

Season 4 | Episode # 18

An Abortion Survivor's Story of Adoption and Redemption

Sasha Carpenter

Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship... and sharing practical ways that you can include people with disability in your church and community.

Sasha Carpenter is joining us today to share God's amazing story of hope and redemption after she survived a failed abortion and was adopted into an incredible family who loves Jesus. Sasha now serves as an adoption advocate, a voice for the voiceless, and a report writer. Sasha is also part of Ting Ministries, an organization started by her parents and her 10 sisters that serves orphans and vulnerable children around the world offering support and adoption counseling. It's a pleasure to speak with you today, Sasha. Welcome to the podcast.

Sasha Carpenter:

Thank you so much for having me.

Crystal Keating:

Well, it's great to be with you. And I'd love to start this conversation by hearing about your amazing adoption story.

Sasha Carpenter:

Sure. Oh my, I could fill a book I think with each one of our adoption stories. But to begin with mine, I was adopted from Russia in 1998 when I was 17 months old. And my family, when they adopted me, my parents traveled to Russia and when they brought me home, they did not realize that I have a really mild form of cerebral palsy.

And that became apparent, being home several months, I just wasn't developing physically quite like I should have. I wasn't walking. My adoption really opened their eyes and hearts to the plight of special needs orphans. And so, I was an only child for about 10 years actually.

My parents said that they were planning on one and done, and then the Lord had other plans. And so, when I was 10, we adopted my sister Ellianna from Taiwan. We knew when we adopted her that she had cerebral palsy, a little bit more moderate than mine. But we did not know when we brought her home that she was also profoundly deaf.

You know, an international adoption. I know this is the case with many families that I've spoken to. You just really don't know for sure what a child's medical history is. You might know some of it and there might be some surprises along the way. But it was really Ellianna's deafness that continued to open our hearts even wider, beyond cerebral palsy, to really any special need. So

then after Ellianna was adopted in 2007, we brought home my sister Avi from the Philippines. She had spastic quadriplegia, which is the most severe form of cerebral palsy, as well as club feet and she also, when we brought her home, had a urinary catheter as a feeding tube. And then after Avi, came Lina.

Lina was adopted from Bulgaria. She weighed 12 pounds at five and a half years old, which is just, you know, shocking, to hear and to see. She again has a mild cerebral palsy and what you might call institutional autism. So had she grown up from birth in a typical family, you know, and gotten the proper care and love that a child would normally receive, she wouldn't have developed what looks to be autism.

It's just a result of having spent those first five and a half formative years, in a really neglectful orphanage, unfortunately. But she is doing remarkably well. She is walking and growing and just beautiful at 14 years old now.

After Lina, I have two sisters from Ukraine, Rachele, and Olyvia. We adopted them at the same time in 2014. They have cerebral palsy, as well as Rachele, had very severe brain injury and epilepsy, and Olyvia had mild form of spina bifida. And she came home at nine and a half years old actually wearing size six-month clothing. So, she had severe and continues to have severe failure to thrive, you know, where the body, eventually just due to lack of care, lack of nutrition just completely stops growing and emitting that growth hormone.

So today she is 17 years old and probably when most people see her, they think she's about three size-wise. But she has been a blessing to people that have met her. She's just almost like a little doll, you know? And so, I think it's really just a blessing for people to meet her and just to hold her and to love her. Every life has value.

And then after my two sisters from Ukraine, we went to China for my sister Annie, and we did a miracle adoption in a complete total of six and a half weeks from start to finish. Those that are familiar, know that China adoptions, when they were occurring, usually take a year, two years, even more. We had no documents, no money. And the Lord just moved mountains. And we were able to officially complete the adoption paperwork in country and adopt her eight hours before she turned 14 and would've been aged out, oh my, and unavailable to be adopted. Oh, praise God.

Yes. Yes. It's interesting, you know, we go from Annie's six-and-a-half-week adoption back to China for two more of my sisters, Hope and Brittan and that adoption process took two years. Hope and Brittan also have varying forms of cerebral palsy. And then most recently in 2019, we brought home, Christina "Mei Mei" from Bulgaria. I also have another sister adopted from Russia who's very close to my age. She does not have any special needs, but her name is Anna.

Crystal Keating:

Sasha, I am just floored right now. I did not know all these details and I wanna get to your story. But I can't help but think about your parents. How did they go from one and done to let's have a full tribe of girls with significant special needs? Okay. Who are your parents? Tell me everything.

Sasha Carpenter:

Yeah, my parents' names are Brian and Stephanie Carpenter. I have to go back here a little bit. When my mom was nine years old, she read Joni's book. And she got to the part of the book where Joni describes having the diving accident and drowning in the water and crying out to the Lord for someone to save her.

And, and her sister turns around at that moment, jumps in and my mom says that when she got to that passage and she said, whatever God that is, that Joni cried out to, that's the God I wanna serve. Mmm amen. And so, from nine years old she was a believer. But she was also a gymnast, and it was really at the time of famous Soviet gymnast Nadia Comăneci. Oh yeah. And Olga Korbut. It was around that time she thinks there must have been a feature about the plight of Russian orphans, cuz at that time of course Russia was still open for adoption. And so, she had this dream that she would adopt a little girl from Russia. So fast forward, she met my dad and she said, you know, if we get married, we're gonna adopt from Russia. You know, how do you feel about that?

And, sure enough in 1998, they went to Russia. And there's so much to my story in that whole adoption process that the Lord just demonstrated his faithfulness and so I was an only child for 10 years. But my mom was working in international adoption during that time and that is how she found my sister Ellianna. And it was her that really kind of opened the heart to any special need that there was. And then we had found my sister Avi, also through adoption advocacy.

We were just burdened by this idea that when you adopt and you advocate for adoption, you save one child. You know? Yes. Right. And what about all the others that are left there?

Crystal Keating:

Oh, I totally feel that. Yeah.

Sasha Carpenter:

Yes. So, we found her orphanage in the Philippines and her orphanage really became the start of Ting Ministries, by developing that relationship with an orphanage in a very Muslim-populated area of the country through a local pastor that would come in, deliver these supplies, share the gospel and the Lord really opened some amazing doors.

Crystal Keating:

That is incredible. And so that kind of allowed your mom and your parents to live out that call of like, okay, it is the one, but it's more than the one mm-hmm and this is how we can do that. Yes. Oh, that is incredible. Well, Sasha, let's go back to you. You survived a failed abortion, and your parents adopted you. So, bring us back to what was happening with your birth mom, her family? How did God rescue you from this? How did you survive this?

Sasha Carpenter:

Yes, this was a really incredible story, which we only knew the second part to, if you will, in 2018. As I had shared, I was adopted in 1998, my parents knew, and I had a mild form of cerebral palsy.

What was always very interesting to us was that my cerebral palsy was so mild. It affected mainly the right side of my body. So, I had physical therapy, you know, and it affected my

walking on that side. But you know, I have no cognitive delay, as is perhaps typical with children who have CP.

And we just wondered how my form of cerebral palsy came to be so mild. We also knew from my adoption documents that my birth mother in Russia was very young when she had me. She was 17 years old. But we didn't really know more than that. Growing up, my adoptive parents were always very open and honest with me about where I came from, and they really instilled in me that my birth mother loved me and that she made the best decision that she could. And that is what brought me here and to look at my adoption story as a blessing, rather than as a source of grief and trauma. You know, and there may be those things in any adoption story or in anyone's life, really, you know, it's not just adoptees who struggle with those things.

We all have things that bring us grief in life. But by pouring into me the truth that my birth mom made the best decision that she could for whatever reason and that I should be thankful for that decision, and thankful for the life that the Lord has given me. Having those truths instilled in me from a very young age just let me to, as an adoptee I think, have a different outlook on the questions of identity and birth family. Yes. Um, then a lot of adoptees that I see today.

My parents always instilled in me, you know, Sasha, we will support you if you want to look for your birth family, but only will we support you only if you go with the intent to be a blessing. Wow. And not to get answers to questions for yourself. Wow. You know, why did you give me up? Why didn't you want me? All of these things which were natural questions, but they turned it around and they said only if you go with the intent to be a blessing, as the Lord would want you to will, we really support you in that. And we believe the Lord will in turn, bless that reunification, should it ever take place. Wow. And so, you know, having that foundation from my adoptive parents, I wasn't really particularly interested in looking for birth family for many years.

In fact, I wasn't particularly interested in even learning Russian until we adopted my sisters from Ukraine. That would've been when I was about a junior in high school. And so, I decided after that trip, I did wanna learn Russian. So that's how I ended up at Bucknell because they have a Russian studies program.

Oh, my goodness. Um, and when I was there, my friend Maria Came. And she was the Russian teaching assistant for two years. She came from Russia and helped to teach the classes. And when she was living here in the states, she had a YouTube channel, for her friends and family back home. And so, towards the end of my junior year in April of 2018, she asked me, hey Sasha, I think it'd be really interesting if you would be willing to do an interview with me for my YouTube channel in Russian. Cuz, I think my friends back in Russia would find it interesting to meet someone who was adopted from Russia first of all, but who now speaks the language, you know, having not learned it when she was little.

So, I said, oh, sure. And in the interview, it came up that I was adopted, and I'd love to meet my family, one day if that would ever happen. And after the interview, we were talking and she said, do you mind if I help you look for your birth family? She was leaving in a few days from the campus.

And I said, oh, sure. And so, I gave her some of the information that we had from my adoption documents. Neither of us, I don't think really expected anything to really come of it.

But that was a Saturday evening. So, Sunday afternoon after church, she comes over and she just says, you know, I have some questions for you and some updates. She sits down and she says to me, so I found your birth mom last night in less than an hour. And I think my first words to her were, no, you didn't.

And she said, yeah, I did. And I've been talking to her since last night and she really wants to meet you.

Crystal Keating:

Okay, Russia is a very large country. How is this even possible?

Sasha Carpenter:

Yeah. So that was my next question to her. And so, it turns out that Maria went onto basically a form of Russian social media that's like our Facebook. Okay. Um,

So, Maria typed in some of the information that we had and she said one profile came up that matched. And she looked at the picture and thought to herself, this has to be it. And there's really a resemblance between myself and my birth mom. And as it turns out, I have a stepdad and a half-sister in Russia as well. And the resemblance between myself and my sister is just, it's amazing.

Another thing that the Lord just worked together so beautifully Maria, as a native speaker of the language could have this first interaction to be able to fluently explain everything. I'm just so thankful that I get to share this experience with her.

Mm-hmm. Maria was able to explain that she was a teaching assistant at a university in the United States. And she said, based on information that we have, we think one of my students in my Russian class might be your daughter.

And yeah, she said, oh my goodness. Yes, that's me. And she proceeded to tell Maria the entire story. I mean, she remembered that my name was Sasha, how big I was, the incubator that was in the hospital room, the whole story, and even details that I hadn't told Maria but knew to line up with my story and super specific details that just was made it abundantly clear along with everything else and the physical resemblance that, that this was my birth mom.

So that was Sunday afternoon. So, I think the very next day on Monday, I created a social media account and had a video call. As soon as Maria shared this information with me that Sunday, I should say I, I called my adoptive family. And they were just so excited along with me.

I mean, we were just amazed. We were speechless. People often ask, well, how does your adoptive mom feel about you having a relationship with your birth mom? Right. It's so beautiful. My adoptive mom was genuinely so excited. And it is like they are sisters. It's truly like I have two moms, that our families have known each other our whole lives, even though it's only been, you know, about five years at this point,

And I really think again, going back to what I was saying earlier about the foundation of truth and love that my adoptive family laid out for me, in regard to birth family, you know. It was my adoptive mom that prayed every day for 22 years, up until that point for my birth mom, not knowing her at all, prayed for her every day. Wow.

And I truly think that it was those prayers that continued to just lay the foundation for the beautiful relationship that exists between not only myself and my birth mom, but our entire two families.

Crystal Keating:

Sasha, you have the gift of faith because even just to see that your mom laboring in prayer for so many years, without even the hope that she may ever know. You know, some of us pray for people and kind of come to this place of contentment like I may never know until I'm in heaven, what actually happened. Mm-hmm. But what a gift that God gave your family and your birth mom to know you.

Yes. Okay. Did she ever tell you what happened, the circumstances? Yes. What caused her to think about abortion?

Sasha Carpenter:

So, it was that first video call that I had on Monday, like 24 hours after this had all transpired, that I had that first conversation with her. And in that conversation, she filled in the rest of the story.

What the documents did not tell us and what I found out was that not only am I an abortion survivor, but it was not my mom. My mom did not want to have an abortion. She at the time was being raised by a single parent because her own mom had passed away when she was 13.

So that would be my maternal grandmother had passed away. And so, my grandfather, my mom's dad was raising her and my uncle by himself. And you know, in the nineties in Russia kind of a really tough time, poverty-wise in the country.

She really loved my birth dad. But there was another side to the story, which is that my mom's family was Russian Orthodox. And my paternal side of the family were Muslim. So, there was a religious divide between the families. My paternal side of the family did not like my mom, didn't want anything to do with her when they found out that she was pregnant, even though she really loved my father. And she concealed the pregnancy for many months, intending to keep me and raise me as her own.

And then my grandfather found out that, you know, his teenage daughter was pregnant, looked at the situation that they were living in, looked at how difficult her life would be trying to raise a child in the conditions that they were living in, and made the decision for her as her dad that she was going to have an abortion. So, the pain of the abortion itself, on top of that, it was something that she did not want to do. No. And so when, when I was born and survived, she actually stayed with me in the hospital for several days to a week.

She pumped milk for me. And then one day she came back to visit me, intending to take me home because I was alive and she was gonna take me home and, and raise me in Russia and went into the hospital room that I had been in, and I was gone. And she went to the doctors and the nurses and said, what happened to the little girl that was just here?

I just visited her yesterday. And they told her that I had died. Oh, no way. Yeah. Yeah. And she didn't know that I had been transferred to my orphanage which as it turns out is like a couple blocks away from other biological family members and then adopted at 17 months old. And she said that she always had a feeling that what they had told her was not true.

Crystal Keating:
Mama's intuition.

Sasha Carpenter:
Yes. Yes. So then fast forward and, she eventually met my stepfather, and she had my sister, Lara, and one of the things that she told me, it turns out that my sister, Laura, was also born with, a very mild form of autism and for years, she told me through tears that she felt my sister being diagnosed with autism, and these were her words, "That was the cross that the Lord gave me to bear for what happened to you." And she carried that for 20 some years. And for me to come into her life the way that the Lord orchestrated it and to tell her not only that I was thankful for how things had transpired and for wanting to give me life.

And I'm thankful that the Lord had chosen to protect my life, you know, not only to extend that love and forgiveness to her. Yes. But to then show her, all of my siblings who have special needs, that my adoptive family sees special needs, not as a cross to be burdened and shouldered, but as a blessing. Amen.

It has just slowly over the last years that we have known each other, now there has just been a change in their hearts as they see this walked out in our lives. And now each of them, my stepfather, my mom, and my sister, they all have personal relationships with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Crystal Keating:
Praise the Lord. That is his redeeming work. Yes. And every point. And how many years went? Yes. God is always working, even when you can't see it. Yes. This is a perfect example of that.

Sasha Carpenter:
Yes. And if I can add one more thing to what you said there. The Lord is always working, even when we can't see it, you know, and how I talked about my mom praying for years. And I really think that it was those prayers, unseen at the time, but laying that foundational work, for this relationship to happen. Additionally, my mom shared with me in that first conversation, a little bit about what had happened, after I had been adopted.

She shared with me after whom I am named. So, my Russian name is Alexandra, which is how you get Sasha. That's the Russian nickname for Alexandra and my grandfather's name was Alexander. So, she named me in honor of my grandfather. And I would've been about five years old living here in the states when my grandfather became very ill. As his health was declining, he would go out for walks around the village. And he would see children running around, and

people would come up to him and, and speak so harshly to him saying, what a fool you were. And they would say to him, you could have had this.

You could have had a granddaughter running around and to enjoy. What a foolish decision you made. It just breaks my heart to think about it. But months went by and when he was on his deathbed, he asked my mom to forgive him for making her go through with that abortion procedure.

And so, there was forgiveness and redemption in their relationship and restoration in their relationship. The Lord was paving a way through the greater, and more restoration and redemption to come that none of us could fathom at the time. So again, just a beautiful testament of the Lord's sovereign hand in situations, and how none of it, you know, would be possible had I not gone with the intent to be a blessing. It would've destroyed my mom, rather than being an amazing source of forgiveness and encouragement and that redemption, you know. So, to any adoptees that are listening today, you know, I just want to share that with you.

What I've learned through my story is that we really have no idea. Adoptees especially, we have no idea what led our birth families to make the decision that they did. And maybe we won't ever know. You know, some of my sisters that are adopted, we're not ever gonna know their birth families.

And I recognize that other adoptees that have met their birth families, their stories have not had the happy endings that mine has had. But we can still love them and honor them for giving us lives. Yes. And not pass that judgment because like I said, you don't know.

And so, turning that into prayer for them rather into bitterness and anger against them. That is how the Lord is going to work in your life as an adoptee in their life. And like you said, sometimes in prayer, we won't ever see the effect of the prayers until we get to heaven and see it from that other side.

But my what a beautiful day that will be, yes, when we can see the effect of those prayers. And when it does happen on this side of life, what a testament to turn back into praise to God.

Crystal Keating:

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