

In Search of My Birthmother

Today's Christian Woman (May/June 1993)

by Sherrie Eldridge

I always knew I was adopted. My parents broke the news when I was just old enough to understand. "We chose you out of all the babies in the world to be ours." Even though my adoptive parents tried to make me feel special, unanswered questions about my adoption kept surfacing within me.

As a young girl, people always asked about my nationality because I looked so different from the rest of my family. "I don't know," I would say. "I was adopted." My late teen years were especially turbulent. Conflicts with my adoptive mother were common. I often wondered if my birthmother would be as hard to get along with.

I married and soon started my own family. Throughout my pregnancies, thoughts of my birthmother pressed in upon me. What kind of a woman was she? Why did she give me up? How could a woman carry a baby for nine months, experience the miracle of birth, and not think about that child for the rest of her life? I wanted to find her and let her know I was happy.

Then, when I was 27, I turned my life over to Christ. But it wasn't until two or three years later, as my walk with God grew, that I connected the issue of my adoption with God's sovereignty. I read in Psalm 139 how I was "fearfully and wonderfully made," and that "all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." God had chosen my adoptive parents for me--He really was in control!

Yet with each birthday that passed, I still thought about my birthmother--and wondered if she thought about me. But it wasn't until two years ago, [1991] after my adoptive parents had died, that I decided to search for her. I struggled inwardly with my motives, wanting to make sure they were pleasing to God.

Initially, my husband wasn't in favor of my search--he was afraid I would be hurt. Other extended family members chided me for wanting to open a "can of worms." Despite my family's opposition, my desire to find my mother only increased.

One Sunday, my pastor spoke on Ecclesiastes 3: "There is a time for everything...a time to search, and a time to give up." That phrase, "a time to search," stood out. After much prayer and counsel, I was convinced my desire was God-given--and that this was my time to search.

Before her death, my adoptive mother had left behind several clues: my birthmother's last name and place of residence at the time of my birth. I hired a professional to aid in my search, and before long, received additional information by obtaining my sealed birth certificate.

A few months later, I traveled to my home state to work intensively with the adoption worker. After two days of combing city directories and state library and health department records, we learned which state my birthmother resided in. I felt numb with disbelief! My birthmother was no longer a fantasy, but a real person with an address and phone number! The adoption worker paved the way by making the initial call. "What do you want me to tell her?" she asked. "Tell her that I'm married, have two grown daughters, and am back in college full-time. Ask her about my nationality, who my father was, and her medical history." Then the Holy Spirit prompted me to add, "Tell her, 'Thank you for giving me life.'"

I waited nearly two hours at home while she talked with my birthmother. Finally, the adoption worker called back. "Was it good or bad?" I asked eagerly. "Both," she said. "Your mother wants you to know she is a woman you can be proud of, but she doesn't want to talk about your father because you were conceived in rape." I was stunned! I had never considered rape as the reason my birthmother gave me up for adoption. My heart sank. "She sounds just like you," the adoption worker added. As she spoke, her call-waiting suddenly clicked in. "I bet that's your mom. Hold on!" After what seemed like an eternity, she said, "Sure enough! It's your mom, and she wants you to call."

My hands trembled as I pushed the buttons. A gentle-sounding voice said, "Hello." "Catherine*, this is Sherrie, your daughter. I never thought this moment would come!" Our first conversation lasted into the wee hours of the night. We agreed to exchange photos and began thinking about a possible reunion. For the remainder of that night, I lay sleepless in bed, pondering the turn of events.

Suddenly, I had a new family: a mother, half-sister, and half-brother. As morning dawned, so did feelings of peace and completeness. While I still had unanswered questions about my father, I now had a history! First Corinthians 2:9 came to mind: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

Within days, my birthmother and I had planned a reunion to be held in two weeks. We exchanged photos, and in a subsequent conversation, she told me, "When I look at your sweet face, I know you are mine." She told me she had purchased a diamond-studded gold pin for me, and I compiled a photo album for her. We finalized our plans for our reunion. As the plane lifted away from the airport, emotion engulfed me. I always believed God loved me, but on this particular day, his personal touch was unmistakable! That he would reunite me with my birthmother was beyond my wildest dreams!

My birthmother, half-sister, and stepsister met me as I walked off the plane. When I saw her run to me with arms outstretched, it was a moment like none other. Some adoptees refer to it as the moment of birth. I vacillated between laughter and tears. As is common during reunions, I couldn't stop staring at her. The resemblance between us was remarkable. My self-esteem took a giant leap. I didn't feel "different" anymore. The first night we talked, I learned my mother had lost another baby two years after I was born. She told me she wondered if God was punishing her for giving me up.

Although I tried to stay sensitive to my birthmother's wishes and avoided asking about my father or the circumstances of my conception, as our visit progressed, our budding relationship became increasingly strained. When I gave her my photo album, I thought it would be an opportunity for me to tell her about my life. Up until that time, she had asked next to nothing about me. But she quickly thumbed through the pages and put it away, saying politely, "Thank you very much."

Later that afternoon, she said, "This is going too fast for me. I've had it." "What do you mean?" I asked, biting my cheek as my bottom lip began to quiver. "This is very difficult for me," she said. "You don't know what a pressure this has been on me." By the last morning of our visit, I felt uncomfortable leaving the photo album with her. As we drove to the airport, I asked her if she would like me to take it back home. That triggered a well of emotion for her, and she blurted out, "You don't know how much you have hurt me. You don't know how hard it is to give up a baby. There wasn't a day that I didn't think about you." I could feel warm tears streaming from my eyes. I reached into my purse for a tissue. By the time I boarded my return flight, we were both exhausted. "I love you, Catherine," I said, "and I'm glad you're my mom." "I love you, too," she responded, her eyes welling with tears.

Two days after returning home, I sat in church and listened to our pastor preach on how the presence of Christ in a believer's life often brings division between family members. After church, my husband waited patiently as I went from friend to friend, telling them my wonderful reunion story and showing them the pin my birthmother had given me.

Later that afternoon, I called to thank her again for the visit. "I just called to tell you I think you're wonderful, and that I had a great time at your home last week." "Thank you," she said, her voice emotionless. Suddenly, I had the sick feeling that something was wrong. By the end of the conversation, she announced she wanted nothing further to do with me. I was stunned and crushed.

Despite the anguish I felt at this turn of events, I later realized that because Christ had endured the ultimate rejection for me--His death on the cross--his strength could carry me through the loss of relationship with my birthmother. While I had been on the telephone with Catherine, Jesus had stood with me, making his presence known. As his child, I was intimately united with him--and he would never leave or forsake me. At that moment, the words of Isaiah 49: 15 comforted me: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will never forget you." God felt that way about me.

Reunion with a child given up for adoption--especially one conceived in rape--can send a birthmother into a grief process that has been long repressed. Suddenly my birthmother not only had to deal with meeting the child she had given up--but also with the pain of reliving the circumstances of my conception.

Within a few days, I wrote a letter to Catherine, thanking her once again for giving me the gift of life 47 years ago--and for letting me back into her life, if only for a short time. I affirmed my desire for a friendship with her and invited her to reestablish contact with me. That was eight months ago. As of yet, I have heard nothing back from her.

As I look back on my search, many things come into focus. First, I needed to face the pain of my past so I could live fully in the present. As an adoptee, I was subconsciously searching for the mother I lost at birth. For me, never knowing her would be far worse than knowing her and being rejected. Finding her put a missing piece of my puzzle into place. I also saw vividly

how God is able to bring good out of evil.

Some say that no good can come from rape--that abortion is the only answer. But God proves again and again that he is able to bring good out of any situation for his children, and the good he brought out of this was me. I know there are no mistakes, no illegitimate children, in God's kingdom. I am his child and he planned my life, even though my birthparents didn't. My heavenly Father knew all along what was best for me, and in his protective love, removed me from an undesirable situation.

But was God unfaithful in keeping the promise from I Corinthians 2:9 he had given me the morning after I found her? At the time, I thought that verse applied to my future relationship with my birthmother. While that vision has died, in its place has come something far better--a deeper union with Jesus.

At times, it seems that all that's left of my relationship with Catherine is the little gold pin she gave me. But in reality, there's much more: her warm smile; her gentle, soothing voice; the way she tilts her head; the squared jaw; the tiny earlobes. Even though she put me out of her life, no matter where I go, whenever I look into the mirror, I see a reflection of her.

My 47-year search is now over. It ended, not in the arms of my birthmother, as I expected, but at the feet of my Savior. For this, I will always be grateful.

**The name was changed to protect the woman.*