



# Introduction

“We read to know we are not alone.” *Shadowlands*

## Josh

On the first day of graduate school, Dr. Garrison strolled into class with his dignified gait, clad in his rumpled blazer with the brown elbow patches. His leather binder was stuffed with lecture notes, and his bow tie was crooked underneath his flabby chin. Notably, Dr. Garrison’s eyes and nose reminded me of a tortoise, like the ones photographed in *National Geographic* that paddle off the shores of the Galapagos Islands.

As Dr. Garrison opened to his notes and leaned his arms on the podium, I fidgeted in my desk as though Oklahoma fire ants were skittering through my boxer shorts. “Esteemed future colleagues,” the professor warbled in a throaty way, “will one of you please tell me why God created man?” “I didn’t utter a peep. Neither did any of my classmates. We

knew of Dr. Garrison's notorious reputation for smashing student's responses like cheap porcelain. Feeling our unease, Dr. Garrison grinned and beckoned us forward with his index finger; we scooted up to the edge of our chairs to listen. "God," Dr. Garrison whispered before pausing for a moment to let the word gather firmly in the air. "*God created man because he loves stories.*"

It's true, I think, that God loves stories because he is the inventor of them, and more than anything, he delights in using "prop actors" to play lead roles in one of his epic screenplays.

By my own admission, I have often felt like Neo in *The Matrix*, reticent and lacking aplomb, convinced that God must have the wrong protagonist in mind. I have nothing titanic to offer to the part. I am a simple English teacher and basketball coach (currently with an inauspicious record of 7–13). In addition, neither Amy nor I hold influential positions in our church, community, or jobs, and truthfully, we are okay with that. We tend to eschew the spotlight. Amy prefers a chameleon-like existence, where she can blend into the wallpaper. I tend to favor a monastic-like existence, where I can live unmolested in my cave of books. What Amy and I, though, have witnessed firsthand demands a wholehearted response. We have discovered a world within our world made up over 144,000 million orphans, 4.4 million in Ethiopia alone. As a result, Amy and I can't go back to life as normal. We feel summoned to a *lifestyle of involvement* with the "least of these."

Amy and I obviously don't have much to contribute. We're not billionaires like Bill and Melinda Gates. We're not

rock stars like Bono. We're not movie stars like Brad and Angelina. Instead, Amy and I are like two bumbling hobbits. We know we can't save Middle-Earth, but we also know we can't live comfortably in the Shire. If, though, Amy and I have come to believe anything, it is that there is one who can take two people's paltry lives of "five loaves and two fish" and make it grow, expand, and multiply into a sumptuous feast. Believing this, Amy and I celebrate the way God longs to use ordinary people to accomplish his extraordinary purposes in places like Ethiopia.

T.S. Eliot once wrote:

*These are only hints and guesses,  
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.<sup>2</sup>*

Our story mirrors Eliot's understanding of spirituality and faith. Through our entire journey, Amy and I have wobbled along on tentative legs as we have tried to wisely guess and prayerfully discern the voice that more often than not speaks to us in whispers and in shadows.

Specifically, this is the story of *ashes*. For us, our ashes correspond to our battles with barrenness. Studies show that one-third of the time, infertility involves the female. One-third of the time, it involves the male. Another one-third involves mystery. Three-thirds of the time, though, infertility involves deep heartache and pain. Amy and I know this firsthand.

This is also the story of *Africa*. For us, our story involves falling in love with and feeling God's heart for a continent and people, where beauty and tragedy, wealth and poverty,

and humanity and sub-humanity coexist in a jagged tension. Stepping into this world of interlocking realities felt like a baptism of sorts, whereupon returning to Oklahoma, we have been challenged and inspired to rethink and redo everything from our relationship with God, to church and community, to our understanding of missions and God's future dreams for the earth.

Finally, this is the story of *adoption*. For us, it is simply the story of meeting a baby boy named Tesfamariam, and our lives not being the same since.