. That's got to be a very unique person, which is who we have in the studio today.

Bob: Mike Berry joins us on FamilyLife Today. Mike, welcome to the program.

Mike: Thanks you. Thanks for having me.

Bob: Mike is an author, a speaker, a blogger, and has written a book called, Confessions of an Adoptive Parent. You and your wife are parents to, how many?

Mike: Eight children.
Bob: Eight kids—including the oldest, who you adopted at 24.

Mike: Yes, that's true.

Bob: Okay, hold onto that story [Laughter] because we want to start at the beginning with all of this. Where did your desire and your passion for adoption come from?

Mike: Well, going all the way back to the beginning of the story—or beginning of our story—the passion came from my wife. She grew up in a family that was an adoptive family. Her grandfather was in the foster care system—aged out of the foster care system—so she grew up with storylines of foster care adoption. As I like to say, “Her heart was tuned to adoption and foster care.”

Dave: I remember you said earlier in your book that when you were dating, she told you, “I do not want to have biological children; I want to adopt.”

Bob: This was on the checklist, like if you're not game for this, we're done.

Mike: This was sitting on our college campus—

Ann: Wow!

Mike: —in front of our library.

Ann: How did you feel about that? You're a young man—what were your thoughts?

Mike: I resisted. It wasn't because I was against adoption—it was just because I didn't grow up with it. It wasn't a storyline in my family growing up and I just didn't really know anybody who had done this; you know?

Bob: Mike, most of the people I've talked to over the years would say, “We wanted adoption to be part of our story.” Your wife was saying, “I want it to be the whole story.”

Ann: —which is pretty unusual.

Mike: It is, yes—very much so—and that was also part of it. We went to a small Christian college, and everybody is getting married. It was kind of like—this is the format—

Bob: The “MRS Degree”.

Mike: The “MRS Degree.” [Laughter] So, everybody's getting that—everybody's getting married—everybody's having children and then they're going off and working in the church. You're doing ministry. But then I have this total foreign idea thrown at me—that we're going to adopt all of our kids—it just wasn't what I grew up with. Naturally, I pushed back—I resisted.
Ann: How did she win you over? What happened? Did she win you over? Did God win you over?

Mike: Typically, my wife is very vocal. We talk a lot. We're very vocal—we're communicators—so, we talk. One of the things she did—which I thought was really interesting—was that she didn't say anything else. It just didn't come up again. It was still very much on her heart, but she could tell that I was going through a little bit of a battle. I was wrestling through some things—there were a lot of other things going on too—just a lot of insecurities I was working through.

She had somebody say to her, “You know what? You need to let this go for a while. You need to—if it's something that's supposed to happen—then you need to trust that God's going to make that happen. You need to pray about that; then just pray for him.”

Bob: Don't you be the person that talks him into this.

Mike: Yes. In all of our years of working with families, we have often coached couples, “Listen, you cannot drag somebody into this journey—because it's a calling—and when that happens, you're not entering this journey with the right intentions and the right means.” So, she did that. She just let it go. What was interesting is that there were moments—in the three to five years that followed—where people would come into my life.

One of those in particular was a guy who started off adopting before he had children biologically. Moments like that happened. When we adopted our first-born daughter, Jaala, my heart was changed—and the way I say it in the book is that God changed my heart—that's really what it was.

Dave: Before we leave that first topic—I think it's important for people to consider this—if you're trying to change your spouse, whether it's adoption—or you name it, trust God. State your heart, share your heart.

Mike: Yes.

Dave: Then let it go, because the harder you push—again, in your situation it's adoption—but really in any situation—I’m saying this so that my wife will hear me. [Laughter]

Mike: She's sitting close to you—she's within reach of you. [Laughter]

Dave: Did you see that look I gave her?

Bob: You're saying the "badger" strategy—is not a good strategy.

Dave: It doesn't work for me.
Mike: It never worked for me.

Ann: I am good at that. I am good at getting in there—

Bob: —and badgering?

Ann: Yes! [Laughter]

Dave: She is good.

Bob: You're good at it—but it doesn't work.

Ann: I've come to realize that it really does not work.

Dave: Your story is a beautiful one of how your wife did honestly share—

Ann: It's almost like she laid it down and said, “God, this is your business.”

Dave: That's hard to do—it's hard to let it go.

Mike: Yes.

Dave: And she did—even that story of that gentleman is like, “look at what God is doing. I've got this.”

Bob: Was her reticence to have bio kids—was it, “I don't want to get pregnant. I don't want the pain”—or was it philosophically-driven, like, “We shouldn't have kids—there are so many kids who need a home”? 

Mike: Yes; yes—that was the driving factor right there. She saw what her parents went through to bring her youngest brother home. She remembered the stories that her grandfather would tell...as he grew up—this was in the ‘40s, I think—around that time as he was growing up in the foster care system—so there were zero resources back then. Some of the heartache he went through—some of the struggles he went through—

Kristin has one of the biggest hearts for justice on planet earth. Way back then, she hears those stories, and it’s like, “That’s it! Right there. There are so many children who are in need—that’s what our focus is.”

Bob: Along the way—in your marriage journey—have there been moments when she's seen a pregnant woman and just thought, “Maybe once?”

Mike: We did find out we were pregnant in 2011. Our youngest son was still in foster care, and he was soon to be adopted. It was one of the moments where we both talked about it and decided let’s see what happens. We ended up miscarrying—which was
really painful—but I remember going through that and we realized that maybe this is just confirmation that what we have before us is what our focus is.

That was hard, because we still were excited, we went through all of that emotion, and then it didn't happen.

**Bob:** I want to go all the way back to the engagement. You were clearly in love with this woman. You knew this is the woman you wanted to marry—but you also knew, “This is a decision that I'm making—that I'll never have bio kids.” Were there second thoughts? Misgivings? Did you walk closer to the altar and go, “Wait. Am I going to be able to live with this?”

**Mike:** I don't know if it was a situation I was second guessing or feeling like, “Ah, maybe this isn't a good choice”, but I do—there were moments where I felt that something was missing. I don't even think I could articulate back then that this is what it was. Now I look back on that and I wouldn't even say that I was fully committed to that. It's one of those moments where you, if this makes sense, that you're on this journey and you feel like, “I love this, but I feel so distant from it.”

Then, all along the way, God was changing my heart. What I often tell people is that adoption—foster care—this journey—it's broken me from some serious selfishness. As I look way, way back in those engagement days, I was a horribly self-centered person. That was a process I had to work through. I mean, we all have to work through that—human beings have to work through that—and we still struggle with that.

**Bob:** I was going to say that you're not alone in this.

**Ann:** Which is true, even for bio kids. God works through that and tears out our selfishness—tries to. [Laughter]

**Mike:** It was just like a destroying—just destroying me. I can't even say right now that I wish we would have—because I'm so glad that we're on the journey we're on. I could not have written a better story. That's why I'm glad the pen was taken out of my hands because the story I would have wanted to write—not the story that I'm living—I'd much rather live the story that I'm living.

**Dave:** It's interesting—if you haven't read your book or know your story, you could actually hear you right now and think, “Oh, this must be an unbelievable, beautiful family—with all these wonderful days after days with all these kids. [Laughter]

Early in the book you find out—I'm going it read this—

**Mike:** Yes. Go for it!

**Dave:** —it says, “We've been to some of the darkest places ever, including”—here's just a list and I'm sure it's triple this but—
“constant rejection from a child that we would move mountains to love and serve, another child wanting to end her life at just 12 years old, a child who routinely emotionally and physically attacks our family, multiple run-ins with police with one of our kids, judgmental stares, whispers and glares from teachers, coaches, neighbors, and extended family. Feeling that we messed up, missed our calling, or failed as parents because we can't stop our children from making horrible choices.”

Mike: Yes. All true.

Bob: Well, I'm guessing before you adopted, you never imagined that would be the list you'd write someday.

Mike: Right.

Bob: Did you have the fairy tale, happily ever after—these children will be so grateful that we've stepped in and adopted them?

Mike: Oh, absolutely; yes. I'd say Kristin had a more realistic perspective than I did. What we didn't have was—we had no trauma knowledge, in terms of some of the trauma history our kids went through—how trauma changes the brain and how it dictates behavior—we had no clue what any of that looked like.

I was the person—I immediately—this is really out of that self-centeredness that I really struggled with—I immediately went to that super-hero complex—the rescuer. Like, “We're going to do this and now I am the super-hero that is going to swoop down and pull this child out of this dark, awful place and I'm going to be the hero—I'm going to walk into our church and everyone's going to applaud for me. [Laughter]

I know, it's ridiculous, but that's—a lot of people struggle with that.

Ann: I was going to ask, do a lot of people walk into this with those thoughts?

Mike: Totally. Often people message us or walk up to us after live events and they’ll say things and you can immediately see that, “Okay. You're going to hit a brick wall.” Like, do—if you're called to do this, do this. This is a calling. There's no question.

But there will be a moment when you find yourself running into a wall because you were so focused on what we like to call the “Hollywood perspective”—you know, Angelina Jolie jumps on a Learjet and flies to Cambodia. That would have been awesome if I had a Learjet at my disposal—I would have flown somewhere to bring a child home, but that's not reality for most of us. So, people get that idea that this is what it's going to look like.

The other thing that people have the misconception over is that the way I grew up—the traditional methods that my parents used. In my household and in my wife's household,
if our parents said, “No”, that was the end. No meant no. You could challenge it, but then, there’s going to be problems; right? But those traditional methods don’t work with kiddos who have come from traumatic places, who’ve been through significant abuse, neglect, gone through all of these things that we can’t even imagine.

**Bob:** I talked to a friend who had adopted two boys out of foster care. When they got them, the boys were 4 and 6 years old. They already had bio kids and he had experienced his bio kids lying to him and he knew pretty well how to deal with a lying child; right?

**Mike:** Yes.

**Bob:** He knew that you could talk to them and pretty soon the cracks in their story will reveal and their heart will get soft and they’ll confess and you can have these healing moments. He said and then I get these two kids who have learned as a life-coping mechanism, at age 4, the way you survive is by lying with impunity—with not conscience seared at all. And he said that as a parent I have no idea what to do in this situation. He said, “I was stymied with this and wondering how do you make this work?”

This is the kind of reality you’ve dealt with, not only with lying, but all kinds of issues; right?

**Mike:** Oh, yes. Yes, you have to go into this journey understanding that children who have gone through chronic trauma, starvation, neglect, abuse, witness domestic violence—the list goes on and on. They are functioning in survival mode. If our brain stem exists to help us survive, like we do things without thinking—breathing, heartbeat, movement—our amygdala is the alarm system in our brain. Our pre-frontal cortex is the reasoning and logic and self-control. If something happens, my amygdala pops, an alarm goes off, then it eventually calms down; right?

But in a child who has gone through chronic abuse and neglect and has been through chronic trauma—that amygdala stays “popped” and they’re functioning out of brain stem. You can’t look at a child in that situation and say, “What’s wrong with you?” or, “Why did you?” or “How could you?” because they simply can’t answer that—they don’t know. They’re working in survival mode.

**Ann:** One of the things you say in the book is that you had to learn how to win your child’s heart. What does that mean and what did that look like?

**Mike:** The way that I grew up—it was a very vocal household—Dad always had the last word. When I stepped into parenting, I kind of had that mentality like, “What I say is final and there’s no pushing back. What I say goes.” I prided myself on winning the argument, but all the while, I’m losing their heart. So, I’m losing this ability—this opportunity—to connect with them on a deeper level, which often times parents fall into because they see things like disagreements or arguments or those tense moments with your kids—they see those as “me versus you”.

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There are still boundaries—there are still guidelines and household rules—but at the same time, we have this opportunity to connect with our kids and enter into conversations with them, to really learn what they're thinking—especially as they grow into the teen years. Like, “Why do you feel so strongly about this?” Or maybe a situation where you could ask, “Why did you do that? What were you thinking?”—and give them permission to speak into that. The boundaries still stay in place, but you're building a bridge, instead of creating a wall—and that's key.

**Bob:** I mentioned as we started today that you're the only guy I ever met who adopted a 24 year old. [Laughter]

**Mike:** There's not many of us.

**Bob:** Before we get too far along here, tell us that story.

**Mike:** That's always one of the biggest questions we get. Like, “What in the world?” Most people don't realize you can adopt adults—you can adopt any adult—there's really no state-by-state regulations. As soon as I adopted her, I had lots of people saying, “Will you adopt me?” [Laughter] I had those requests. It got really weird, really quick.

Rachel, who is our oldest child—as a freshman in high school, we moved to Indiana to become youth pastors and she was in our youth group. She was in a youth group in a suburban area and we connected with her because she was very standoffish. She wasn't a Type A personality.

Kristin really began mentoring her from her freshman year on. Her mother passed away 2 weeks after her high school graduation, so she moved in with us in the summer of 2004. We moved her into college that fall, and she just remained a part of our family.

Then you fast forward to 2011 or 2012, she showed one July afternoon to our house and we're just having a conversation and she looks at us and she says, “Hey, by the way, I know what I want for Christmas this year.” Which was, “Okay—that's early, but let's talk.” [Laughter]

**Ann:** Yes.

**Mike:** She said, “I want to be adopted.” We looked at her and said, “Rachel, you've always been a part of our family.” She said, “I know, but I want the paper that says—I want to make this official.” We said, “If that's what you want, then absolutely.” So we went to our county courthouse and finalized her adoption. It was really cool. She was 24 at the time.

**Bob:** How many kids did you have at that point?
Mike: At that point, we had seven.

Bob: So she's the last one.

Mike: She's eighth. Yes, she's the eighth.

Bob: What did she really want?

Mike: You know, she—permanency. Her biological father, biological mother—both had passed on. She has a biological brother who she's still connected to, but I think that all of us want to belong somewhere—all of us want to be able to say, “That's home.” And you picture the child, the eight-year-old—the nine-year-old, who's just longing for that forever home. It really breaks your heart because you realize, “I don't know what that's like.”

I always had my home—and I still do to this day. I could call my mom and dad and go home at any point. But to think about that in a child—11-year-old, a 12-year-old—it's like, I don't want a Nintendo, I don't want an iPhone—I want a mom and dad. That breaks your heart right there.

Bob: You know, reading this book, I kept thinking—anybody who's thinking about adoption—they ought to read this first. This is kind of that cold slap in the face that just goes, [Laughter] “Let's just make sure you know what you're getting into”—and we're advocates here. We think adoption's a good thing—we're for it. We think people should go into it, but I've run into listeners of FamilyLife Today who've said to me, “You guys need to tell the whole story. Don't just paint the romantic picture—but tell the whole story—because it's hard.”

Sometimes you get yourself into stuff that you go, “Man, can we even survive this?” The list you read, Dave—I mean—that's a pretty powerful list.

Dave: Honestly—you know better than anyone in this room, Mike—that's just a little bit of the list. If you keep reading, that book tells you the truth. Confessions is real. I'm sitting here, just moved by the heart of God, in you.

Paul says—the apostle Paul, in Ephesians 1:5 says, “We are adopted, predestined to adoption as sons and daughters to the King.” So I feel like I'm looking at...the picture— on a human level—of God's heart. You've got the heart of God and I know it's hard and we're rebellious kids to our heavenly Father, but, way to go! It really is a calling from God and you're modeling to the world—this is the heart of the Father for us as rebellious children—and it's a beautiful, beautiful picture of the heart of God.

Mike: Thank you.

Bob: We've got copies of the book Mike has written. It's called, Confessions of an Adoptive Parent—Hope and Help from the Trenches of Foster Care and Adoption. You
can order copies when you go online on FamilyLifeToday.com—or call, if you’d like to request the book. Our number is 1-800-FL-TODAY. Again, the website, FamilyLifeToday.com—or call to get a copy of Confessions of an Adoptive Parent, 1-800-358-6329. That's 1-800, “F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

You know, I keep thinking back today to what Dennis Rainey called, “the prayer of the helpless parent”—which is that prayer that says, “Help!” We’re all in a position of dependence, whether we're dealing with adopted kids or bio kids and David Robbins, the President of FamilyLife® is here. That’s a good place for us to be; isn't it?

David: I think a lot of times it's the place God purposely puts us, where we are dependent on Him. The whole conversation today reminds me of the power of trusting God for the values that He's put in our hearts. The power of prayer. The power of the Holy Spirit living inside of us—the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. The power of dependence when He does put us in that posture and we offer ourselves up to Him and He shows up. God consistently puts people in positions where we are desperate for His power. Then He shows up in provision in ways that display His greatness.

My heart is engaged some today and I'm just thinking if your heart is racing and God is prompting something in you—whether that's prompting to explore adoption or something completely different, but He's using this conversation today to prompt you to something—I just want to encourage you to reflect on the ways God has been consistently prompting you and take it seriously. Really depend on Him and lean into it with faith.

Bob: Yes; that's a good challenge, David. Thank you for that. Speaking of challenges, I want to challenge our FamilyLife Today listeners with something.

During the month of May, we have a special opportunity here at FamilyLife to take advantage of a matching gift opportunity. Some friends of the ministry have come along and offered to match every donation we receive this month—dollar-for-dollar—up to a total of 550,000 dollars. Now that's a big goal to try to match that, so we're hoping that FamilyLife Today listeners will make either a one-time donation, or become a Legacy Partner and begin making monthly donations.

In fact, if you become a Legacy Partner, every donation you make for the next twelve months is going to be matched, dollar-for-dollar, until that matching gift fund is depleted. We're hoping that some of you will make a one-time donation and others of you will consider becoming monthly Legacy Partners to help support the ongoing ministry of FamilyLife Today.

If you become a Legacy Partner, we want to say, “Thank you,” for that by sending you a certificate so that you and your spouse, or someone you know, can attend one of our Weekend to Remember® marriage getaways, as our guests.
Again, the certificate is our way of saying, “Thank you,” for becoming a new Legacy Partner. You can sign up for that—or make a one-time donation online at FamilyLifeToday.com—or do it by calling 1-800-FL-TODAY. We just want to say thanks in advance for being part of the team and helping to make FamilyLife Today possible for people in your community—and for people all over the world.

We hope you can join us back tomorrow. We’re going to talk about what every prospective adoptive parent needs to know so they can go into adoption fully ready, with eyes wide open. Mike Berry will join us again tomorrow. I hope you can join us as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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