

Foreword by Abby Johnson, bestselling author of *Unplanned*

# SURVIVOR

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An Abortion Survivor's  
Surprising Story of Choosing  
Forgiveness and  
Finding Redemption

"Claire's heart-wrenching and inspiring story is exactly  
what our world needs today." —Lila Rose, president and  
founder of Live Action

*Claire Culwell*

**WITH LOIS AND STEVE RABEY**

Afterword by Josh McDowell, founder of Josh McDowell Ministry

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Choosing Forgiveness and  
Finding Redemption

CLAIRE CULWELL

*with Steve and Lois Rabey*

...

FOREWORD BY ABBY JOHNSON,  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Unplanned* AND FORMER  
PLANNED PARENTHOOD CLINIC DIRECTOR



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SURVIVOR

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*I lovingly dedicate this book to  
my mom and dad,  
my sister, Rachel,  
my husband, David,  
my precious children,  
and my birth mother.*

*This is our story, and I am honored  
to be able to share it.*

# FOREWORD

. . .

*A*S AN ABORTION CLINIC DIRECTOR, I BELIEVED MANY things to be true. I believed abortions empowered women. I believed women had a right to abortion. I believed abortion was health care. I also believed many things to be untrue. I did not believe the pro-lifers who said that some women regretted their abortions. I did not believe them when they said that women could suffer long-term physical and emotional damage from abortion.

And there was one thing that I had never considered. I had never considered that a baby could actually survive an abortion procedure.

I remember the day I met Claire. My life had just been turned upside down because of my simple decision to quit my position at Planned Parenthood. I had been with the abortion giant for eight years and abruptly resigned from my position as clinic director after witnessing a live abortion procedure on an ultrasound monitor. I wasn't supposed to see what I saw. This tiny yet perfectly formed baby wasn't supposed to feel the suction tube as it entered the home that had been his place of safety for thirteen weeks. But when the tube touched his body, he jumped. He jumped as if he

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had been disturbed from a peaceful sleep. And when the powerful suction was turned on, I watched a gruesome tug-of-war begin. This baby was fighting so hard, moving his arms and legs, but the suction was simply too powerful. In just a matter of moments, the screen was black. The womb was empty. The jar was full. My life had been changed.

I left my job quietly, never planning to speak publicly about what I had seen. I sought help from the Coalition for Life, a local pro-life group who had been praying for me for all those years. They had always promised to help me find another job if I ever decided to walk away. But it had become more than that. It wasn't just about a job anymore. I had experienced a conversion. My heart of stone had become a heart of flesh. Christ had changed me and made me a new creation. I needed a new start, and I found that with my new friends at the Coalition for Life. I didn't want to speak. I wanted to slink away quietly and heal privately.

God had other plans. Several weeks later, I found myself in a court battle with Planned Parenthood, which then turned into a media firestorm I could never have imagined. After all, why would Planned Parenthood attempt to silence one of their directors? What do they have to hide? These were the questions I was being asked by all the major media networks across the world. I was overwhelmed by this new life, these new friends, these phone lines that would never stop ringing with reporters on the other end wanting to ask me questions that I didn't know how to answer.

And in the midst of this chaos, a quiet young woman walked into the Coalition for Life office with a piece of paper in her hand. She was greeted by one of the staff members, and I remember them asking, "Do you want to meet Abby Johnson?" In a sort of confused voice, Claire responded, "Um, yeah, okay." I could tell she

had no idea who I was. She hadn't seen the breaking news story on the local ten o'clock news program. She probably didn't follow the Drudge Report. I was no celebrity to her. *Thank goodness*, I thought. She handed me the piece of paper that was in her hand. "I just wanted to drop off my story. I recently found out that I'm an abortion survivor, and I want to see if maybe I could use my story to help women choose life."

An abortion survivor? I had no idea what that meant. Was that a joke? People don't survive abortions. That's the whole point of an abortion. Death. Destruction. Yet here was this beautiful woman standing in front of me, so I knew I must have misunderstood. "What do you mean?" I asked.

She went on to tell me her story. We didn't sit down to chat about the explosive details she had found out about her life from the birth mother she had met only months before. We just stood in the middle of the reception area, a living room of an old house that had been converted into an office. No one was paying attention to us anyway. The staff from the Coalition for Life was scurrying around, answering the ringing phones, managing the unending stacks of messages from reporters that I needed to call back about interviews, and visiting with the local reporters and supporters who were coming by for a quick word. Yet here we stood, everyone around us unaware of the profound moment that was taking place: a former abortion clinic director standing face to face with a woman who had been saved from an abortion. A young woman standing face to face with a woman who had participated in the act that had almost taken her life many years ago. I was, for the first time, facing the humanity that existed in the womb—humanity that I had helped destroy more than twenty-two thousand times. While we stood in that truth, a lifelong friendship began.

Under all normal circumstances, Claire and I should not be friends. In her flesh, Claire should feel anger when she looks at me. Her neck should get red and hot when she hears my name. She should be disgusted when she thinks of me. People like me are the reason she is without her twin sibling. People like me are the reason she almost lost her life. In my flesh, I shouldn't be able to look Claire in the eye. I should be ashamed to even be in her presence. I should run the other direction every time I see her coming my way.

But *God*. God makes our friendship make sense. God makes it so a former abortion clinic director and an abortion survivor can be best friends. Only God can do that. Only God can turn anger into forgiveness. Only God can turn shame into mercy. God makes a way for new beginnings, and he made a way for me and Claire. We have lived this journey together for more than ten years. We have hurt together, healed together, cheered for each other, had babies, worked hard, played harder, loved well, been mad at each other, made up and laughed about it, taken care of each other after surgery, traveled together. We have been able to live life together because Claire was able to *live*. The chance to live is something most of us take for granted, yet it has resulted in incredible complexities for Claire.

You will love Claire's story. As you read, you will feel heart-broken. You will celebrate victories. You will absolutely fall in love with Claire and her sweet spirit. But more than anything, you will marvel at God. You will see his goodness displayed in the lives of his children. You will be blessed.

I will meditate on the glorious splendor of Your majesty,  
And on Your wondrous works.  
Men shall speak of the might of Your awesome acts,  
And I will declare Your greatness.



They shall utter the memory of Your great goodness,  
And shall sing of Your righteousness.

(PSALM 145:5–7, NKJV)

—Abby Johnson, bestselling author  
of *Unplanned* and former  
Planned Parenthood clinic director

# PREFACE

. . .

## THE SECRET THAT TURNED ME UPSIDE DOWN

*S*HE SAT ON THE BED NEXT TO ME, SOBBING AND SHAKING. The look of anguish in her eyes told me that something terrible was about to be revealed.

My birth mother stammered through the truth about my birth. It was not the story I had believed for the past twenty years. I put my arm around her as the shock pulsed through my mind. In a moment, the story of who I was changed radically. At once, I saw that just about everything I had assumed about my birth was not what had happened at all.

I knew I had been adopted, but because my adoptive parents were so loving and kind, I never experienced the gnawing hunger that makes some adoptees feel they need to uncover all the facts of their birth.

So far I had been more than content with my life. I had been blessed by parents who claimed they loved me more than anyone had ever loved a child and who backed up that bold claim through their loving actions, moment by moment and day by day.

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Most of the details surrounding my birth mother's pregnancy and her decision to place me for adoption were unknown to my parents because my adoption was closed. It seemed that, for the rest of my life, important information about who I was and how I got here was destined to remain walled off from me in some dusty archive.

But then my younger sister, Rachel, upset this delicate balance. Two years after they adopted me, my parents welcomed Rachel in an open adoption after a young woman they had known for years faced an unplanned pregnancy.

When Rachel was a teenager, she met her birth mother and established positive ongoing contact with her. The more I learned about this experience, the more my desire to do the same with my birth mother grew. At that point, all I knew about my origins—and all I really needed to know—could be summarized in two simple truths: my birth mother had unexpectedly become pregnant with me when she was thirteen; she had chosen to give me life and place me for adoption.

But as she tearfully confessed to me that day, only one of those statements was true. She *hadn't* chosen to give birth to me. Instead, at the insistence of her own mother, she underwent an abortion to take care of the “problem” that was me.

Problem solved, or so she and her mother thought. Weeks later, my birth mother realized that somehow she was still pregnant. I had survived. And since by then she was in her third trimester, it was too late for a legal abortion in her home state of Oklahoma. Her mother could not accept this surprising predicament and forced her to go to Kansas, where third-trimester abortions were legal.

I might have been subjected to another abortion attempt if not for an injury my birth mother had sustained during her first abor-

tion. The amniotic sac that was holding me had been ripped and was leaking fluid. If not for this damage, my birth mother likely would have undergone a second—and successful—abortion.

That revelation sent my mind, heart, and nervous system into overdrive. Mixed emotions swirled in my head as I sat on the bed that night in 2009. I didn't know what to do with how I felt. I couldn't even sort out what I did feel—confusion, sadness, anger, fear. My birth mother left the room, and I sat there and stared at the wall. The shock of what I had just heard paralyzed me.

Finally I lifted my head and cried out in a silent prayer, *What do I do now? What do you want me to do?*

I didn't get an answer that night to my question, but I got an assurance that has proved true through the journey that has followed. God promised that he would be with me every step of the way as I worked through the process of absorbing the knowledge that my birth mother and grandmother had tried to end my life before I left the womb. I'd been completely unwanted.

It's hard to explain how I knew that God would be with me, but I have always sensed that during difficult moments in my life. My parents taught me that trusting in Jesus meant that I could ask him for help and that he would give it to me. I've carried that teaching with me all through my life. So, when I asked God those questions, I also prayed, *Please be with me no matter what this all means*. I felt peace that God's presence would give me whatever I needed to move forward.

I had survived an attempt on my life. And looking back, I can see how my life had been preserved, nurtured, and guided and how God's plan for my life had been unfolding all along. I didn't know it then, but there was a purpose in my receiving this surprising information.

After finding out I'd survived an abortion, I developed an inter-

est in pro-life issues. And in time, that interest grew and grew. Soon I began telling my story to small groups at schools and churches near me—a major accomplishment for one of the world’s quietest introverts. And eventually, telling my life story would become my calling.

I talk about the joys of adoption and the sorrows of abortion, but I always stress that women like my birth mother—women who unexpectedly face major life-and-death decisions—don’t need lectures or chants of “Baby Killer.” They need God’s forgiveness and grace to heal and recover from their grief.

In the following pages, you will read a survivor’s story—my story—filled with grace and redemption. The parents who adopted me provided a safe and healing home that gave me a foundation to follow God’s leading to where I am today. I remain close to my parents and have a loving relationship with my birth mother. I am married and have a beautiful family. God has made clear to me what my calling is and has opened doors for me to fulfill that calling.

You may be reading this and thinking, *I don’t have any of those wonderful things in my life. How can I relate to this woman who has so much?*

I can assure you, I have struggled—and still do—with pain and difficulties. My life has had many ups and downs. There are still questions I grapple with. And as you read my story, you’ll see that the older I get, the more complicated my life becomes.

You may be an adoptee, a woman who has had an abortion, or a woman who is considering an abortion. You may be pregnant and deciding whether to place your baby for adoption or raise your baby yourself. You may be a man who has fathered a baby in an unplanned pregnancy. You may be the parent or the friend of a person who fits one of these descriptions. You may even be a pro-

choice activist who has secretly picked up this book. Or you may be a reader who simply questions how to sort out the controversy over abortion.

No matter who you are or where you find yourself, I hope my story will encourage and inspire you. Most of all, I hope you will see that the grace and redemption in my story can be your story too.

—Claire Culwell

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PART ONE

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*Wanted, Chosen,  
Loved*

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1.

## CHOSEN, LOVED, ADOPTED

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“SO, CLAIRE, ARE YOU REALLY ADOPTED?”

“That’s weird.”

“What’s that like?”

“Did you live in an orphanage?”

“I’m sorry you’re adopted.”

My elementary school friends weren’t trying to be rude or mean. Most were merely curious. But their occasional questions surprised me.

“Yeah, and what was it like living in an orphanage?”

Most of us kids had seen the movie *Annie*, which was based on the old comic strip *Little Orphan Annie*. Annie lived in a big New York orphanage run by a mean alcoholic woman who made all the children work and clean every day. Annie tried to escape but was caught and returned to the orphanage, where she was later adopted by a wealthy man named Oliver Warbucks.

“I’ve never seen an orphanage,” I told my friends, “and being adopted is wonderful.”

My parents had actually convinced me that adopting was the preferred way to create a family. While most mommies and daddies

simply accepted the babies that were born to them, my mommy and daddy searched and searched until they found me—the perfect baby for them.

Then, once they took me home, they loved me with all their hearts.

“We loved you more than anybody has ever loved a baby,” Daddy always told me. I’m pretty sure almost all parents feel that way about their children, but my sister and I always felt affirmed when our parent repeated those words.

I tried to explain it all to my friends.

“My mom and dad wanted me. They chose me. They love me,” I said. “And it’s not like being adopted makes me any different than you.”

In time, I would learn much more about Warren and Barbara Culwell—when they met, how they fell in love, and how they faced difficult struggles to create our wonderful family.

In fact, I often heard them tell their story when college students and other guests who had gathered around our big dinner table asked them how they got together.

It was December 1979, and Warren Culwell was in Atlanta to attend the annual Christmas conference of Campus Crusade for Christ—now named Cru—the ministry that works with students and others all over the world.

After two years on Crusade’s campus staff at Ole Miss, Warren was given a plum assignment: serving as personal assistant to Josh McDowell, the ministry’s globe-trotting superstar speaker.

McDowell was able to transform Christian apologetics from an abstract academic exercise into compelling talks he delivered to millions of young people. He wrote *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, a classic that has sold more than one million copies and is still in print.

Many young people rejected Christianity during the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, but McDowell assured his audiences that having faith in a resurrected Christ and trusting in the Bible's teaching were not only intellectually defensible but also the only way to live. Warren traveled with McDowell from city to city, handling logistics and working with local Crusade staff to follow up with the many students who had come to faith through the events.

Barbara Griffes, a college senior, was four years younger than Warren. She had come to Crusade's Christmas conference to learn, grow her faith, and apply for a job. Faith in Christ was central to her life, and she wanted to join Crusade so she could share the gospel message with young people desperately searching for answers to life's challenges.

Barbara was riding up an escalator when Warren spotted the attractive newcomer from the floor above. Something about her caught his eye. As she got closer, he could make out her name tag. But instead of quietly introducing himself when she got off the escalator, Warren, who could be energetic, joyful, outgoing, and a bit irreverent, called out to her in a voice that others nearby could hear.

"Barbara, I love you!" he shouted.

Startled and a bit embarrassed, Barbara smiled and walked on by. But it wasn't the last time these two would cross paths.

They met again—but only briefly—in February 1980. Warren had traveled with Josh McDowell to a speaking engagement at Auburn University, where Barbara was a student leader. They talked, but then Warren was quickly on the road again.

That summer, they would finally have some time to get to know each other better. Both were taking training classes at Crusade's Institute of Biblical Studies in Colorado when one of Warren's friends suggested a double date with Barbara and one of her friends.

The two couples spent a beautiful day at Elitch Gardens, an amusement park in Denver.

By the end of the day, my mom-and-dad-to-be had grown more serious about each other.

In the gathering twilight, the two of them were strapped into a little car on a big Ferris wheel. As they sat close together, their car rotated up to the top and paused, giving them a stunning view of Denver's city lights and the vast expanse of the Rocky Mountains to the west.

That was the moment Warren looked at Barbara and thought, *You know, this is the kind of girl I want to spend the rest of my life with.*

Things moved quickly after that. Between Crusade classes on the Bible and theology, the two sought each other out during campfires and horse rides in the Rocky Mountains. As they talked about their lives, shared their favorite Bible verses, and discussed their passion for ministry, their affection grew.

"Each of us knew we wanted to share our lives with someone who was devoted to serving Christ," my mom explained to me.

And in June 1981—a year and a half after they met—they were married.

But married life turned out to be even busier than they expected. Their first years of marriage were hectic.

Mom was on staff with Crusade at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, leading Bible studies for sorority girls and other students while also discipling young people who were interested in experiencing a deeper relationship with Christ.

Dad worked with male students at SMU while attending Dallas Theological Seminary.

Both believed the work they were doing with students was vital, so they gave 110 percent of their time and energy to ministry. They assumed they would have kids and start a family at some

point, as both came from big, loving families. But they had no idea when they would get around to it. Life was full, the demands of ministry were never ending, and they were in no hurry.

Then came Hawaii.

In 1984, Crusade dispatched them to a distant tropical paradise for a summer assignment: teaching forty college students how to grow in their Christian faith and share it naturally with others on their campuses.

Their lodging was far from romantic. They stayed at the Hawaii School for Girls, where they slept on cots. But the setting—near Diamond Head, a gorgeous volcanic crater—was beautiful and inspired thoughts of a family. They were ready.

“God,” they prayed aloud together, “please bless us and give us a beautiful baby!”

Dad prayed more specifically: for a beautiful baby boy who would carry on his family name.

A short time later, Mom didn’t feel well, which got her excited. *Is this my first bout of morning sickness?* she wondered.

No. She was not pregnant but merely taking the first steps of a long journey of waiting, wondering, believing, and doubting.

People deal with challenges in different ways, and my mom and dad faced infertility in dramatically different ways.

Dad’s default approach is to be hopeful and positive about the future. He’s a visionary who always looks ahead to what God can do tomorrow. His approach to their inability to conceive was optimistic. “If our plan A doesn’t work out, God will have an even better plan B for us.”

But Mom’s barren years were difficult for her as she struggled to understand why God was not choosing to give them the baby they had hoped and prayed for.

She often compared herself with her Crusade friends, many of

whom seemed blessed with supernatural fertility, according to their frequent, joyful announcements of their pregnancies.

"I went to baby shower after baby shower and always hoped I'd have one myself," she once told me. She described this period of her life as "living in a waiting room."

Mom discussed some of these trials and tribulations in the regular newsletter that she and Dad sent to friends and supporters of their work with Crusade. The May 1987 newsletter was headlined "Wait Wait Wait . . ."

While she gave her supporters a general sense of her frustration with waiting, my mom poured out her heart more fully in her journals, which she shared with me. The one from 1985 was tinged with heartbreak in nearly every entry.

*What if we can't ever have any children?  
I guess God is still in control. That's a lot to  
think about. But I'm not going to worry  
about it. I hope.*

*We went to the Dr. again. . . . We need to go  
back again next month. Again. I know your  
intentions toward me are for good.*

*We got a letter from the Dr. that doesn't sound  
very good at all. They are going to do one more  
test. I guess God is still in control. It's hard to  
think I might never be pregnant. I know  
everyone always "wants something." It keeps  
us trusting the Lord, I guess.*

She tried to stay focused on serving others, but that didn't always calm her disappointments:

*Lord, I want to have that confident trust in you always. I know I haven't suffered to the point Job has. Right now I feel kind of neutral about things. No major problems but I'm just not real fired up about anything either. I hope this will be a good week with the girls I am discipling.*

*One of my friends that has been trying to get pregnant for 10 years just found out she is pregnant!! What a miracle!! For some reason yesterday it made me sort of depressed, though. Lord, I need you to help me. I feel like nobody really understands what I feel.*

*This week has been the hardest of all. Another one of my friends is pregnant. I cried and cried. I talked with a student that asked me how I was doing and cried some more.*

When I asked my dad about this time, he acknowledged that he had missed an opportunity to love and care for Mom as she suffered.

“It was a busy time for us. I spent almost every night with students, giving, giving, and giving. I did not pick up on her deep struggle, nor did I enter into her grief over this great loss we were facing together. Years later, when we watched a movie about adop-



tion, we wept together over the couple not able to have a baby naturally. I wished I could have listened and cared for and cried with Barbara as she waited and wrestled.”

Mom and Dad tried to keep hope alive as the waiting and wrestling continued. They did more than pray about their infertility. They spent years setting up difficult meetings with a series of infertility specialists, trying a variety of treatments, including intra-uterine insemination, without success.

One doctor was particularly blunt: “I think you have a 1 percent chance of ever conceiving a child, and I’m being generous with the 1 percent because of God,” he said. He gave them a list of twenty-four adoption agencies.

Mom was devastated when the door finally shut on her hopes of having a baby. She experienced the only real crisis of faith she’s ever known. As she wrote in her journal,

*I believed in my heart that God was good, and that his plans for us were good. But I felt like my prayers and concerns didn't really matter to him. My mind and my heart were at odds with one another. I wondered, Does God really care about me and my desire to have a baby? Has he forgotten all about me?*

Even though giving birth to their own baby had been their plan A, they soon embraced God’s plan B. As Mom started calling the twenty-four adoption agencies on the list, the waiting entered a new phase. There would be two years of filling out forms, taking training classes, and waiting for that special call from an agency before I arrived on the scene.

At one point, they thought they were approved to adopt, only

to be told by a social worker that they were not yet ready because they hadn't sufficiently grieved over their infertility. It was frustrating, but as they waited, they knew God was orchestrating the timing and finding just the right baby for them.

They spent months meeting in discussion groups with other couples who were working through their sorrow and anger over being infertile. Then suddenly, after years of waiting, things started happening.

A social worker notified them they were approved to adopt, which made Mom feel like she had become pregnant at last.

Finally they got *the call*.

The social worker explained that a baby (me) had been born prematurely to a fourteen-year-old Oklahoma mother. I weighed just over three pounds and, as is often the case with premature births, had complications. But it would be years before we understood why.

"Do you want this baby girl?" the social worker asked.

Mom and Dad would need to sleep on it before deciding.

They took the next few days to think it over and consider the complications. My birth had been rough. I was born with clubfeet and a dislocated hip that would require me to spend the first two months of my life in the hospital. Dad wondered whether they would be able to afford the years of medical bills, therapy, and surgery that might be required to make my body whole.

Plus, I was a girl, not the boy Dad had originally imagined. As a card-carrying resident of the Lone Star State who had been taught by his dad to hunt and fish in the piney woods of East Texas, Dad had always dreamed of teaching his son to hunt and fish. He also wanted to pass on his family name to a son because, without a male child, this Culwell family line would end with him.

But, during the months and months of waiting, Dad grew to

love the idea of being a dad to a little girl. He thanked God for this precious new life and was eager to hold their baby girl in his arms. After a few frantic calls to their health insurance company to make sure my care would be covered, Mom and Dad were gung ho to go.

“Yes,” they told the agency. “We would love to take her.”

They decided they would name me Lauren Claire. *Lauren* means “victorious one,” which was perfect, since by the time I was a few months old, I had already been victorious so many times.

The night before they were to come to the hospital and see me for the first time, each one of them wrote a letter to my teenage birth mother, in care of the adoption agency. Mom had got this idea from one of the many books she read during her years of waiting. It was called *Dear Birth Mother: Thank You for Our Baby*.<sup>1</sup>

They didn’t know my birth mother’s name, so Dad addressed his letter to “Dear Special Friend,” telling her, “I’ve been waiting to write to you for two months and tell you how I prayed for you and your baby girl.”

And they both prayed, asking God to make it possible for them to meet my birth mother someday.

The timing of my arrival proved perfect. Four days after my parents took me home from the hospital, they got to take me to church on Mother’s Day. Mom couldn’t believe she was finally a mama! Her years of waiting and wrestling were over. She always says she’s sure she was the happiest mother that Mother’s Day.

Foreword by Abby Johnson, bestselling author of *Unplanned*

# SURVIVOR

An Abortion Survivor's  
Surprising Story of Choosing  
Forgiveness and  
Finding Redemption

"Claire's heart-wrenching and inspiring story is exactly  
what our world needs today." —Lila Rose, president and  
founder of Live Action

*Claire Culwell*

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