

Mothers of Disabled Children

Learning from Reid

by Nicole Whitacre

I was ten years old when Reid was born to our friends Drew and Diane. At our church's school, my math teacher Miss Kisiel led our fifth grade class in praying for him. God, would you please not let Reid die, and Jesus, would you please help him to feel all better? God heard those child-prayers. He did graciously allow Reid to live. But for reasons known only to Him, He did not choose to heal Reid—in this life anyway.

Reid was the first severely handicapped child I had known. And in our church family, Reid was something of a celebrity. His parents taught us how not to be afraid to talk to him. His sisters Erin and Vicki showed us how to love him. And Reid taught us too. He is still teaching us.

Drew and Diane are long-time friends of my parents—they've known them since before they were married—and are vital members of Covenant Life Church. As my high school literature teacher, Diane inspired me to love and read the classics through the lens of God's Word. She inspired me even more by her tender, joyful affection for Reid.

So to us, it's only fitting that we begin this series for mothers of disabled children with our dear friend. Thanks, Diane, for sharing with us the grace God has given you in the gift of your son, Reid.

It is difficult to write down 20 years worth of lessons that God has taught me by giving birth to and raising a handicapped son. Nothing prepared me to give birth to a severely retarded quadriplegic. He came when I was 23 weeks pregnant. He had a brain bleed when he was 6 weeks old. He developed cerebral palsy. I had a 16-month old toddler. Things were chaotic.

The first lesson I learned was that God allows suffering, and that doesn't mean he doesn't hear my prayers. For two years I believed that God's will had to be total healing for Reid, and that would result in the entire staff at Children's National Medical Center converting to Christianity. For whatever reason God allowed Reid to be born early and he allowed him to develop catastrophic conditions.

The second lesson that I learned is that my relationship with God is more important than having my questions answered. Every time I demanded to know "why", I was plagued with the thought that maybe God doesn't exist or that he doesn't exist the way I have always believed Him to (Jesus as His Son, the Bible as His Word). I eventually came around to the resolution to believe in Him—even if I never know why he allowed Reid to be born early.

I learned how selfish I am. Having a healthy baby is enough to teach any woman this lesson, but to have a healthy active toddler plus a baby on life support who never gets toilet trained, feeds himself or dresses himself, and who is constantly needing to see doctors or be hospitalized, is beyond stressful. Erin spent her whole childhood going to doctor appointments with me!

I wouldn't want anyone to think that we just breezed through the early years joyful every day. I had to walk through hardship and pain before the joy came.

But joy did come to Diane. Check back to read the conclusion of her story tomorrow.

On To Joy

by Nicole Whitacre

Here is the conclusion to Diane's story...

We are the happiest family I know. Reid is a part of our family and his smile is one of the biggest blessings of our lives. The girls are not shy of people with handicaps and disabilities. They are sensitive to others. They are kind. They are gentle. They have always lived with limitations on where we go and what we can do, so they are grateful for all that God has provided for us. We have all learned to love expecting nothing in return, as Reid has never spoken or reached out to hug us.

One may look at a family like ours and wonder how we can even survive. We were encouraged to put Reid in a home for seriously handicapped children because our "quality of life" was at stake. But we have learned what is important in life, so I think that we (especially Drew and I) are not tempted to have our way in petty areas. We don't fight over which way the toilet paper is rolled out or how the toothpaste is squeezed! Life is far too short and precious for

that nonsense. We laugh uproariously at the dinner table. We read books together a lot when the kids were younger, but now we discuss the books we are reading. We read to Reid. We play all kinds of music for him--everything from Bach to Leon Redbone! We take him with us when we can, although that is harder as he gets bigger.

Mainly, I love God more and I am closer to Him. I come to Him on His terms, not mine, and He is the answer to all my prayers.

Having a retarded or handicapped child does not mean you are sentenced to a life of hardship. Jesus makes us buoyant, and the Holy Spirit gives us comfort. I used to pray for total healing now. Now I pray that the Holy Spirit will speak to me and that I will know his voice. Our family is very close and very joyful. Life is good.

God and the Disabled

by Carolyn Mahaney

As a pastor's wife, I often have a front row seat to observe people walk through trying circumstances; and it invigorates my soul and builds my faith to see God's grace at work in their lives. Such has been the case as I have watched Drew, Diane and their girls welcome, accept, delight in and care for their disabled son, Reid, for the past twenty years. What magnanimous grace this remarkable family has exhibited!

Yet, to be completely honest, I've also wrestled with questions, fears and doubts as I've witnessed godly people experience severe trials such as the one Reid and his family have endured. Why did God allow this to happen? Why hasn't God healed Reid? What is God's plan and purpose for our friends' handicapped son?

As in every arena of life, we must resolve our questions and fight our doubts and fears through Holy Scripture. To help us discover what God's Word has to say regarding people with disabilities, we want to encourage you to read an article by Peter Avery: "Then shall the lame man leap like a deer: God and the disabled."

Himself the father of a disabled daughter, Mr. Avery notes that, "Families never plan to have a disabled child. We live in a society that strives for and idolizes perfection, with people paying exorbitant amounts of money to have reconstructions done on their bodies." But, he also observes that one in five of his native Australians have a disability.

So, he continues, “The question I want to ask is, ‘How do people with bodies that are less than perfect fit into God’s world?’ What is the big picture of how God views his creation? How does he view people with disabilities? How should we view them? How do people with disabilities fit into his plan?” In this honest, thorough, and hope-filled survey, Mr. Avery outlines what Scripture has to say in answer to these questions.

Even if you do not have a family member who has a disability, no doubt you know someone who does. This article will arm you with a biblical viewpoint and equip you to more effectively care for the disabled and their loved ones.

(Thanks to our friends at *The Briefing* for allowing us to make this article available to our readers free of charge.)

What Irene Taught Me

by Carolyn Mahaney

This series on mothers of disabled children allows us to introduce you to some of our heroes. These women lavish their disabled children with love and care. Yet, very often their children are unable to thank them--in words anyways. So we want to say "thank you" on their behalf.

Today I want you to meet Irene--another one of my heroes. Irene served as my husband's secretary before she married Jeff, and this dear couple have been faithful members of our church for many years. As with Diane, there is so much I could say about Irene, but I'm going to let my good friend Charlotte--who has observed Irene up close for many years--introduce you to this godly woman.

"What Irene Taught Me"

I've known Irene Herbert for almost 20 years but we were not close friends at first. She married five or six years before I did and had her first baby about a year later. Her precious firstborn, Bethany, is fifteen now. She has never walked or talked. She is fed through a tube in her stomach. She has several seizures on most days and sometimes she drools. Irene and her husband Jeff love Bethany passionately. They have taught their five other children to love her like that. I didn't understand that love at first, but when my child, Valerie, was born with Down Syndrome, Irene taught me how to love Bethany too.

Irene has a tenacious belief in God's sovereignty and in His word. She has always considered her daughter to be a precious gift from God, fearfully and wonderfully made. She beams whenever Bethany focuses her eyes on Irene's face, even for an instant. "See how she knows me," she'll say. Though I usually can't see much difference in Bethany on any given day, I know Irene can. She knows her child. Irene taught me to see Valerie like that. A precious gift, made in the image of God. She taught me that even when others don't understand Valerie, I can. Watching Irene taught me that God helps mothers like us to see things in our children even when no one else can.

Irene doesn't compare Bethany with any other child. To Irene, Bethany is complete the way she is. Though she has many serious limitations, Irene doesn't consider her to be less "human" or "worthy." Irene accepts Bethany's disabilities and rejoices as she sees God's hand in every tiny step of progress. She sees her other children that way too. Irene is keenly aware that all growth comes from God and she is grateful for evidences of grace in any of her children. She has taught me that comparison is so unwise. She's taught me to love Valerie as God has made her and to delight to watch her grow on the unique path he has given her, and to do that for all of my children.

Though Irene sometimes wonders why God made Bethany the way she is, I have never heard her charge God or demand an answer. She doesn't complain about caring for Bethany, bathing, dressing and diapering her. Recently, Bethany's health began what may be a slow decline. Last month she spent several weeks in the ICU. Irene spent many nights at the hospital serving and praying for her child. "I know one day I'll have a conversation with her," she told me. "One day she and I will be in heaven together and we'll have so much to talk about." Irene has taught me to have an eternal perspective. This is not all there is, it's just all we see now.

In Her Own Words

by Carolyn Mahaney

Irene—whom you met yesterday—was unaware that we were planning to post Charlotte's tribute to her when she sent us the following email last week. The thoughts she shared with us further illustrate her faith in God that Charlotte described so well. So we wanted you to hear from Irene herself about the grace of God she's received as she cares for her daughter Bethany.

Thanks Carolyn for doing a series on this topic. As you know my first child, Bethany is severely disabled and this was such a surprise for us to be in this trial early in our marriage. But I must say to the glory of God and credit to our church and leadership that we've always felt cared for, loved, blessed beyond measure. I had moments in the beginning (when she was like two) of feeling awkward when invited to a "discovery toys" party and realizing Bethany wasn't doing anything "normal" ...but my friends and the Lord Jesus Himself has always been a comfort. My husband had led me so well in never doubting the fact that "God is always good." This has all helped in keeping us steady and strong. Not that we haven't had our moments but for the most part God has given us grace not to get depressed or doubtful of His love. Somehow, in more ways than we'll know (until we get to heaven) God is using our severely disabled daughter as "an arrow (though a silent one) in the hands of a mighty warrior." We've met people and become friends with people we would have never known if it were not for Bethany. We've brought nurses to church and they've been able to see our lives and hopefully the gospel lived out because they've been in our home caring for her. Hopefully our kids will always be compassionate toward others in need because of their sister. There's so much we don't know but we are grateful that we know God and that we are in a local church. His grace truly is amazing...

Love,
Irene

God's Hope for the Disabled

by Nicole Whitacre

What do you say to the parent whose child will never have a mental ability beyond six months?

In his sermon, "The Triumph of the Gospel in the New Heavens and the New Earth" pastor John Piper answers this very question:

"You read to them, with tears and with the joy of hope ("sorrowful yet always rejoicing") Romans 8:18-25."

Piper's advice is directed to his fellow-pastors, but can encourage and equip all of us with the hope of an eternal perspective.

You can read the entire sermon, or the following excerpts from Justin Taylor's notes, beginning with the Scripture passage:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

1. God promises that there will be liberation for this creation from its bondage and decay. V. 21: "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption."

Your disabled son will have an eternity to run and leap to the glory of God--and this world will have seemed like a light and momentary affliction.

2. This liberation from its natural order will be a participation in the freedom of the glory of God. V. 21: " the creation . . . will . . . obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

Your child will not be changed to fit the new glorified universe. The new universe will be changed to fit the glory of your child. He will not have to adapt anymore; everything in creation will be adapted to him.

3. The arrival of the new liberated creation is compared to a birth; so there's not only continuity with this world, but also discontinuity. V. 22: "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."

Will my disabled son ever grow up? Will he eat on his own? Will he be able to make anything? God will make this world in a way that nothing is wasted. Your son will eat with Jesus. God will give him full development, for his maximum joy and God's maximum joy.

What's the deepest assurance and highest hope we can give these parents?

4. The hope of having redeemed bodies in the new creation is secured by our salvation which we received in the gospel--but this (receiving new bodies) is not our best hope. Vv. 23-24: "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved."

The ultimate gift and good of the gospel is not the redeemed bodies, not propitiation, not justification, not forgiveness of sins--these are all means. The ultimate good of the gospel is the glory of God himself in the his crucified and risen Son. 1 Pet. 3:18: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."

The risen Christ will never lay down his risen body, but will keep it as an emblem of Calvary, where God's grace was displayed most fully. We will sing of the slain lamb forever.

Wait Until Then

by Nicole Whitacre

Yesterday we pointed you to a sermon by John Piper on the glories of the new heaven and the new earth. Deep truths for adult minds. Today, we are pleased to recommend a book that communicates these deep, biblical truths to our children.

To me, a well-crafted children's book is simple enough to engage my child's imagination, and profound enough to evoke my own emotions. Such is Randy Alcorn's *Wait Until Then*.

This story of a boy suffering from cerebral palsy and his grandpa is an invaluable resource for several reasons. First, it introduces the reality of suffering to children—such as mine—who are totally unfamiliar with pain or trial; yet it doesn't overwhelm their still tender understanding or tempt them to fear.

Also, by creating a main character who has a disability, Mr. Alcorn helps children who don't have a disability relate to and understand—at least a little bit—those who do. But most importantly, this book contains a clear gospel message and creates anticipation for heaven.

In addition to the excellent written content, you and your children will surely enjoy the vivid—almost real looking—illustrations by Doran Ben-Ami. And the final picture is especially sweet.

As we conclude this all-too-brief series, we want to thank those of you who wrote to tell us of the joy and blessing that your disabled child, sibling or friend is to you. No doubt, we could continue indefinitely to marvel at the grace of our Lord as expressed in the lives of these precious children. And the good news is that someday, we will.

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold I am making all things new.’” Revelation 21:3-5**

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