

Facing a Handicap – with God’s Help

I can still remember clearly that evening in Georgia in 1993. For several years, my husband and I had been concerned about some behaviors we’d begun to notice in our second-oldest son, Jonathan. Gradually, his delightful speech had begun to disappear. We were beginning to see strange, obsessive behaviors, and toilet training seemed unusually difficult. He didn’t seem to be able to process simple commands or to tell us when he wanted or needed something. We’d brought these concerns to health professionals on more than one occasion, including our pediatrician, but in fairly relaxed, rural Georgia, no one seemed unduly alarmed. A chance remark from our dentist’s hygienist, however, sent me to the library to do some research. During his visit, Jonathan had been terrified. She remarked, “Autistic children often have a difficult time at the dentist’s.” So, I checked out a stack of books on the topic of autism. What I read, comparing my son’s behavior with checklists in the books, only confirmed my husband’s and my worst fears. I think I had crying spells for more than a year, and my husband grieved in his own way. Finally, the time came to square the shoulders and say, “O.K., so we have a handicapped child. What does the Bible say about how to deal with this?” I hope some of the lessons I’m just beginning to learn can be of help to others.

The first is to realize that our dear Lord Jesus understands how deeply parents hurt when their children hurt. As I read through the Gospels and the Scriptures, I saw our Lord heal the children brought to Him by desperate parents again and again. If He were still walking this earth, we could bring our children to Him, and He would heal them. Physical disabilities weren’t part of His original plan for man; these entered as a result of Adam’s sin. It’s such a comfort to know that our Lord is also grieved by the effects of sin. He knows and He cares. I Peter 5:7 says, “Casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for you.”

Another lesson I’ve learned is the importance of facing trials with the joy of the Lord. This isn’t a new thought, but it’s so true that “A merry heart doeth good, like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones.” (Proverbs 17:22) As wives and mothers, we have tremendous power to influence the atmosphere in our homes for good or ill. Not being by nature a “bubbly” sort of person, I feel like I’m just beginning to understand this. Our husbands, healthy children, and handicapped children will be helped or harmed by our attitudes. I’ll always remember one day in particular. We had tested Jonathan for a food allergy that causes autism in some children. The odds were long—something like 1000 to one—that he was one of those children. I didn’t realize how much I’d pinned my hopes on the test results until they came back showing that our son’s autism wasn’t caused by a food allergy. I was crying when I told him, “Jonathan, I’m so sorry.” His reaction startled me. He reached out and wiped away my tears. He didn’t want to see his mommy crying then or any other time. This was such a powerful lesson. It’s not some sort of betrayal of our afflicted children, and it’s not uncaring toward them, when we’re joyful in the Lord; it’s actually a tremendous help to them and the rest of the family.

A follow-on lesson to this one is that it’s absolutely vital, when we have a handicapped child, to be careful to nourish all aspects of our relationship with our husbands. It saddens

me to hear that the divorce rate among spouses dealing with a Down's Syndrome child is very high. Just at a time when a couple needs so badly to be ". . . heirs together of the grace of life"(I Peter 3:7), some allow adversity to rip their marriage apart and go their separate ways, bearing their heavy burden alone. I wouldn't be honest if I didn't say that, especially early in my son's diagnosis, I gave way to the impulse to retreat into my own world of private pain, completely shutting myself off from my husband. Doing so, though, also shuts me off from some of the help God intended to give me in the person of the husband He gave me. Now, I don't know what I'd do without my husband's problem-solving skills. I think also of how in Genesis 24:27 Isaac was comforted after his mother's death by his relationship with his bride Rebekah. It's good to allow our marriages to be the comfort and even the escape from stress they're intended to be. We may be the parents of a handicapped child, but there's no reason we can't be deeply in love with each other. In this, as with maintaining the joy of the Lord, it doesn't represent a betrayal of our handicapped child in any way, and everyone in the family benefits from our strong, joyful marriage.

A final lesson that's been so helpful to me is learning to wait on the Lord when we encounter a problem for which we see no immediate solution. When there's a handicapped child involved, many difficult problems do arise—serious problems that make daily living and even venturing out in public difficult. I'm talking to myself too when I say don't despair or be overwhelmed (Psalm 77:3), but pray earnestly and wait for God to provide the answer. I think of the verses in Psalm 27:13-14, "I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord." What a beautiful promise to hold in our hearts as we encounter trials—with our loving Lord to help us.