

The Schneider Family Story

From our early years of dating in college, Tony and I just knew that we would adopt children one day. Little did we know the winding journey the Lord would have for us, though.

I remember sitting in one of our ethics classes in physical therapy school, watching a video about orphans in eastern Europe. It was at that moment that the Lord began stirring my heart for the fatherless. Fast forward to 1999 - the year we were married! What a glorious, exciting time! We spent our first 6 months of marriage living in married student housing apartments (boy, was that an adventure!), and then moved to Colorado Springs so I could finish my clinical affiliations. After graduating, our "perfect plan" included me working for about three years before starting to build a family. The Lord's perfect plan, the best plan, was a bit different. In 2002, we decided it was time to try and have a baby. Months passed, and no baby. Years began to pass, still no baby. We had tried different fertility treatments, but all along, we were hearing the Lord's voice telling us that was not His plan. You can be sure we tried to ignore it for awhile! But patiently, He kept gently reminding us of the plan He had begun for us many years before. After much prayer and realization that the Lord wanted to be in control of how our family was built, we surrendered our control over the situation to the Lord, and we began our adoption journey. It was springtime, 2005.

After hours upon hours of research and prayer, our hearts were drawn to the children in central Asia. We set about to begin the adoption of a baby in Kazakhstan. By June, 2005, we had chosen our placing agency, and began gathering all of the initial intake paperwork. We were so excited! But just before we were to submit all of our initial paperwork, we realized we had left one important detail out, and put everything on hold while we did a little research for a home study agency in our state. During that "on hold" week or two, we learned that we were expecting a baby!

To say we were shocked would be a total understatement. We could not believe it! After getting over the shock, we began to wonder what the Lord was doing - bringing us through years of infertility, having us start the adoption process, and then becoming pregnant. Oh, we heard lots of things, like, "See? You just had to relax." or "That always happens! You start an adoption and then you get pregnant." The truth is, the Lord brought us through our journey of infertility because He had such a bigger plan for us. He wanted to confirm in our hearts that He desired for us to adopt children. Had we built our family with biological children from the start, maybe we would have snuffed out that flame He had started in our hearts so many years before. We probably would have gotten caught up in parenthood, and decided to forget about adoption. But our amazing Father took us through a journey that was not pleasant at the time, but oh, did it reap a beautiful result. Becoming pregnant was wonderful, but we were so excited to be able to pick up where we left off and resume our adoption plans in the future.

Our joyful spirit, Caleb, was born in 2006. He is such a blessing. What an energetic, eager little boy! When he was about 18 months old, our hearts were being stirred up again for adoption. We still felt certain the Lord would have us adopt a child from central Asia, so we resumed our research, and found a wonderful fit with our placing agency, who had begun processing adoptions in a little country called Kyrgyzstan.

In March, 2008 we began the paperwork trail. It was a lot of work! Our home study went smoothly, dossier preparation was exciting, and on September 15, 2008, we got "the call." I'm typing this through tears now. I won't ever forget that day, as I can liken it to the birth of one of our biological children. There was a precious 4 month old baby boy in Kyrgyzstan who needed a mommy and daddy. Despite warnings to not "fall in love" with a picture, we couldn't help it. We just knew in our hearts that we needed to try, with all that we had, to adopt this beautiful child, with the biggest brown

eyes you've ever seen. By the end of that week, we had officially accepted the referral of "Baby Z." I cannot explain to you how elated we were, and how in awe we were of God's special plan.

Our excitement turned to fear and confusion just a month or so after accepting our referral. Adoptions suddenly came to a halt in Kyrgyzstan, and we were left wondering what was going to happen. The country didn't officially "close" their adoption program, but in February 2009, the Kyrgyz Prime Minister placed a one-year moratorium on international adoptions. That one year stretched into much more than one year. Tony and I went through such a wide range of emotions in that first year. Each month that went by was another month these children remained without a family, and it was heartbreaking for all of us. Through all of this, though, the Lord was there (Jehovah Shammah). He sustained us (Psalm 55:22), and He gave us hope and taught us how to hold onto it (Hebrews 10:23). And one thing was certain, we never once felt the Lord telling us to give up on Baby Z. We would keep fighting for him.

In the meantime, after we had been waiting for one year to bring him home, we began pursuing a 2nd, concurrent adoption. This time in Ukraine. We had made it clear to our placing agency that this adoption was not a replacement for our bringing home Baby Z. We struggled a lot with gathering documents for our Ukraine adoption. Looking back, we can recognize it as a total attack from the Enemy. But in the midst of it, that wasn't so easy to see. Despite having to redo several documents more than one time, our dossier was officially received in Ukraine in March, 2010. Our appointment date at the Ukraine State Department of Adoption was April 7th. What a whirlwind those few weeks were before traveling - lining up childcare for Caleb, packing, getting all of our travel documents in order. We were exhausted! But we were ready for our Ukraine adventure!

On April 9, 2010, after a long, sleepless night on an eastern European train, we met tiny Andriy. We couldn't believe how small he was for his age. But oh, was he sweet. He had a more complex medical history than we anticipated, including several issues related to a cleft palate. But we trusted the Lord had led us to each other, and made the decision to adopt him! We had quite a time with him during our bonding period. In those 10 days, he went from struggling to roll over, to wanting only to have us hold his hand to "walk" everywhere. We had sore backs after each visit, bending over to hold this wee boy's hands for him to walk, but if you could have seen his smile, you'd understand.

On April 19, 2010, we stood before the Ukrainian judge as she pronounced us as Ian's parents. What an emotional day! We had the elation of court, followed by the sadness of having to leave him behind while we waited for the court decree. We traveled back to the US for a few weeks, and returned to Ukraine, this time with Caleb, in early May. May 13, 2010, was Ian's last day of institutional living, praise the Lord! We arrived safely back to Minnesota on May 22nd, home forever with our little Ian.

Ian has been a wonderful addition to our family. He is filled with so much joy. He has an amazingly witty personality, and a sweet gift of making people laugh. So far, Ian has undergone two cleft palate surgeries, followed by countless hours of speech therapy. He is doing so great, and we thank God for him.

Three months after Ian came home from Ukraine, we were stunned to learn we were going to have another baby! God has such a unique plan for us all, doesn't He? Of course we were thrilled with the news, but we also couldn't help but worry a bit about Little Z. We weren't about to give up on bringing him home. After a month or two of needless worry, we finally listened to the Lord telling us He'd work out His perfect plan for us. And, of course, He did. I sure love Him!

Sweet little Anaya was born in June 2011, just a year after bringing Ian home from Ukraine. She is just a precious little girl. The boys simply adore her, as do Tony and I. Hard to believe she's already 1.5 years old! It's been fun having a girl in the house, and she keeps the boys on their toes.

In Fall 2011, we learned that the Kyrgyz government finally put a new adoption law into place. The next step was for adoption agencies to apply for accreditation, and wait to be selected by the government. After the new year, our placing agency learned they were the first to become accredited, and we were so thankful. Finally, after such a long time, we had a green light - an open door to bring our son home. Finally, after praying for this open door for 3.5 years, it was here. A first step was for our agency to learn whether or not our Little Z was still in the orphanage, and still available to be adopted by us. We had learned that some of the children were no longer able to be adopted by families. Families that had become dear friends to us. It was heartbreaking to keep hearing that another child had been lost. Every time our phone rang, our hearts jumped into our throats, wondering if we'd be the next family to get that dreaded phone call from the Department of State. The day our case manager called to give us the news about Micah, Tony answered the phone. I can't adequately describe what I was feeling as I watched Tony and listened to the conversation, but I felt as if life turned to slow-motion. When I heard the words, "So he's still there, and we can adopt him?" come out of Tony's mouth, I began weeping. Tony passed the phone off to me, and I watched him walk into the other room and drop to his knees in praise to God.

We knew we weren't "out of the woods," but Tony and I were full steam ahead to put together our dossier in record time. We spent hours upon hours preparing documents, pulling all-nighters in fact, just to get our paperwork ready as quickly and accurately as we could. We knew our window of opportunity to bring Little Z home might be small, and we worked fervently to get everything in order. You can be sure, once again, the Enemy was also hard at work, but we had a bigger Helper, who gave us what we needed to push through each and every attack. At the end of that week of document preparation, Tony and I could say that, with the Lord's help, we had done everything we could do, knowing that there wasn't anything we left out. We did our part and had peace that the Lord would do the rest.

On March 21st, 2012, Tony, Anaya, and I boarded an airplane on our way to finally, after 4 years, meet our son in person. We traveled with 6 other amazing families. We are so thankful for the group of families we traveled with, and they will always have a very special place in our hearts. On Friday, March 23rd, we stood in front of a representative from the Kyrgyz adoption ministry as they granted us approval to go and meet Little Z. Just minutes later we were in a car with one other family and our translator (and now dear friend), making our way to the baby house. That hour long drive was filled with so much anticipation. So much elation! So much joy! We were just about to meet our beautiful son!!

Entering the gates of the baby house for the first time, following a line of people down the dusty, uneven path to the door to Little Z's room, is something I won't ever forget. As we entered the room, swarms of beautiful children migrated toward us. One little boy wasn't quite so sure. Our precious Little Z was responding just how I had anticipated he would. "Who were these strangers that my caregivers want me to hug?" was written all over his beautiful, innocent face. We were careful not to push ourselves on him too much or too quickly (although all we really wanted to do was hold him tight, smother him with kisses, and bawl like babies). We gave him some space, let him look at us, and let him take the lead. We were in awe. Here was our son! The Lord had been victorious, and here was our son! By that afternoon, he was more at ease, and our beautiful "bonding period" began. (For the record, if you go by Minnesota time, I met Micah on my birthday! It was the best birthday gift I've ever received.)

The next 10 days were spent playing with sweet Little Z. We were allowed 2 visits per day, lasting about 2 hours each visit. Our precious Anaya, about 10 months old at the time, was a rock star! Consider taking your baby to an orphanage in a third-world country for 2 weeks, 4 hours a day. That's probably not something most parents would do! But we had so much peace about her health and safety. Looking back, I think we were a little crazy! But in the midst of it, God gave us what we needed to get through it, and gave us such an overwhelming peace about it, that we really weren't scared for her at all. Our bonding time with Z was so much fun. We learned he was a leader in his little group, he was very obedient and always desiring to please, and compassionate, wanting to make sure others were included. Somehow (had to be the Lord), I already knew this was his personality.

At the end of the bonding period, we were planning to get our court date, and go through court before returning home in early April. Unfortunately, some things changed that, and we were not able to secure a court date before we had to leave Kyrgyzstan. The night before we left, we sat in the hotel with one other family and our case manager and facilitator. Tony and I were so scared that we would never be able to return to bring our son home. We feared that adoptions would shut down again before we could even get back to bring him home. I recall saying, through tears, that whatever the outcome, I would never regret making that trip and spending time with Little Z. That time with him was a blessing, no matter what would happen. We needed to go. We needed to be faithful to where the Lord had us.

We made the long trek back to Minnesota, and were so thankful to receive a court date just a couple of weeks later. Tony made the trip alone this time, and spent about a week in Kyrgyzstan. Court was essentially effortless, praise the Lord. We are so thankful for that. Next up was our 30-day waiting period before the court decree would take effect.

Those 30 days may have been the hardest part of our 4 year journey to bring Micah home. The attacks were like no other. But again, we knew our sovereign God was on our side, and despite the Enemy trying to get us to believe his lies, we made the decision to keep on our full armor of God, and to stand. To stand, trusting that the Lord would be victorious, once more.

On May 28th, 2012, Micah Zhenish Schneider walked out of the baby house in Kyrgyzstan. No longer an orphan. No longer fatherless. Officially our son - forever! By the way, Zhenish means "victory," and we couldn't think of a more fitting name for our amazing son and our journey to each other. We stand in awe of God's amazing grace, and His wonderful work to bring our son home.

On June 9th, surrounded by our dearest friends and family, Caleb, Ian, Anaya and I stood in front of the arrival door at the airport with more excitement than we could contain. We couldn't wait to see Tony and Micah walk through that door! Our dear 6 year old, Caleb, who had prayed since he was 2.5 years old for his brother Micah to come home, was finally able to embrace this brother he had hoped for for so long. It was one of the best days of our lives. The flood of emotions as they came through that door are indescribable. A burden that had been on our family for so long was all gone. All gone. Victory! All we can do is praise God. We are so, so thankful.

Our celebrations were met with heartache for the vast majority of the original "Kyrgyz 65" families. Of all of us who had waited together for so long, only 9 families were united with their children. The rest remain, once again, in limbo, not knowing when the time might come for them to be able to resume their work to bring their children home. Please, please pray with us that the rest of the families and children can be united soon. While our son is home, we won't ever stop praying and advocating that they all would come home.

Micah has been with us for about 6 months now. Every time I look at his beautiful face, I see God's amazing grace. Grace. Tony and I don't deserve such a gift as we have in Micah. We are completely unworthy to be able to call this precious child our son. Yet, God chose us to be Micah's parents. And we will honor God by raising Micah and all of our children to know Him, to love Him, and to share His love with others.

The Lord has done a great work in our hearts through our journey to build a family. He has shown us more and more how to trust in His plan, how to hold unswervingly to hope, how to wait on Him, and how to give up control over all things. He's so good to us. Despite all the tears we've shed and despair we've felt, we can still declare that He is good. Nothing that we've experienced comes to us without first being filtered through God's sovereign, loving, and merciful hands. Would we go through these years again to bring our children home? Absolutely. Will we adopt more children one day? (Writing through tears again) If it's the Lord's will, of course, and I hope so! Have our hearts been changed so much that we will always, tirelessly advocate for the orphan? Without a doubt.

Thanks for reading our story. We are blessed.

The Schneider Family-
Tony, Lisa, Caleb, Micah, Ian & Anaya