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## An Unexpectedly Precious Gift

Susan CALDWELL

Little did I know how God had been preparing me for his birth. Little did we know what this child would mean to our family.

Joshua is our fourth and youngest child, born over ten years ago with a medical problem known as Down syndrome. This condition affects him both physically and mentally. Shortly after Joshua's birth a doctor told us, "Your son will learn to do many of the things other children do ... but it will take him longer." It took him much longer than most children to learn to roll over, sit up, stand up, and walk. But eventually he did. Those were days of great rejoicing in our home!

Though now ten years old, Joshua looks and acts like a six-year-old and is in first grade. He is learning to read, write, and do arithmetic, but will never learn as quickly or as much as the average child.

Our story about Joshua began two years before he was born when I was pregnant with his brother, Caleb. In my home country, people commonly ask a pregnant woman, "What do you want-a boy or a girl?" A typical reply is, "I don't care, just as long as the baby is healthy." But I have never been able to say those words. First of all, I have a brother who has never been able to walk. Second, I knew that the God who made us and loves us has not promised that each child he
gives will be problem-free, either physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually.

Early in my pregnancy with Caleb, a blood test suggested I might be carrying a child with Down syndrome. For the next six months I fought with God in my heart. Like everyone else, I wanted a normal child, not one with Down syndrome. Only a few days before Caleb's birth did I experience a change of heart. While walking along the ocean near our home, the thought suddenly came to me, "If this child has some kind of problem, he needs me." My thoughts had turned from what $I$ wanted to the needs of our child, and acceptance washed over my heart like the ocean waves sweeping over the sand before me. The fight was over. God won, and great was my joy. Not long after, Caleb was born, perfectly healthy.

While pregnant with Joshua two years later I refused the special blood tests, wanting to enjoy the pregnancy. And I did. How unexpectedly came the news only minutes after his birth: "He has Down syndrome." I could see in my mind a book on a shelf, once read. Taking the book in my hands, as it were, I opened it to the chapter and lesson learned two years earlier: This baby needs me. Our Father in Heaven had prepared me for his coming.

The morning after Joshua's birth, my husband Darrell came into the hospital room with a story. Our oldest son Luke, then nine years old, had asked his father on the way to school, "Dad, if God were to say to you, 'Which would you rather have-a child like Joshua or a normal child?' What would you say?"

Darrell's response: "What would you say, Luke?"
"I would say to God," Luke replied, 'Whatever you want, that's what I want."

Do you know what those words were to me? They were just what I needed to hear. No, more than that-they were just what my response needed to be: "Whatever you want, that's what $I$ want." Joshua, like every child, was a gift from God;' and God was enabling us to accept his gift.

[^0]Still, we had to endure a "season" of grief and disappointment. It was as if the child we had been hoping for had died-we needed time to grieve the loss of that child. It was kind of like going through a storm that lasted for a while. Eventually, the storm passed, the sky cleared, and the sun shone once again.

Accepting the circumstances that God brought into our lives did not occur in a single moment, but over a long period of ime. Many times God used his word to answer some of the deep questions of our hearts and to teach us truths that have instructed and guided us about having a child with special needs.

We have learned that God takes responsibility for how Joshua was made. One day while reading the story of Moses at the burning bush, I was struck with God's words to him: "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, Yahweh?"

Can you believe it? God was unashamedly taking responsibility for children who are born blind, deaf, and mute! It seemed reasonable to draw from that passage the truth that God was also taking responsibility for the way Joshua was formed in my womb. I cannot understand this. I only know that God can never be accused of doing wrong," and that his will for us is "good, pleasing, and perfect." ${ }^{3}$

We also believe that there is purpose in Joshua's life. One day I read a question Jesus' disciples asked him about a ce tain blind man: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

His disciples believed, like the people of that day, that there was a direct relationship between the man's or his parents' $\sin$ and this man's blindness. Jesus' answer must have surprised them: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

What wonderful news for that man and his family! The man's blindness was not a punishment for wrongdoing; instead, it was an opportunity for the work of God to be seen in his life. Likewise, there

[^1]is purpose in Joshua's having physical and mental problems-"that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

One way we have seen the work of God displayed in his life is in his personality and character. For example, he freely expresses praise to God. Sometimes while riding along on a moto, in the car, or playing at home, Joshua sings unaware and not caring that others may be watching and listening, and not attempting to draw attention to himself (though like every child, he is quite capable of doing that, too!). One day while walking along a road he sang over and over again, in a loud voice, "Oh the blood of Jesus, oh the blood of Jesus, it washes white as snow." Now there is a message that needs to be heard! The psalmist says, "From the lips of infants and children you have ordained praise."4

Joshua has a simple but strong trust in Jesus. One day last summer we were climbing a long, steep set of wooden stairs in the country. Joshua was getting tired, but we still had a long way to go. He started saying over and over, "Come on, Jesus; come on, Jesus...." until finally we reached the top. And then he burst into a heart-felt, "Praise the Lord!"

Another way we see the work of God in his life is through his compassion for people. One day while playing alone in our yard, he noticed a boy leading a blind man down our dirt road. Joshua rân to our bedroom, grabbed a twenty-dollar bill from our desk drawer (without permission) and ran to the front gate calling after them, "Boy! Boy!" His heart was touched by their need.

He is also very patient-both with himself and with others. His speech is not so clear as the normal child, and sometimes I cannot understand what he is saying. I may ask him again and again to repeat it, or to explain to me using other words. Joshua never shows impatience with this process. He keeps at it until I understand. I wish I were more like he.

He is very friendly, accepting, and loving. While riding by motodope on a Phnom Penh street, Joshua may call out a friendly, "Hello!" to some stranger. People are attracted to one whom they

[^2]sense loves and accepts them. Yes, he feels and expresses anger like the rest of us, but he is also very quick to forgive. These are some of the gifts that Joshua brings to the human family. And these are sonie of the ways in which, as different as he is from what we think of as normal, "the work of God [is displayed] in his life."

Over the years, on many occasions, God has shown his protection over this child who does not understand danger as well as other children. We have always had to be very careful about making sure that our home (and wherever else he may be) is a safe place for him.

In 1997 he found his way to the peak of a villa roof in Phnom Penh. Thankfully, he was discovered by another child and rescued, unhurt, by our oldest son. The message God communicated to my heart after that frightening experience was: "I am watching over Joshua." Is this not also "the work of God displayed in his life"?

In 1999 we were visiting our home country. I remember speaking in a church one Sunday in July about how God had proven his protection of our family. I went on to say with deep conviction, "And even if one of us were to be hurt or killed, he is still God and we will still trust him."

That very afternoon about twenty of us were walking up and down the streets of that city, searching for Joshua. He had wandered away during a backyard picnic. The name of the city is Lynn, and a local proverb warns, "Lynn, Lynn, the city of $\sin$. You don't come out the way you went in." As we searched I remembered what I had so boldly asserted in church that morning, and cried out to God, "Are you going to make me live out those words this very day?"

Thank God, he did not. After what seemed like an eternity, Joshua turned up at the police station. Someone had seen this little boy about to cross a busy street, took his hand, and led him to a safe place ... where his father found him and brought him back to his family.

When my husband came home with Joshua and I took him in my arms, I could not help but cry tears of utter relief. Joshua put his little arms around me and said a tender and heartfelt, "Sorry, Mom." We give glory to God who displays his work in the life of a child whose ability to understand is not as great as most children.

Quite honestly, Joshua's lowered mental ability has been the most difficult thing for me to accept. As I have considered the reason for this over the years, I believe it has to do with society's silent (though loud and clear) message that the mentally retarded are less valuable.

I needed the truths of God's word to battle this lie. Both the creation story in Genesis and the story of salvation throughout the Bible paint a clear picture: Human beings have far greater worth than anything else God has created. Only human beings were made in God's image and have the unique potential to have a relationship with their Creator. It was love for people that motivated God to send his son to die for people. People have value simply because their Creator has made it so.

Consider all the times Jesus spent healing people with needs in their bodies, minds, and spirits. He obviously did not consider them less valuable. He stopped, he noticed, he took the time to care for them. The message? People mattered to Jesus. And people with needs touched his heart.

Children also touched his heart. Although his disciples considered Jesus' time far too valuable to squander on little ones, Jesus made it perfectly clear that to him they mattered a great deal. "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

Joshua happens to be a child who is mentally retarded. But that is not a description of his worth. It just means his potential to learn is not as great as that of most children. However, he can learn and, in fact, has gone to school since he was three years old. He has always been in classes with "normal" children. This gives him the much-needed opportunity to be with other children, and gives his classmates the opportunity to relate to a person who is different from them. Of course, going to school also means that his teachers have to adjust their classroom goals and methods to fit Joshua's abilities. But Joshua's teachers have always been eager to do all they can to help him meet his potential. And that is what we see as the most important goal in formally educating him.

One of the most important aspects of educating Joshua is helping him learn good behavior. It perhaps takes more patience, persistence, and consistent effort to teach a child such as he how to conduct himself. But I have seen over the years that he can learn good behavior, and he has made much progress in this area. I am very grateful to all of his teachers who have exerted such a positive influence in this area of his life, and have helped us to expect a higher level of good behavior from him.

I remember when Joshua first went to school in Phnom Penh his teacher asked, "What do you do to help Joshua obey?" Thankfully, by that time I had learned that there was one thing Joshua disliked almost more than anything else, and that was a "consequence." Even at his young age he understood well its meaning: Something he would not want to experience.

A "consequence" might be having to sit alone for a while, not being allowed to play with a friend or his favorite toys, losing some special sweet cookie or cake after a meal, or not being able to watch television. The most important thing about a "consequence" is that it has to be something he would not want to endure. These particular "consequences" are meaningful for Joshua because he is a boy who loves being with people, playing with friends, playing with toys, eating sweets, and watching television.

An effective "consequence" not only has to be an undesired event, but it has to occur soon after the unacceptable behavior. For example, if Joshua is misbehaving now, the "consequence" must occur as soon as possible so that he understands the connection between his undesired behavior and the "consequence."

Whenever I say the words, "Joshua, do you want a consequence?" I better have one in mind in case his behavior does not improve. When I first started using this method of correction, I often had to impose a "consequence." It was as if Joshua were saying, "I don't really believe you will do anything that I don't like." Now he believes me and rarely tests me when I ask him the question.

However, he does have a stubborn streak. Occasionally, he acts like a cow that stands still and refuses to budge no matter how hard one tries to move it. In fact, the more one prods the cow, the
more firmly it resists! At such times, the best thing for Joshua is to be alone until his stubborn streak quiets down within him.

Finally, I must be careful not to overuse the "consequence" method. Like cloth that will wear out from constant use, this method of correcting his behavior will no longer be useful if I ask the question too frequently.

Sometimes I have to think about why Joshua's behavior is not appropriate on a given occasion. Recently his teacher called me from school at lunchtime. "Joshua and another boy were in the changing room after swimming," she said. "We heard Joshua screaming and ran inside. They had been hitting each other." We never learned from Joshua why he was so angry with the other boy. Joshua only said, "He hit me."

When his doctor heard this story several days later she asked, "Was the other boy a new student?"

Surprised, I replied, "Yes. How did you know?"
"Of course he was a new student," was all she said.
His teacher told me, "When Joshua is saying or doing something the other children know is naughty, his friends who know him well say, 'Don't pay any attention to him.' They understand at their young age that he just wants their attention, so they are making a very wise decision: Ignore him!"

When Joshua has a sudden, unusually strong outburst of improper behavior, I have learned to ask myself. "Is he getting sick?" I have observed this enough times to keep this question in the back of my mind. Of course, Joshua is also capable of becoming angry with another child just like all children. We try to understand the cause of the outburst. In the case of the changing room story, I learned a few days later that he had an ear infection and was, indeed, sick. That may have been the cause of his outburst of anger. And then again, maybe not. Sometimes we just don't know.

We simply do not have all the answers about how to raise this child ... or any of our children for that matter. We pray for God to give us wisdom. He loves to answer that request. ${ }^{6}$

[^3]We do not know Joshua's potential. God does. He knows his plans for our son. ${ }^{7}$ We are filled with hope, not because of what he may accomplish in the eyes of men, but because we believe the words of Jesus: "This happened that the work of God might be displayed in his life." ${ }^{8}$

Now when I think of how I fought with God over receiving a child like Joshua ... well, I smile. He has turned out to be an unexpectedly precious gift. "As for God, His way is perfect."? To God be the glory!

${ }^{7}$ Jer 29:11.
${ }^{8}$ Jn 9:3.
${ }^{9}$ Ps 18:30.

























































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[^5]
[^0]:    'Ps 127:3-5.

[^1]:    ${ }^{2}$ Deut 32:4.
    ${ }^{3}$ Rom 12:2.

[^2]:    ${ }^{4}$ Ps 8:2.

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