

Your Special Needs Child

Help for Weary Parents

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What is the number-one question an expectant parent is asked? *“Are you hoping for a boy or a girl?”* And what is the typical response? *“It doesn’t matter as long as my baby is healthy.”* That seemingly innocent exchange may reveal a foundational belief that resides in the hearts of many of us—that there are few things worse for a parent than having a child who is not *healthy*. The possibility that we or someone we love would have a child with special needs evokes a powerful fear. Let’s talk about that fear.

Who Are You?

We wish we were having this conversation at our kitchen table. We would love to hear your story before asking you to listen to ours. My wife Kris makes a great cup of coffee along with cinnamon rolls that are out of this world. Why not picture us communicating in that way? Our prayer is that this sounds less like an academic discussion and more like a chat between friends.

People generally pick up a minibook like this for a particular reason. What’s yours? Perhaps you just learned that your child has some kind of mental or physical challenge. Maybe this diagnosis was made for one of your grandchildren or someone else for whom you care deeply. God may have brought such a special person into your church and you wonder about the best way to show love to the family.

Of course, this format does not allow us to hear what specifically motivated you to read this minibook. But, friend, God knows. Do you believe that? His Word goes so far as to make the outrageous claim that “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:30). Your story—past, present, and future—is not hidden from his compassionate gaze.

Who Are We?

The Lord has blessed Kris and me with three children, two of whom are adopted. Our adopted son Andrew is blind and has a number of other physical and mental challenges. In many ways he functions like a small child and will never be able to live on his own.

As of this writing, Andrew just turned eighteen years old. We are in the process of organizing our household to care for him as an adult.

A Learning Experience

We have no desire to sugarcoat our story. There are aspects of caring for Andrew that are hard every day. Physical and mental handicaps are the result of a world rocked by sin. But we have learned that *hard is not necessarily bad*. Our experience is that God can truly work all things together for good (Romans 8:28).

Two thousand years ago, Jesus gave this invitation:

“Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)

This great passage has given our family four foundational truths that have guided us as we have tried to raise Andrew in a way that honors our Lord.

1. Be Authentic about the Pain

God does not expect his people to wear a plastic smile over a broken heart. All parents have dreams and aspirations for their children. Thoughts of your child playing sports, getting married, having a family, and caring for you when you're old are all normal for any parent contemplating the birth of a child. Often those dreams are dashed when you learn of your child's diagnosis.

Your child may never be able to speak. His life span may be greatly diminished. She may never be able to return or show love. He may never play sports, climb a tree, read a book, or go out on a date.

Your child may require lifelong care. She may never be able to feed herself. He may never be able to use the restroom without assistance. Simple words like

“Mommy” and “Daddy” may never come out of your child’s mouth.

Never. That is a hard word for any parent to hear. But it is the reality for many mothers and fathers who have been given the challenge and privilege of raising a special needs child.

Honestly Acknowledge the Weight of Your Load

In his invitation, Jesus spoke to people who were “weary and heavy-laden.” He doesn’t ignore the hardship and pain that come with living in a fallen world.

Caring for a special needs child can be exhausting. We have experienced that with a son who is blind. One of the first lessons we learned was that sleep makes absolutely no sense to Andrew. It is always dark in his world, so why not be up at two o’clock in the morning? He went for years and years without ever sleeping through the night. Ever.

Andrew also had great trouble learning to walk. Because he could not see, he was not motivated to get up to go somewhere or to get something. He never saw another child walk so he had no model to follow. Lifting his head that far off the ground was terrifying to him.

Andrew also has complicated sensory issues, especially in his feet. Even touching the ground with his feet was extremely painful. That meant that until Andrew

was eight years old, he had to be carried or placed in a stroller or wheelchair every time he needed to be moved. There were plenty of days when one or both of us were weary and heavy-laden.

2. Cry Out to the Lord

What does a Christian do in such a situation? Ignore the pain because big boys don't cry? Wear a plastic smile? Just pretend everything is fine?

Approaches like that are not even close to what the Bible advocates, nor are they consistent with Jesus' invitation. God wants his people to genuinely and passionately cry out to him. Jesus says, "Come to me." He is urging us to bring our hurts, our questions, and even our complaints to his throne of grace.

One Scripture passage we treasure is Psalm 61:1–2: "Hear my cry, O God; give heed to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I."

In his book *Soul Physicians*, biblical counselor Robert Kellemen writes about the importance of developing spiritual candor, which he defines as courageously telling oneself the truth about life, "in which I come face-to-face with the reality of external and internal suffering." He goes on to say, "In candor, I admit what is happening to me and I feel what is going on inside me."¹

That is exactly right. Friend, please do not listen to anyone who says you have to be some sort of supermom or superdad as you raise your special needs child. Syrupy Christianity that denies the reality of suffering in this life is unbiblical. It won't be able to sustain you through the challenges and hardships that lie ahead in this journey.

Do Not Be Afraid to Express Questions, Confusion, Doubt, or Complaint

Some people believe it is wrong to question God. Really? That is not the message of the Bible. For example, the prophet Habakkuk was very concerned and hurt about what he perceived as injustices all around him. So what did he do? He took his questions to the throne of God.

How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and
You will not hear?

I cry out to you, "Violence!" yet You do not
save.

Why do you make me see iniquity, and
cause me to look on wickedness?

Yes, destruction and violence are before me;
strife exists and contention arises.

Therefore the law is ignored and justice is
never upheld.

For the wicked surround the righteous;
therefore justice comes out perverted.
(Habakkuk 1:2–4)

Those are the sounds of an authentic conversation between the Lord and one of his faithful servants. Commenting on Habakkuk's questions, one writer said

God is the friend of the honest doubter who dares to talk to God rather than about him. Prayer that includes an element of questioning God may be a means of increasing one's faith. Expressing doubts and crying out about unfair situations in the universe show one's trust in God and one's confidence that God should and does have an answer to humanity's insoluble problems.²

The same is true of a man named Asaph. He wrote Psalm 73, one of the most important discussions of suffering in the entire Bible. We would encourage you to drink deeply from this psalm, which illustrates a man who came to God with questions and complaints. He did so respectfully—there is no question about that. But he admitted, with words that Jesus would later use himself, that he was weary and burdened because he had questions and challenges that were beyond his own wisdom and strength.

Understand That in So Doing, You Are Being Like Christ

Jesus not only gave this invitation, he also modeled this kind of emotional and spiritual authenticity. Do you remember the words Jesus uttered from the cross? “I am thirsty” (John 19:28). “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46). The same compassionate Savior who invited us to acknowledge situations that make us burdened and weary was willing to do the same thing himself in his hour of greatest need.

How about You?

Have you been willing to honestly acknowledge the weight of your situation? Have you come to understand that it is okay to cry as you consider the special needs of your child? Can you bring yourself to admit that you are burdened and weary? When you think about the way you have responded to this trial thus far, would the word *authentic* be an accurate description? If not, what needs to change in the way you talk to God and others about the difficulties you are facing?

3. Accept the Responsibility

Jesus not only encourages us to acknowledge our burdened, weary condition, he also urges us to do something about it. Using a word picture that everyone in that day