



A Stormy Night in Bucharest

Angela's Story

by Bob Mardock

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An adage says that God protects fools and children. Perhaps in our case we qualified for the first category on behalf of the second. I will explain.

By the year 2000 International Family Services would have assisted with more than 1000 adoptions from Romania, Russia, China, Vietnam, India, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala, but in March of 1991 IFS was little more than a dream, and my wife Carol and I were “innocents abroad,” on our way to post-Ceausescu Romania to see for ourselves if the horror stories about the conditions of orphans were true, and, perhaps, add another member to our family.

I suppose my portrayal as total novices is not quite accurate since by this time we already had adopted Marcie from Korea, and both Carol and I had been overseas. But we had never been to dark and stormy Bucharest, and certainly not at night with no hotel reservations. I remember the feeling of vulnerability for me and my money belt.

Our story begins in the fall of 1990 with the late night TV news show 20/20. Reporter Tom Jerrel had just returned from Romania with the horrific expose on the tens of thousands of orphaned children who had been hidden away in dilapidated children’s homes throughout dictator Nicholi Ceausescu’s Romania. The Romanian revolution of 1989 had just pried open the despot’s doors so the world could begin to see the dark secrets of the evil attempt to create the new meaning of “working class” as orphanages overrun with children, wards of the state, were being warehoused to eventually become the human equivalent of worker drones,

a kind of state-sponsored slavery.

I watched the report that night knowing that if I awakened Carol I would also reignite the ongoing dialogue about adopting another child, and I had made up my mind that my house was already full with our five kids.

Like many who experience adoption first hand, we had become the local experts on adoption. Orphans and adoptions are very warm and heart tugging subjects, and adoption conversations are sure to come up almost anywhere, especially if your adopted child doesn't look like the rest of the family, as was our case with Marcie. All a Caucasian parent has to do to strike up an adoption conversation is to load your beautiful Asian daughter into the grocery basket and go shopping. Conversation with strangers happens. If you are seeking families who will adopt orphan children, it's a great marketing technique. In our case, Carol and I had told our story many times, and a lot of people began to trust our adoption instincts – well, actually Carol's more than mine. So, it wasn't at all unusual that the next day Carol's colleagues at the Jr. High asked if she had seen the previous night's report.

That evening Carol gave an account of the day's teacher-room adoption conversation and, of course, I was questioned as to why I hadn't awakened her, and, as expected, our adoption discussion lit up anew. When 20/20 aired the following week with a Romanian-orphan follow-up, Carol was very much awake and with deep compassion was compelled to action. The need was undeniable.

Within days Carol had researched the Romanian adoption process and was already becoming one of the experts, not too difficult a task as very few people really knew anything about adopting in this unknown Eastern European frontier. She also had found that her interests were being

echoed by countless others around the United States. Our world was abuzz about the Romanian orphan crisis.

At the time I was assisting a friend in the launching of a new international trade business while also serving as a pastor in the Southern California Orange County suburbs. One of my new acquaintances was a Romanian businessman. *The Los Angeles Times*, looking for background information for a story on Romanian orphans, contacted my friend, who referred the reporter to us, a family known about town with a deep interest in the plight of the Ceausescu's cast-offs.

Little did we know what we were in for after the article was published. There, above the fold and wrapping the entire Wednesday "coupon" edition was our picture and story. Nowhere in the story was our phone number offered, but our names and city where we lived were, and within hours of publishing our phone started to ring off the hook, calls coming from everywhere in the United States. For almost three weeks 5-10 people a day found us to say, "If you're going and you know what you are doing, maybe you can help us, too." When we did travel a few weeks later, we couriered files for a number of families, having assured our new friends that we would do our best to see what we could do to make their dreams a reality, too.

As our day of departure neared, Carol made all the final arrangements for our visit, including garnering the help of an adoption facilitator she had made contact with in Romania. This is where the story begins to take some very interesting twists.

You may have surmised that I eventually did “give in” to the whole idea of adopting another child. And another, and another. In fact, Carol and I ended up with 10 kids, six of whom are adopted. And even then I’m not telling the entire story. Along the way we lost little four-month old Lyndsay Joy to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). She makes child total eleven, but it’s usually awkward to explain all of that. Most who have lost a child to premature death don’t take the time in their birth-order recitation to say, “Oh, we have 11 kids; one died leaving us with only 10.” It’s odd enough to say you have 10 kids.

But, God has a way of taking the ugly stuff in your life and turning it into something good if we let him, even death. Years later, when we began to work with adoptive couples who had lost their dream of becoming parents through infertility or any number of other reasons, it helped us empathize with their grief as we remembered the deep heart ache of our own loss.

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It was cold and wet when we landed at Bucharest Otopeni that stormy early spring night in 1991. Patches of snow were still on the ground, and the temperature inside the terminal wasn’t much warmer than it was outside. Everything about the airport looked uninviting – dark, dirty and out of order. We would soon discover that light bulbs were a desirable commodity in this destitute land, not to mention expensive to replace, even for the country’s premier international airport. Young soldiers with AK-47 rifles were stationed all around, appearing to be nervously waiting for some kind of outbreak, from what or whom we were not sure. All week long we

would feel the oppression of a broken big-brother police government not quite sure if it was still under a communist dictator's control or whether it had really broken free from the chains of its many years of domination.

The dilapidated old conveyer eventually spewed out our luggage with the help of non-uniformed middle-aged men who we weren't sure we should trust to handle our stuff, but we soon figured out it was a way for a fortunate few to make a buck, taking tips from the wealthy from far off lands.

We began to look for our name among the many hands holding signs with block letters, waiting to meet up with their prearranged traveler. Finding no placards with the name MARDOCK, we moved our belongings to a safe place in the dingy terminal just outside of baggage claim, and I began to seek out our adoption guide, the one in whom we would put our hope and trust for the next seven days.

I took numerous laps around the crowded room, looking for our name and asking likely suspects, most who did not speak English, if they were waiting for us. No one was expecting the Mardocks, and no one admitted to being the person we were anxiously looking for. I checked back with Carol frequently, giving an update on my failures.

The terminal area began to thin out as the midnight hour approached. We hoped beyond hope that our guardian would come bursting through the doors with apologies for running late, and whisk us off to safety away from our fears. He never showed. He never came. To this day, after 30 or more trips in and out of Romania working with scores of adoption facilitators and government officials, spending years in the inner workings of US and Romanian humanitarian work on behalf of the children, we never met the man; we never found him. We had been forgotten.

There are times in life when we all feel abandoned, scared and insecure. That's what we experienced that night. What a humbling way to start a ministry to orphans, abandoned children whose very existence is described by words like "unwanted," "cast off," "throw away," "a burden on the state." That night we had the security of having each other and a money belt with enough US dollars to get us through for a few days. There was security in having a US passport, something that we would have greater and greater appreciation for through the years. And, as Christians, we had the security of knowing our heavenly father knew what was going on that night, and we were certainly begging him for help as our dream for a successful week of discovery was crumbling within the first hour of being in the country.

As the number of travelers and those meeting them dwindled, two men, maintaining their own placard, patiently waited for their weary travelers to identify themselves, and finally it became apparent that there were no more unidentified passengers. These guys looked very Romanian, or perhaps Hungarian – what did I know – but as I continued to tour the facility seeking our man who would never show, my attention was drawn to these men. The sign they held was inscribed with an American looking surname, but by this time it appeared that we were the only Americans who were left.

There is a travel disorder that we have observed many times though we've never seen it written about in a psychology textbook. We call it cross-cultural stress syndrome, which is the overwhelming sense of not being in control of your surrounds due, primarily, to being dropped into an unfamiliar culture. There are a lot of symptoms, like the overwhelming desire to get back on the airplane, or like wanting to hunker down in your



hotel room until the taxi arrives to take you back to the airport, or like choosing a McDonalds hamburger rather than eating at one of the local restaurants – before heading back to the airport. Every part of the person’s desire is to get out of the country. While we have become what most people would call “seasoned travelers” (well over 100 international trips between us), that night we experienced our own version of cross-cultural stress. So, when these two men – one who spoke English, poorly, and the other obviously secret police or perhaps part of the Romanian mafia – made their way across the room toward us, our fight or flight instincts rose dramatically.

The English speaker introduced himself as Gabi and his friend was Bebe. Gabi told us, in broken English that he noticed that whomever we were looking for had not come for us, and – how odd – the Americans they were waiting for to take to Gabi’s home had never shown.

Our conversation went something like this:

Gabi: “Why have you come to Romania?” (Romanians tend to be direct.)

B & C: “We are here for adoption.”

Gabi: “We know about adoption.”

B & C: “Wow! What a coincidence.”

Gabi: “We are here to pick up a woman who was coming to Romania to adopt a child.”

B & C: “Oh, really.”

Gabi: “Perhaps we can help you. We have a friend who knows all about adoption. Perhaps we can introduce him to you.”

B & C: “Well, there is this man who is supposed to pick us up here at the airport, take care of us, who knows all about Romanian adoption.

Maybe you know him?"

Gabi: "No, we have never heard of him, but perhaps our friend knows him. We have a business proposition for you." (Romanians always want to do business.) "Here is our proposal. You need a place to stay tonight and we have a place waiting for the lady who has not showed up. We propose that you come to our place for the night, you pay us money, and tomorrow we shall try to make a phone call to your friend. Perhaps he had car trouble tonight. What do you say to our business proposal?"

What other option did we have at the moment? Now, well past midnight, we had no idea if we could even get a cab, and if we could, where would we go? "Take us to a hotel please!" Sure. A quick scan around the terminal told us that Romania had not yet caught on to airport hotel kiosks with "hot phones" for shuttle services.

We took a leap of faith and did our business arrangement with two total strangers, who could have been ax murderers, or Romanian con artists holding up fake signs just waiting for one of the wealthy bleeding-heart adoption types from America. What a great scam – take them away, rob them, and dump them off somewhere on the side of the road.

Sometimes faith-steps come easier when there simply are no other alternatives. For us our "safe" choice would have been to sleep somewhere at the airport, and that was not much of an option.

As we loaded up our gear, a second car and a new face appeared at curbside behind us. It was explained, somewhat cryptically, that they expected they would need two vehicles for the American's luggage. Apparently these businessmen knew that Americans on an adoption quest didn't travel light. In our case, traveling lighter than the average American, our luggage was able to be crammed into our vehicle, and the other car and

driver disappeared somewhere into the night. Now it was just us, Gabi and our driver Bebe, if those were really their names.

All the commoners drove Dacias. Dacia is a Romanian carmaker eventually purchased by Renault a few years later. It has actually become a respectable car by Eastern European standards, but in the days of Ceausescu communism the Dacia was only a slight step up from a Yugo. And like ancient Chevys in Cuba, they never die. Well, they might die on you a few times on a road trip, but a proud Romanian mechanic can resurrect a Dacia 50 times over. It's what you do in a country that is broken. Since the body style had not changed for decades, everywhere we went we saw these little sad-looking national work mules with barely enough room for four adults with winter coats, holding the remaining luggage that did not fit into the trunk. We felt like sardines. This would be the appropriate time to mention that Carol has issues with claustrophobia. Add that and all the aforementioned uneasiness regarding our new acquaintances, the smell of gas from an unknown source, as well as cross-cultural stress syndrome, and you're bound to have problems, either real or perceived.

The "big" airport is in the suburb of Otopeni just outside Bucharest. As we jetted down the dark, gloomy and wet airport thoroughfare on our way into the city, it began to rain again, and for some unknown reason Bebe suddenly yanked the steering wheel to the right and skidded to a messy stop on the side of the road. Was this the end of the road for us? Carol and I looked at each other with faces that cried out for help and continued in our prayers. Disaster seemed ready to strike when a second car, the one we had seen at the airport, appeared out of nowhere, slamming on its breaks, hitting the road embankment spitting slush and mud as it

came to an abrupt halt in front of us. The driver was out of his car in a flash with a menacing looking contrivance in his hand, obviously a weapon. This *was* it. We were goners. Not only would our precious money belt soon be gone, but perhaps our very lives. And, there was no one around this late in the black of night to witness this international incident about to take place.

Our senses were on high alert as the intruder drew near, and we braced for what would come next. He brandished his weapon as Bebe eased his window down, quick words were exchanged, and, what we thought to be a tool for evil was transferred – to the windshield of Babe's car. Then, and only then, did Gabi, in labored English, explain to us that in Romania people steal windshield wipers, and Bebe and the other driver, who was Bebe's brother-in-law, shared one wiper between the two cars. Being good businessmen, our hosts wanted us to have the better driving experience. How thoughtful. There was another similar encounter further down the road, this time to pass off a bag of fresh bread and to bid each other good night; then the mystery car disappeared, for good. Breath.

As we neared the capitol city, we began to make out the foreboding silhouette of the city skyline. Much of Eastern Europe, having been satellite countries of the former Soviet Union, made use of the soviet style high-rise apartment buildings. In a US city, like New York, multi-million dollar high-rise apartments present an image far different than soviet style buildings. Housing for most city dwellings in Bucharest resembled more like low-income housing you might find in the Chicago or Detroit projects, buildings five to 10 stories tall, packed in all over the city. Between World War I and World War II, Bucharest was known for its beauty, the "Paris of the East" or *Micul Paris* - "Little Paris." Now, we know Paris, and this was no Paris, especially on this particular night. I would later describe my first

impression of Bucharest as Gotham City with a layer of mud. Eventually, we did get acquainted with Little Paris and saw where the resemblances were, but my first impression of this imposing place was a caricature of George Orwell's 1984: communist, cold, and uninviting.

The outside appearance of Gabi's apartment complex that night did little to change our belief that we had entered a broken and backward land. After dragging our belongings from the trunk, we made our way into the tenement housing – light bulbs missing – and onto the four-foot by four-foot elevator. We could feel cold air from somewhere below gathering at our feet from the hole in the floor bringing with it the smell of rotten garbage. There was no light in the elevator. By now Carol's claustrophobia made her want to climb the walls, or throw up. The decision was made that Bebe would come up by way of the stairs as there was no more room in our small prison. Gabi squeezed a flashlight from his pocket to light up our cell as the elevator slowly churned and bucked its way to the fifth floor. When the doors finally opened onto a grey concrete hallway, no carpet, one 40-watt light bulb, we just about exploded. What had we gotten ourselves into? An entire week of this? How would we ever be able to make it? Take us back to the airport and get us out of here!

We made our way to Gabi's apartment. Bebe soon followed and we waited as Gabi rapped quietly on the door, speaking softly in a language that was unfamiliar, as if giving a secret code to say that the marked Americans were here for whatever the devious Romanians' plans were. Someone inside spoke, Gabi said something, the door opened. And, just like that, we were dragged inside by warmth that I can still feel to this day. There was beautiful Coca, Gabi's wife, a huge and loving smile on her face, welcoming us into her home and her life. In this land of so little came the

richness of joy, warmth and fellowship.

Gabi kissed his wife, as did Bebe, and we were ushered into their small living room and immediately offered tranquility, safety, reassurance, something to drink and a late-night dinner of schnitzel. We were already benefiting from our business agreement with these middle-aged new entrepreneurs. We soon realized that this was an upstart bed-and-breakfast, inner city Bucharest style. That night was just the beginning of the remarkable tale that led to the adoption of Angela Carina.

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The world of international adoption has a history reminding one of stories of the wild west and pioneers traveling across the planes of North America. The first sojourners who risked all and survived found themselves celebrating the blessing that came from their hardship. After the trail had been blazed, then others came along, following the route that had become more and more trodden. Soon the trails became roads, which became highways, and eventually speed limits and rules were established to ensure that the highway was maintained and the potholes filled for every-day travel. The story we tell about our Romanian adoption may never be duplicated. We were pioneers. Today, when we share the story of Angela's adoption to prospective adoptive parents, we warn them not to expect the same experience. For instance, when asked how long it takes to adopt a child from the country of interest, we'll often say, "Well, figure that when you provide us with a completed dossier (all the documentation needed for an adoption) then we can establish that you just got pregnant." It takes nine months for a full term pregnancy. We have found that to be the rule of

thumb for an international adoption -- give or take a few months, and usually it's not less than nine months. And, we say that with a smile. Then we'll admit that sometimes, due to circumstances that vary, we will see adoptions completed in a time frame shorter than the "standard" incubation period.

But few have ever completed an International Family Services adoption in the time it took us to adopt Angela.

That said, our first full day in Romania ended in discouragement. Our experienced adoption facilitator we had hoped to put our trust in was nowhere to be found. No phone answered, no way to research his whereabouts, and no luck meeting him in all the places we might have had the chance to run into him. This man was our hope for identifying children available for adoption, but after our futile attempts Gabi and Bebe decided it was time to put us in touch with their adoption connection, the man for whom they were providing adoption B&B client services. By this time we had met Bebe's beautiful wife Elena, who was equally a ray of sunshine as was Coca. We were hitting it off, and Gabi and Bebe apparently came to the conclusion that we were a worthy cause to invest in. They must have called in sick for a week from their places of employment because they devoted themselves to our pursuit with a 24/7 passion that hit us like a wave of blessing. These two men, and their lovely wives took us in, and by the time we left Romania we would have trusted them with our own children. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

The men made contact with their adoption "boss," who gave them some direction and encouragement, but told them that he was tied up with other work and would have very little time to personally work with this unexpected and hopeful couple. But he gave our friends some pointers, and

turned them loose to help us find a child.

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We went to Romania to adopt a boy. At least that was the plan. And we found ourselves in orphanages where we met a lot of boys, and girls, and saw first hand the squalor and miserable conditions that we had seen on TV a few weeks before. We were introduced to children who were abandoned at birth. We met children who were orphaned because their parents had died. We discovered first hand truth to the rumor that there were so many children in these state-run institutions that babies were “stacked” two and three children per crib, some cribs made with chain-link fence, then painted and chewed on by countless innocent children looking for hope.

We also met children, in fact, the largest percentage of orphanage children, who really were not true orphans. We learned that untold numbers of children had been deserted by parents who simply could not feed another mouth, so they were given over to the “system,” as broken as it was, to raise their children. It was assumed that at least the State had food. On a subsequent visit to Romania I was approached by a desperate father who pleaded with me to adopt his youngest because he could not provide proper care. “Please, come meet my son; you will like him. He is very handsome.”

The tragedy is that the true orphans were the more fortunate ones, as crazy as that sounds, because at least they could become legally free for adoption. It was the children whose parents came to visit once or twice a year who were more likely to grow up in the institution and never be adopted.



We were also exposed to the reality that many of the children we met simply did not have the relationship with a caring adult who would touch, hold and love them on to emotional health. We saw first hand the “rockers,” the children whose developing minds had found a way to stimulate themselves by rocking back and forth for hours, a tell-tale sign that these children needed a lot of help and hope. They needed parents to love them and hold them.

It surprised us to learn that the warehousing of these children was unknown to the regular folks of Romania. When the ill-fated orphanage system of Ceausescu was exposed, it horrified not only the world at large, but the citizenry of Romania as well. The general populous had no idea. They had been lied to by a government of deceivers and were made to believe that the state children’s social safety net was functioning adequately.

During our week of exploration we made multiple trips to the adoption committee, the hub for all adoptions in the country. This was the designated central authority charged with the responsibility of managing the affairs for adoptions from the state-run orphanages. The idea was that hopeful parents interested in adopting would register with the office and would then be told about children who were available around the country. The prospective adoptive parents would then travel to the region, meet the child(ren), sign acceptance agreements with the local authorities, travel back to Bucharest, register with the courts and complete the adoption. In actuality, it was much more involved, but in its simple form it was supposed to work that way. We quickly learned, however, that there were no guarantees that the identified child would even still be in the orphanage when the hopeful got there. We continually ran into would-be parents who

shared their heartbreaking stories about the broken system, and we met many who had been in the country for weeks, traveling from region to region, often by air, trailing these adoption leads. The lack of organization was distressing.

We grew deeply concerned that we would never find our new child and that we would fail those back in the US we had promised to help with their adoptions. We didn't have the time, or the money, to make this process a marathon. Even though there were tens of thousands of children needing homes, and even though we had seen the need with our own eyes and had met scores of orphan children, we were beginning to think we would travel back home with an unfulfilled dream.

One afternoon, while walking the downtown streets of Bucharest, we had a "chance" encounter with an American. An alert individual can learn how to spot Americans in almost any country. There is a unique "American" look. You see it, not only in dress, but also in the way Americans carry themselves. This particular day a 30-something American spotted us and struck up a conversation. He was a big burly Christian missionary with a huge heart living in Bucharest, helping to save the lives of homeless street kids, orphans and runaways who did not have the "luxury" of living in the relative safety of an orphanage. He had met a few Americans who had come to Romania for adoption and was intrigued with our story and us personally. He would love to help us, but all the adoption red tape was something that kept him at arms' distance from really getting more involved although he had come along side a couple of families for moral and spiritual support. He drew us out and we began to share our frustration. I was intrigued with him, his story and how he had come to this place at the edge of the world. He graciously opened his heart, and we soon

figured out that this encounter was about us and not about him.

This little street meeting was not by chance. It was a “God moment” for us. There on the streets of Bucharest, with people all around us, this “street angel” enveloped us in the love of Jesus, pouring into us a compassion and empathy that we desperately needed right then. There, with God and the streets of Romania looking on, he prayed for us, and when we parted we knew we had been affirmed by our Lord. Our Father in heaven, the God who had adopted us, not only knew our names, but he knew and cared about our circumstances, and had sent his message of love and assurance for us.

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One of the people groups of Romania is the gypsy, the Roma. Through the years we would be exposed to a new kind of bigotry, at least to us. There were thousands of children in the orphanages of gypsy descent, and if there ever was a throwaway child, these were its very embodiment. In the US gypsies are an enigma from the “old country,” a group of people who stay to themselves, a culture within a culture. To the Eastern European, the gypsy is a thief, a liar, and one not to be trusted. When Gabi and Bebe learned through their bossman that twin gypsy girls had just been born at the maternity hospital, and the birth mother was ready to relinquish, we went to visit. We assured our friends that gypsy children were okay with us, and after polite discussion in Romanian between the hospital staff and the boys, we were soon introduced to the chief of staff of the hospital who wanted to interview us and give us his professional opinions. We let him know that we would love a child of gypsy descent and asked about the

health of the twins who had, we found out, been born a few days premature. The esteemed doctor, having compassion on these innocent hopeful parents, gave us an Eastern European medical opinion on gypsies. He explained that in a gypsy's genetic makeup there is a missing chromosome, and this caused gypsies to be liars and cheats. They couldn't help themselves. We were strongly advised, in his professional opinion, not to adopt a gypsy child. He just couldn't see these nice people ruining their lives making a terrible mistake. (This was advice from the same medical community who had helped perpetuate the AIDS epidemic among the orphan children through the use of dirty needles. One of the boys we identified as legally available for adoption was, in fact, infected with the AIDS virus that pronounced his fate to be an orphan for the rest of his life. So very sad.)

The twin girls were beautiful, and in spite of the bigoted opinion of the "esteemed" doctor, we let Gabi and Bebe know that we would like to meet with the gentleman, their business associate, the "boss," who would manage us through the legal processes of our adoption of the twins.

We went to Romania looking for a boy and found two girls. Well, we decided we were open to that, and, in fact, got very excited – thrilled! It looked to us like our adoption plan would really happen. We would finally be introduced to the man who seemed to be in the know. Bebe and Gabi made arrangements for a meeting the next day.

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His home was nice, at least by Romanian standards. While it seemed most the city folks lived in the tall boxy grey apartment complexes, this guy

had a real house, and when we were ushered into his courtyard his wife was immediately about making us at home with flavored soda water and cheese. His private garden boasted grapevines that would produce their delicious fruit candies he would use for his own house wine. We were made to feel at home in the outdoors garden, and we soaked up the spring rays of sunshine that were finally breaking through after the storm that greeted us when we entered the country. In this lovely setting we could see the vestiges of the bygone years of Little Paris.

Of course, on our minds were not the glory days of Romania but the twins, who by this time we were now anxious to adopt. We got down to business right away. What the business was, we really didn't know, but we believed this was the man who, with the help of Gabi and Bebe, would walk us through the process, manage the legalities, administrate our adoption on our behalf, and help get our new daughters home. And, of course, we also were anxious to discuss the possibility of soliciting his help for the families back in the US who also wanted to adopt. The bossman spoke good English, and this made us feel even more comfortable. We were silently praying for God's open doors and help as we entered into our discussions. But, sometimes God's answers to prayer are closed doors.

One of the first matters of business was finalizing the financial arrangements with the boss to complete our adoption. The day before, when we met the twins, we had learned what the hospital fees would be, what the general legal fees would be for the attorney to do everything "by-the-book," and what the fees would be for the services of the pro who would also work on our behalf. But, as we discussed these matters further, we began to get the feeling that there was something kind of "slick" about this guy, like he had some shark in his DNA. Then he dropped the bomb shell that there was

another family who was also interested in the twins. He reminded us that these girls, while preemies, were healthy and very desirable to Americans, in spite of their DNA. Then he told us that the other family would be speaking with him later on in the day, and that we probably needed to produce some “insurance” that we would get the twins instead of the other family.

Were we hearing this correctly? Were we being told that to ensure that we got the girls that we would have to offer more money than the other family, or we would lose the opportunity of adopting these beautiful babies? I had flashbacks to the cattle-yard auctions where the prize entry went to the highest bidder. This felt weird and wrong. Was this a racket? Had we gotten sucked into an adoption scam? Were there other couples in Bucharest that same week that had also been introduced to the twins? Were we up against one other hopeful family, or two or three? And what part did Gabi and Bebe play in this game? Had we been buttered up by their warmth and hospitality so we could be dragged into the web of something illegal? *Was* this illegal? How did this boss man come across these twins anyway? We had heard of “baby buyers” who went around the poor neighborhoods setting up business deals with destitute pregnant girls who would relinquish their babies to anxious adoptive parents. Any way that we considered it, this appeared to be crooked.

Romanians, when in passionate discussion, tend to do business loudly. At least that was the impression we were getting from this business meeting. We could tell that Gabi and Bebe were beginning to get agitated. There was much bantering we did not understand, and we became outsiders looking in on an excited exchange about us while not knowing whether they were talking about our money, our potential adoption or other adoptive

families. Perhaps it was all three. But when two unidentified gentlemen appeared in the patio area and joined the conversation, something happened that pushed Gabi and Bebe over the edge.

The conversation stopped and we were told not to ask questions, not to argue or resist, but we were to follow Bebe and Gabi NOW out of the garden area and were promptly ordered into the car. We quickly sped away. What was that about? What had we done? What just happened?

While Bebe navigated the Bucharest back streets Gabi was finally able to tell us what had just happened. It seems that our fears of impropriety were not unfounded and our new adoption guides had just learned a lot more about their boss and his associates. When the two unknown gentlemen showed up and engaged the conversation, men they suspected as criminals, Gabi and Bebe knew they needed to get us out of there and away from danger.

We had just witnessed a gathering of the Romanian mob. Gabi and Bebe, up until now only providing transport and housing services for the organization, had just learned how deep the corruption went. Our protectors and friends knew this was bad, and they did not want to get us wrapped up in what they now understood.

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We were spent. The end of our week in Romania was rapidly approaching and we were at a loss. We didn't know what to do except to accept defeat and go back home to our own beds and the security of a way of life we understood. We would chalk our experience off as a memory to reflect on through the years and try to understand what God's purpose was

in taking us through what we perceived as failure. At least it would be an interesting story to tell our friends and family. We had gone to Romania and survived, just barely. In about 36 hours we would be on our flight back home. We had a few hours to enjoy our new friends, lick our wounds, and figure out what to tell the other families who had put their hopes in us for their adoption dreams.

Then, when it seemed as if the trip was mostly failure, the unexpected happened. Late that afternoon Gabi received a call from a Bucharest attorney with whom we had spoken earlier in the week. She asked if the American couple had found their adoptive child or were they still looking. She explained that she had just been contacted by a community social worker that knew of a birth mother with a young baby girl she was no longer able to care for. Perhaps the American couple would like to meet the child. Frankly, we were so demoralized, tired and suspicious at this point that we decided that we really were not too interested in getting our hopes up again. And, besides, we had come to Romania to adopt a boy, and the loss of the twin girls had brought us back to our senses. There really was little time to run after another dream only to lose again. We were done and on our way home. Gabi thanked the attorney, we had a great evening dinner with our friends, and we slept.

The next morning we were back up and ready for our last day in Romania. In 24 hours we would be on our way to home sweet home. We were enjoying a breakfast of salami and Turkish coffee when the attorney called again, explaining that the American couple who were holed up in Gabi and Coca's apartment needed to meet this baby girl. The attorney was insistent, and we didn't know what to think about her persistence.

Sometimes God uses nagging people to get your attention.



The baby girl, about five months old, was the second child of an eighteen year old teenager who had informed a Bucharest social worker that she had made the difficult decision to drop the baby off at a local orphanage that week. The unwed mother had been through this before and knew she was not in a good place in life to raise this baby. The social worker had offered to help the mother who, in turn, contacted this particular family law attorney who knew about the American couple at Gabi's place. She insisted this child was "exceptional" and we "really needed to meet the baby." Gabi checked again to see if we had any emotional energy left in us. We still had a partial day to kill, and, after all, we were there for orphans, and soon this baby would be an orphan. Maybe we owed it to the child, to ourselves, or to one of our hopeful families back home. Arrangements were made to visit the attorney and the baby that afternoon.

I don't think we really knew what to expect as we made our way that chilly afternoon into the heart of Bucharest to the shabby and neglected tenement dwelling. We figured we would meet the attorney, the baby and perhaps the mother. We soon would find out it was all three.

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Bebe parked the car next to the dilapidated building and we met the matronly attorney on the broken sidewalk. She patiently gave instructions for the meeting with the mother and child, and we made our way around the corner and into the bowels of the rat-infested courtyard where trash and garbage was plentiful. We were led up an outside flight of stairs to the second floor that faced inward toward the courtyard. The attorney rapped on one of the apartment doors, and it was opened by a teenage girl, who

graciously invited us in. The door was closed behind us, and we were greeted by the smell of dirty diapers and mildew, in a room about 12 feet by 12 feet. There were two beds, a chair, and an ancient rust-stained sink that had a trickle of water running from a broken faucet that would not shut off. On the floor was a single electric portable burner for cooking that doubled as the only source of heat for the room. Its frayed electric cord was plugged into the only visible power source right above the sink. The burner was hot, undoubtedly in an effort to make the guests feel warm and welcome.

Bebe stayed outside to watch the car and to make sure all was safe while spending time in the underbelly of Gotham City. The rest of us, Gabi, Carol, the attorney and me all crammed into the little space. I immediately made it my job not to let Carol stumble and step on the hot-plate stove or to light her pants on fire.

The meager quarters were shared by two teenage girls, one who was pregnant, the other, obviously the mother we were meeting, and, one baby; THE baby.

Introductions were made and brief pleasantries exchanged. The baby was introduced to us and was immediately stripped down to her birthday suit so we could see that she was all there. It was obvious that the child was healthy and taken care of as best as could be expected. The manor in which mother handled the child made it obvious that there was a love and respect for her little one. The baby wet herself and mom used her hand to clean up the mess before she strapped on the used diaper again. The remains of the wet on the blanket were swept off onto the floor.

Carol and I felt so awkward. We were here to see if this infant, a beautiful child, might be a baby for another family, or perhaps for us. Over the past few hours we had come to the place in our hearts that, if this would

be another God moment in our lives, we would seriously consider adopting this little one. But, right then there was a whirlwind of emotion. The infant was gorgeous, the circumstances so surreal, and this teenage mother seemed to know exactly what was going on. She was preparing to give up her child. How could it be that we were standing in this place on the other side of the world looking at a little person who could become our daughter?

By now the babe had been placed in Carol's arms, and Carol was melting. I was melting. Not only was she beautiful, she was bright eyed, responsive, showing all the signs of health. She seemed perfect.

"What is her name," Carol asked.

"Carina, Angela Carina," was the mother's reply.

Angela -- an angel.

Oh my. What's going on here? This is so -- so bizarre, so wonderful. We could read each other's thoughts. Could this really be happening?

The attorney turned and asked if we had any questions. Questions? Of course we had questions, but were they the "proper" questions? What do you ask in these kinds of occasions? We were face to face with a self-determining 18-year-old girl about to give away her second child. You better believe we had questions.

Our heads were swimming. The mother was dirt poor. This was the week she planned to turn her child over to the local orphanage. The child, now five months old, had started to scoot around on her own, and there was little safety in the room, little resource to take care of the needs of her child, let alone herself. The teen mom (I will name her Bianca for the purpose of our story) made about \$10 a month selling newspapers. What little public assistance she received from the community care nurse was what the baby got to eat, or drink, in this case nasty Eastern European baby formula.

Questions? Yes, we had questions. How did Bianca get pregnant at age 16 and then again at age 18? Was she a girl of the streets trying to make a few extra bucks, getting pregnant twice because of the lack of available birth control afforded to a poor kid? Where was her family? Didn't this young girl have a loving dad who would fight for her? Had a lifestyle ended her family connectedness causing her to be a cast off? And, why was she living in the backstreets of Bucharest of all places? Why live in such a difficult place? Why not in a home for unwed mothers? Why not in a cute little farming community where she could lean on the care of simple country folk? Why was this place so broken and unable to help a girl who had made poor choices? Where was the church? A loving group of Christians should be helping. Why did the baby need to suffer? Was the baby suffering? It looked to us like this child was loved. Didn't this mother love her child? Of course she loved her child! How could you not fall in love with this perfect little soon-to-be orphan? And, how could a loving mother possibly give away her beautiful Angel to these American strangers?

We must have asked appropriate questions, and we must have said meaningful and loving things to young Bianca. We like to think that we are intelligent and thoughtful in our conversation, so whatever we said must have made an impression. Not only were we there to meet the birth mother and her child, but we were there to be interviewed by this sweet, beautiful and loving 18 year old. She wanted to know about our family and us. Were we loving to each other and loving to others? Did we have the means to take care of her daughter for the rest of her life? She watched how we interacted with each other and listened to how we spoke to each other. She wanted to know enough about us to make a gut decision for her daughter's

future. We knew she had already made the decision to relinquish her beautiful Angel, but she wanted to know in her heart, you know, that women's intuition thing, that she was making the right decision for her baby. I admired this young lady.

The verbal and non-verbal exchange went for about 15 minutes. Then, from the attorney, through Gabi's translation, came one of the most emotionally charged questions we have ever been asked. "Do you want the child? Bianca has decided that you will be wonderful parents for her Carina (often the middle name is used as a name of endearment), and she wants to know if you will take her child. Will you adopt Angela as your own? You may go outside and discuss this if you wish."

As we stepped out of the room and out into the brisk afternoon air overlooking the courtyard dump, we knew this was a moment we would never forget. We were already smitten, not only by Angela, but by the tenderness and vulnerable nature of Angela's young mother. We said very important things for about five minutes. Of course, neither one of us can actually recall all of the conversation, except that we said yes to each other and agreed that this was the child God had brought us to Romania to meet and adopt.

We went back into the dingy room and gave our answer, and Bianca began to stuff all of her daughter's earthly belongings into a single plastic shopping bag and prepare her precious little child for her new life journey.

Then came the shockers. The attorney announced that the other girl, the pregnant roommate, would be giving birth in the next few weeks (she was obviously great with child), and would we consider adopting her baby when the time came?

Then, Bianca pulled out a photograph and presented it to us. It was a

picture of her first daughter, now about two years old. As a 16 year old, she had placed her first-born in the care of a state-run orphanage and recently had heard that there might be a family from England who was considering adopting her, but, if that adoption didn't go through, did we think it possible that we might adopt her toddler as well so her two daughters could be raised together?

We had already come too far in our faith walk to say no. For some reason it was simple to say yes to her again. Earlier in the week, what seemed long past by now, we had considered twin infant girls, why not these sisters? The attorney explained that she did not know the legal disposition on the sister, but she would be happy to research the case for Bianca and for us. It would take her a little time, but she would check it out and let us know in a few days after we got back home.

We went to Romania for a new son, and instead we were adopting a gorgeous bright infant daughter and perhaps her beautiful sister. And, what to say about the other baby who was on the way? A boy? It was too much to think about. We knew we would have an interesting next few weeks running all the possibilities through the emotion grinder.

These remarkable, life-changing events had just taken place in a mere 45 minutes. We all walked down the stairs together and out to the street where Bebe greeted us with a warm smile of affirmation. All was safe in Gotham. Bianca cradled her beautiful Angel, hugging her baby tightly, tears in her eyes. We came to the car and little Carina was given her last kiss by her brave young life giver, then lovingly and tenderly, she was placed into Carol's arms. Both mothers hugged and cried together. The attorney cried. I think I saw tears in Gabi and Bebe's eyes. I was on a guy-mission to make sure all was recorded on film. My tears would come later.

But my heart was racing as we got back into the car. The attorney and birth mom walked back toward the filthy courtyard and disappeared together. We drove away with our new treasure just a few short hours before we were to catch our flight back to the US.

We had a lot of family time, and business, to attend to that evening.

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By early flight time the next morning we had placed Angela in the foster care of our new friends Bebe and Elena who took their own leap of faith that we would be back to finalize the adoption and immigrate our Romanian daughter home to America. As mentioned previously, when we share the Angela story to prospective adoptive parents we tell them that they cannot expect to complete their adoption in the short time it took us to finalize Angela's adoption. Most adoptions take considerably longer. That said, one month later I was back in Romania to finalize the paper work and bring our little one home. Bebe and Elena were thrilled, and heartbroken, to see me. They had fallen in love with Angela.

We believe it was a God-directed opportunity that even before we finalized travel plans for our first visit to Romania I already had my ticket purchased for a second Romania trip. I had been invited by the head of a Christian mission organization to go with him and a small group of leaders on a short exploratory tour to open a mission work in Romania. Carol and I knew in our hearts that when Dwight called I should go. Little did we know that God had a plan even greater than our own and this mission.

I did, in fact, return one month later. The mission delegation stayed in the northern part of the country in the region we learned was where

Bianca's family was located – Transylvania. We laugh today when we remember that Angela's first teeth to come in as a toddler were her eyeteeth, her vampire fangs.

The Romanian attorney had completed her part of the adoption process, and soon after I arrived back in country I broke away from the group, drove a rented vehicle to Bucharest in the South, met up again with Gabi and Bebe and their special wives, and picked up our daughter. After a harrowing adventure navigating the finalization of the adoption and immigration process, (a foretaste of things to come in the work of International Family Services) making friends at the American Embassy in Bucharest, and barely making our flight (a story for another time), daddy and daughter found ourselves on the nearly empty Lufthansa flight through Germany where we would meet up with our missionary friends bound for the US. Before we took off, however, while awaiting our ascent, that is when I shed my tears.

What God had done in our lives, providing us his divine direction and helping us accomplish a dream that he had planted in our hearts, was overwhelming. God had led us, protected us, provided for us. And out of this Angela Carina adoption adventure God planted a vision in us that would soon become International Family Services (IFS).

As we rose from Bucharest Otopeni Airport the words of a song came to mind – “You are so beautiful to me” - and I found myself quietly and tearfully singing to my new baby. Somehow I knew this would not be my last time in Romania.



Within a few weeks we learned that Bianca's roommate had given birth to a healthy son, but that adoption for us was not to be. Neither was the adoption of Angela's older sister. The rumored English couple had adopted her at about the same time we were finalizing our adoption of Angela.

Through the years we would make many trips to Romania. We estimate that between the two of us we have been in and out of Bucharest Otopeni International Airport over 30 times doing our adoption work in Romania and making friends and developing many more relationships along the way. It seemed only natural that our oldest son, Rob, and his wife Rachel, would eventually spend two years in Sebes, Romania, as English teachers with Peace Corp in the local school system. I guess you could say that Romania has become part of the fabric of Mardock life.

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## Epilogue

On one of the many subsequent trips to Romania I happened to be visiting the Transylvania region of Romania and was scheduled to have dinner with the regional vice governor, a respected woman of political stature, who was also in charge of the orphanage and child welfare system in the state. During our dinner business meeting, I brought up a matter of personal importance. I explained that Angela, now nine years old, had family in the region, that a family from England had adopted her biological sister and that we had reason to believe the adoption had been processed through her regional office. Was there any way that I could find out if my

information was correct? My host suggested that I come to her office the next day, and she would see what she could find out for me.

The next morning I was ushered into a large warm government office, and while I was sipping my coffee and engaging in small talk, an assistant located the record of an adoption that matched the name and approximate birth and adoption dates that we had uncovered. I looked through the documents, and everything checked out – birth mother's name and the name of a daughter relinquished for adoption to a family from England, and it matched the information we had.

The assistant turned to a document that had since been bound in book form that listed the name and address of the adoptive family, and I respectfully requested a copy of the information. I was provided a piece of paper on which to write, and I quickly scribbled the name and address of the English family. Back in my hotel room later that day, I made a phone call to Carol, who was home in the US anxiously awaiting my report. Within a few minutes Carol located a phone number in England, made a call and awkwardly introduced herself and the nature of her call. Yes, the family had adopted almost 10 years earlier from Romania and they, too, had heard the story about another biological sister adopted by a family in the US. The moms agreed that they would share the exciting news with their daughters. The next day Adi in England called Angela in California, and soon the sisters met for the first time, voice to voice, the pre-teen with the sweet English accent and girl with the distinctive Southern California speak. Carol said it was a lot like eaves dropping on a conversation from the movie *Parent Trap*.

Angela and Adi became pen-pals and through the years would talk with each other by phone on special occasions. When Adi was 20, and

Angela 18, Adi announced that she was going to take the Mardocks up on their long-standing invitation to travel to the US for a visit over Christmas and New Years. The sisters enjoyed the amazing company of each other for three weeks, did the obligatory day at Disneyland, and Carol and I, and the rest of the family, gained a new daughter and sister. The local newspaper heard about the special event and printed a front-page feature article on the sister reunion.

Today, the age of Facebook has allowed the trans-Atlantic relationship to continue with daily updates and regular pictures. Adi is an actor/singer hoping for her big break in London. Angela will soon graduate from Southern Nazarene University in Oklahoma where she is involved in student government and as a mentor/teacher for junior high girls. She plans to be a child and family counselor.

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### **About Bob & Carol Mardock and International Family Services**

Bob and Carol Mardock are the founders of International Family Services (IFS) and Family Hope International, adoption organizations that have helped to find homes for over 4000 orphaned children. Bob and Carol are the parents of 10 children, six of whom are adopted, and 13 grand children, including two who are adopted.

Gabi and Bebe became the first in a long list of IFS in-country adoption coordinators around the world. IFS has helped place children from 14 countries and the U.S. Romania was the first.



Birthmom Bianca (not her real name) with Baby Angela and roommate.



The hot plate, the source for cooking and heating.



On the sidewalk outside of the apartment. Bianca, Angela and Carol.



Back at Gabi and Coca's home, Carol and Angela getting acquainted.



Our new friends, Gabi, Coca and son, a ray of sunshine.



Bebe, Elena and daughters, Angela's foster family while we completed the adoption.





ABOVE: Angela with Mom and Dad (Bob & Carol).

LEFT: Angela as the flower girl at sister Kelleigh's wedding.



ABOVE: Angela in the middle with sisters Christina (L) and Hannah (R).

RIGHT: Angela and Adi. Angela raised a Mardock in the U.S., Adi raised in England.



## **Designed For Adoption**

Often when I write I find that my fingers do the thinking. I don't always know what I'm going to say until the concepts flow from my heart through my fingers and onto the page, (or screen as the case may be). You will note that faith words and God talk came out in Angela's story. After reading a final draft a friend suggested that perhaps the reader would be interested to know more about our faith and the spiritual dimension of adoption as we know it. With that in mind I invite you to read on.

Faith in God means many things to many people. Some believe the universe, the world and people are simply a colossal accident. Big Bang, evolution, that's it. For most this idea is cold and meaningless. Naturally, people turn to some form of spirituality. We have come to this place ourselves. God has become more than a spiritual being who impersonally infuses hills, trees, people and the universe.

We have discovered that God is not aloof. He is not distant. He doesn't engage with us only when he decides to come back from celestial journeys around the universe to check in when he wants to see how Bob & Carol are doing or when things in the world get to be too much of a mess. To us, faith in God has become a moment-by-moment personal walk with our heavenly Father who loves us so much he cares about our daily affairs. We have found that his eternal design is to infuse in us the essence of himself so that we will reflect his wise and just order, his goodness, in creation, in our families, in our society and in our world.

All of us, however, at one time or another and to one extent or another, have said to God, "You go your way, I'll go mine. I'll do it my way." In doing so we became alienated, not only from God, but also from

his original design for the human race. And we all have become, to a greater or lesser extent, morally corrupt, fractured and both victim and victimizer. Sometimes this results in children who are trafficked for human exploitation or become victims of abuse and even homelessness, whether at home or abroad.

There is an enemy of man whose mission is to put a stop to God's original design for us all. It is his obsession to destroy all that is good and right. This Satan roams the earth looking to take down the innocent as well as the guilty, and anyone he can victimize. All one has to do is to look at the world around them to see how the spreading of his lies has led to a world filled with sin and destruction. In fact, the Bible refers to this enemy as the Father of Lies. The sad part is that our decision to buy into the lie has led us to spiritual death.

We think that surely, God designed something better. As a matter of fact, he did. Check out what God tells us in the Bible. *"Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure."* (Ephesians 1: 4-5)

When we went our own way in life we turned our backs on God. We pushed aside what he wanted to give us as a loving father. We said no to him and yes to the Father of Lies. This decision separated us from God. God tells us that we have all have sinned, we have all fallen short of his original design. He goes on to tell us that our sin has led to spiritual death (Romans 3:23; 6:23). It's the ultimate ugly in life. We will die for our sin, unless we take God up on his invitation to adopt us as one of his children. We were designed for adoption.

In the world of physical adoption there is a time when the courts adjudicate, or finalize, the adoption. If the child is the age that the court has determined is mature enough to make their own adoption decision, the child, by law, is interviewed by the judge and asked whether or not they agree to be adopted. As you can imagine, most children jump at the chance. It is their hope in life, their dream, to have a mamma and a pappa. But, sadly, some children say no to the invitation to be adopted. For whatever reason – fear, willful stubbornness, the desire not to break with the life they know, or a lack of faith that the prospective parents really have their best interest at heart – whatever the reason, some kids say no to adoption and choose the life of an orphan. These are some of the saddest moments in our experience as adoption advocates. We know all too well what life without a mom and dad will mean for that child.

Spiritual adoption is very similar. God extends the invitation for us all to become part of his forever family, but he graciously allows us to decide whether or not we want him as our father. We can choose to remain spiritual orphans.

We love this eternal truth; *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16). God wanted so badly to adopt us into his family that he was willing to pay the ultimate price for us. He gave up his son Jesus, so he could adopt all who would say yes to his heavenly adoption agreement. In essence, Jesus agreed to pay the debt we owe by living the life we should have lived, dying the death we should have died. He was alienated in violence and bloodshed from his father so we could come home to our father in peace and security. And once restored to his family, we can join him in the restoration of families, society and creation. Adoption of



children who need a home is just one part of that restoration project.

God offers all people the invitation to become his children through adoption. The adoption agreement, the legal contract, so-to-speak, is our whole-hearted decision to receive his act of absolute love, this free gift of adoption that leads to life eternal. We are amazed that Jesus not only died for us, but was resurrected for us, he came back to life, proving that he has the legal rights and power to finalize this spiritual adoption. Then he shows us how to live in a way that brings honor to our heavenly father.

As adopted children in God's family our desire is to follow him where he leads us and to bring honor to his family name. It is the least we can do as his adopted kids. We know our father, the one who adopted us out of spiritual obscurity, gave us his name, gave us a purpose and gives us only the very best for our lives.

### **God's Adoption Terms and Promises From the Bible**

*Ephesians 1: 4-5 Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure.*

*Romans 3:23 For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard.*

*Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*

John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*

1 John 1:9 *But if we confess our sins to him [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.*

Adoption – what a beautiful picture God provided so we could understand his loving and merciful heart. Unlike earthly fathers, the heavenly father has no limit to the number of children he wants to adopt. Bob & Carol have no plans to add more children to our family, but God says it gives him great pleasure to adopt us and wants all of us in his family. Years ago both Carol and I made the decision to accept the invitation to become adopted children of God. We said yes to being adopted into his family. If you have not accepted God's invitation to be adopted, you can agree to your adoption right now, whatever your age.

Read the verses above again and agree in your heart. If and when you do you will be part of God's forever family, too. We would love for you to join us as brothers and sisters in God's eternal adopted family.

God bless you.

Bob Mardock

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