

Parenting a Special Child

By Miltinnie Yih

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All children are special, but when our oldest son, David, was born 28 years ago, he was special in another way: he was autistic and mentally handicapped.

Sometimes we get the impression that we can plan our families: when to conceive, when to give birth, and even what the child's gender will be. Soon, possibly, we will even be able to select physical and personality traits for our child. However, every once in a while, a special child gets "placed" into one of our families through natural processes. Today, science can help to detect such placements before they actually occur, but mostly for the purpose of giving parents the option to abort the living embryo if the child is potentially handicapped. Whether parents choose this option depends a great deal on how they think this child came to be with them. Was it accidental? Random? Bad luck? Or a "placement" by God?

We waited five years to begin our family, until after my husband Lee completed service requirements in the army, and finished business school. During this time, I taught high school in San Francisco. The time seemed perfect. After an uneventful pregnancy, David was born. On the birth announcements, I wrote, "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow" (James 1:17).

We didn't know then that things weren't perfect with David. When he was about one year old, he began to regress in his speech from about fifty words to almost none. He also became more agitated, and had unpredictable and uncontrollable temper tantrums. He no longer made eye contact with us, and did not play with toys in a conventional way. When we finally got the diagnosis of autism (at about age two), it was a relief. At least we finally knew what was happening with our son.

What is the diagnosis?

In David's early years, autism was not easily recognized and diagnosed and we "suffered at the hands of physicians" (Mark 5:26). Children like David were given such diagnoses as "spoiled", or "emotionally disturbed", or "mentally retarded". Often the recommendation "needs to be institutionalized" was added. This diagnostic rollercoaster played havoc with our fears and insecurities, until we finally began to rely on our own knowledge and judgment about David to see if they rang true. I still remember when Lee said, "This physician may have a Ph.D. in Psychiatry, but we have the Ph.D. in David."

When David was five years old, we were told by still another professional that he should be institutionalized because we couldn't give him the consistent training that an institution would provide. But we decided that, however inadequate we were, we could at least give him love, and we would trust God to help us through any other difficulties. When we turned down a grant for his full institutional care, they shook their heads in dismay and told us we were doing the selfish thing. In the face of this kind of withering pressure, we found comfort in being able to trust the Lord.

Looking for Answers in Books

In the beginning, reading the myriad of books about autism kept my mind whirling. One night, as I worried about David's future and his life span, I felt anguished and couldn't sleep. Turning to Scripture, I found particular comfort in Ecclesiastes 12:12 which said, "But beyond

this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.” I decided then to stop reading the growing stack of books on autism and try to have a more balanced approach to our life situation. I wanted to trust God more than I trusted these books.

Questioning: Is it My Sin, or God’s Doing?

As a Christian, another set of questions began to torment me: Why is God doing this to my son? to my family? to my husband? to me? I racked my brain to think if there was something I had done while I was pregnant to cause this condition. Since David was our first child, I had been exceptionally cautious and diligent with myself, so I felt confident that it wasn’t a result of some carelessness on my part.

However, when a pastor asked us if there might be some unconfessed sin in our lives, the possible cause shifted from the realm of the physical to the spiritual. At first we felt affronted by the suggestion that this could be a result of our unconfessed sin. But we were anxious to find the cause so that we could quickly remedy the situation, that we willingly went through the process of self-examination, just in case. We would do anything to get David healed, if only it were something as simple as confessions, or promises, or bargains with God. As our lives scrolled before us like computer programs before a virus scanner, we tried to confess all the sin that we could recall. But, we knew that if God wanted to pay us back for something, He had plenty to be angry about from our life before we knew Him. Is **that** what this was about?

If God wanted to deal with me according to my sin, I deserved far worse. Unlike Eastern religions that teach that karma and retributive deities bring calamity as repayment for bad deeds done in this or a past life, God deals with His children on the basis of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Christians, we don’t get what we deserve. Jesus got what we deserved, and He gave us what we didn’t deserve: forgiveness. And this forgiveness allows us to reconnect with God.

I was riveted when I read in John 9 that the disciples, encountering the man born blind, asked the Lord, “Whose fault is this?” Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.” This brought me great relief, because it meant that God was not dealing with me according to my sin, but according to His own purposes. I felt that the huge ball and chain of guilt had been released from me and from that point on, I looked for God to display His work in my son.

Who is responsible: Satan or God?

In order to find a cure, the cause of the problem must first be established. At the heart of this are the underlying questions: Who is making this happen? Who is in charge? Is Satan the cause of this in my child or is God? These crucial questions determine the proper route to take.

If Satan is the cause, then we must muster all forces to oppose him and recognize that our son is under a demonic dominion. At best, this kind of thinking keeps us alert and vigilant, however, it makes us afraid of our own child. This approach weakens God’s position and His ability to handle Satan and his wiles. We could spend our time and resources trying to oppose Satan. But by far, the worst outcome would be to find that, all along, we had been fighting God, and not Satan. Throughout Job’s ordeals, he continually identified the ultimate perpetrator of his suffering as God (“Though He slay me, I will hope in Him” Job 13:15), and never once as Satan—though Scripture shows that suffering comes directly from Satan’s hands. The sooner we identify that God is ultimately and fully in charge, the sooner we can begin to grow through our suffering.

While God is not the author of evil, He is master over it and He uses it redemptively. We live in a fallen world, under the curse. Sickness and death are part of the consequences of our sin. When Christ came, the curse began to break. However, the curse will not be broken completely and abolished until eternity (Rev.22:3). Meanwhile Christ helps us to begin to reverse the curse as we “do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove

yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:14-15).

Who versus Why?

As I wrestled with the “Why’s” of David’s autism, it dawned on me that this was the wrong line of thinking. Why do I want God to tell me why? Would reasons really satisfy me or would they simply put me in a position to judge God instead? Could I really understand the workings of God? Though Job asked, “Why?” God only answered by asking him “Who?”

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth! Tell Me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements, since you know? Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:2-7).

While on earth, we may not know the “Why” for difficult situations. But we can know the “Who” of it. Who is in charge? “I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I’ve entrusted unto Him against that day” (2 Timothy 1:12). Asking Why will not give us the right perspective, only asking Who will.

The sovereignty of God became a strong pillar in the foundation of my faith. Even though things did not improve for a very long time, I clung to this passage: “And we know that God works all things together for the good for those who love God, to those who are called according to His purposes” (Romans 8:28). God is in charge of all things. He is fully in control, and is not subject to random quirks in the system, nor is He at the mercy of Satan.

Nothing comes to us except first through the hands of our loving heavenly Father. Our child was not God’s accident, or mistake, or my personal lapse in prenatal care. God has

purposes we don't know about. He knows the end from the beginning. Just knowing that He does have a bigger purpose in everything that happens in my life, and that it is for good purpose, is a great relief. This is why the first three words of Romans 8:28, "And we know," are so important. If we didn't know, we would be relegated to consider our "bad luck" and spend the rest of our lives trying to "get over", or oppose this "bitter fate." Instead, I can see my child as a special gift from God, not a burden or a punishment. And when times get tough, He tells us to

Come unto Me, all 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 shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My load is light"

(Matthew 11:28-30).

God has all things in hand: He knows all about your child and his needs.

My frame was not hidden from Thee, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth. Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Thy book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me when as yet there was not one of them (Psalm 139:15-16).

God also knows all about you, your needs, and your suffering.

Your child comes to you from God with His grace. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, you have the opportunity to gather just enough daily, and no more. We have a tremendous opportunity to know His faithfulness and goodness as well as our own need and deep dependence on Him. As parents it is our privilege to go to Him often, "for we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrew 4:15-16). God would not give you this child to ruin your life and the lives of every member of your family, for it is God who has promised "to work all things for good."

Fixing, Bargaining

In my observation, it is often more difficult for fathers to deal with having a handicapped child because they want to be able to “fix” things. Failing in this, they often detach themselves and leave much of the coping with daily pressures to the mother. This often becomes a wedge in the relationship that is already strained by the demands of the child. My husband, Lee, was supportive of me, but at that point in our lives, he was beginning his career. It became easier for him to occupy himself with work, than with David and our home situation. Sensing that Lee might be unconsciously pulling back from David, I tried to shield him from the more unpleasant aspects of raising David since I was a full-time stay-at-home mom. I wanted to make Lee’s time with David more enjoyable, so I didn’t ask him to do the more onerous tasks. He did his share of changing diapers, but I didn’t expect him to do the daily training that I did with David.

Lee’s desires for David to be healed were deep and sincere. One day he made a bargain with God that if David were healed, we’d become missionaries. However, when David didn’t get healed, we realized that at some point in our future, we would be missionaries *regardless* of whether God healed David or not in this life.

Asking “Why?” or “Who is responsible?” are common reactions to dealing with difficult situations. Bargaining is another. We always need to be aware of our own attempts at manipulating God, and not let our child become a stumbling block to our obeying God’s calling for us.

Desperate Desire for Healing

What parent doesn’t fervently ask for healing? Christians are invited by Jesus to ask whatever we desire: “And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.” (John 14:13-14). Of course, I had my own ideas of how God could display His works in David. It seemed obvious that if God would just heal David like He did the blind man in John 9, it would be a great

opportunity to display His work! We would gladly spend the rest of our lives promoting God and this work.

There is a fine line between asking and demanding. And like Jesus, we ultimately are to surrender our desire to His will: “Yet not My will, but Thine be done.” (Luke 22:42). I sometimes had to remind myself that I exist to do His will and not vice versa. While sometimes God does deliver us **from** our trials, more often than not, He delivers us **through** them.

Coming to grips with our own vulnerability was one of our most difficult struggles. We faced a vast array of “cures” that ranged from diets, to vitamins, to faith healers, to prophetic promises, and even to exorcists. Everyone who loves you brings you new options. As Christians, how much do we pursue, and how much do we wait upon God? Could God be using these different means to help us grow spiritually? How do we decide? Parents need to come to grips with which remedies they are willing to try and which they won’t. What makes sense to them and what does not? What is possible and what is not? What is best for the whole family?

Acceptance

It took me an inordinately long time, at least ten years, to finally realize that there was no cure for autism. All new ideas were merely attempts to increase the possibilities of David’s improvement. The reality is that there are no cures known to man for autism. I wished that someone would have told me this early on in our experience with David. Parents should be wary of their own vulnerability and resist their own natural urges to push beyond what God wants for us. Of course, God can do anything He wants in His sovereignty, but we find it difficult to live in this tension and easily cross the line into presumption, lapse into passive acceptance, or fall into depression...

Incentive to Change

For the first few years of David’s life, I looked for and found signs that David would be healed, then looked expectantly for this to happen. Meanwhile, I tried to find ways to cope with

David's increasingly distressing behaviors. As the healing was not as forthcoming as I had anticipated, I took on the bifocal vision of imminence and pragmatism.

The most practical help I received was to learn how to use behavior modification to bring David's behavior under control. Frankly when the state regional services sent a trainer, I fully expected her to train David herself and was surprised to find that she wanted to coach *me* to train him.

At first I was suspicious when I heard about using positive reinforcements to train for desired behavior. I had to think carefully about how to use this concept in a Christian context. The use of reinforcements felt like bribery. As a Christian, I thought I should treat David with unconditional acceptance, despite this distressing behavior. When David had one of his temper tantrums I tried to console him with hugs. However, instead of helping to stem the tantrums, the hugs only reinforced them, and they continued. According to the trainer, withholding my hug from David until he stopped screaming would help him understand that he could not get his way by screaming. Not only was this easier said than done, it was unnervingly unnatural for a mother to do. I only agreed to try it when I realized that my own methods were hopelessly and painfully ineffective.

David's tantrums came about five times a day and lasted approximately twenty minutes each time. Within months, using these training techniques, his tantrums stopped altogether. We went on to work on other behaviors that needed changing, like widening his food range (which was quickly narrowing to only carbohydrates), making eye contact with us, allowing me to leave his sight, dressing himself, and eventually becoming toilet trained. David's socially acceptable behaviors today allow him to join us in most social situations and this is due to this early training.

My initial reservations about use of incentives gave way to a new understanding of how God, Himself, uses incentives to motivate us as well. Use of incentives is not wrong. But what

we use as incentives can be. Incentives should not be seen as a mechanical, magical means to control another person, rather, incentives, when they are used, should be used in the context of a loving relationship.

We are created to be motivated by incentives (both negative and positive)—God’s commands usually have promises for those who obey and punishment for those who don’t. God motivates us by promise of future praise (longing to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant”), or reward (Hebrews 11:6), fear of punishment, or loss of reward (2 Corinthians 5:10 and 1 Corinthians 3:15). These are personal, relational blessings.

In the beginning, we used cookies to train David because he loved them, but eventually we moved him on to more appropriate relational incentives, such as our praise, or approval. Our society effectively uses this kind of incentive system, too: students study for grades, but eventually, it is hoped that they will study for learning itself. Students can be faulted for only working for grades, but they are the first to admit that having no grades would adversely affect their studying. People work for a salary, but if money becomes more important than one’s own ethics or integrity or family, then this incentive becomes a problem in itself. Use of incentive in the context of relationships with God and others is the most crucial way to influence behavior.

Our selection of incentives reflects our values. Our view of what incentives can and should do also reflects these values. Do we want behavior change (absolute obedience?) to be because of mechanical, robotic, fearful, or magical incentives, or do we want behavior change due to relational responses?

I also had a mistaken concept of unconditional acceptance, a concept not found in the Bible as a description of how God treats us. While we are saved by grace, or unmerited favor, there is the condition of faith for salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9). While the kindness of God can lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4), God also “disciplines us for our own good, that we may share His holiness” (Hebrews 12:6-11). Mothers often mistakenly think that we need to

unconditionally accept any kind of behavior from their children as an expression of godly love for them that will eventually lead them to repentance. Parents can try to love unconditionally, but need to train conditionally. Our finite attempts at extending unconditional acceptance only look and work like license. They do not have the same effect as God's grace. Only God can extend grace, unmerited favor, to people because He is omniscient and omnipotent.

Missing Pieces

Autistics exhibit many ritualistic behaviors, compulsively repeating actions and words over and over and over again. This gives them a false sense of security that their world is predictable and controllable. When they are within their ritualistic system of behaviors, they feel more comfortable. When these behaviors are interrupted or thwarted, they have emotional fits.

While David could not count easily, he would know, at a glance, if one of the pieces of his 100-piece tinker toy set was missing. During these times, he would scream incessantly while we frantically dashed about pulling up rugs and furniture looking for the missing piece. To help him articulate his problem, I taught him to say, "Piece is missing," instead of screaming.

After a while, we realized that it was not in his best interest to give him the impression that puzzle pieces could always be found, or that his desire to have everything perfect would always be indulged. We realized also, that when things weren't going his way, he had to interact with us more appropriately. He realized that he needed us to help him, and that isolating himself within his own ritualistic behaviors did not achieve what he wanted. We carefully braced ourselves to teach him this new lesson about missing puzzle pieces.

When he began screaming "Piece is missing," we looked around for it, as usual. But if we could not quickly find the piece, we said, "David, you are right. A piece is missing and we can't find it, but it will be O.K." He looked at us with disbelief. "Piece is missing! Piece is missing!" he kept insisting. We calmly repeated, "Yes, the piece is missing, but everything will

be all right.” Because we maintained a consistent, calm front, David eventually accepted this approach, stopped screaming, and calmly said, “Piece is missing!”

This was a turning point for him in learning that things don’t always turn out the way he wants, but that it is O.K. This understanding led to his becoming more flexible in many other areas. As a result, we take him with us almost anywhere and everywhere we go. He is able to tolerate many and varied changes—his ability to adjust is remarkable for an autistic. It was a major decision in our family to teach him to fit into our imperfect world, instead of trying to make his world perfect.

It is sobering to realize that I, too, am autistic in my desire to have everything go my way. I liked having my “ducks in a row”, too. If they weren’t, and “a piece was missing,” I felt like having a fit. But God doesn’t allow us to always have our own way, because if we always get our own way, we don’t need Him any more. We become content in living within our own self-controlled world. When a “piece is missing,” in our lives, it reminds us that we really aren’t in control of everything that happens, but that we must behave appropriately by going to Him and engaging with Him to help us.

“No matter what”

When David was just learning to talk, he was “echolalic”, which means that if we asked, “How are you, David?”, he would answer with the same words, “How are you, David?” This was a difficult habit to break, but before we did, God “inadvertently” spoke to us through it.

Autistics don’t respond much to affection and we began to realize how difficult it was to continually be affectionate to a child without any response. So, to counter our own subconscious pulling away from David, we decided that when we put him to bed at night, we would tell him, “David, we love you, no matter what.” He repeated, “no matter what, no matter what, no matter what.” This poignantly reminding us of our commitment to him. We also began to understand

how “autistic” the world is to God, so unresponsive to His continuous outpouring of love. Yet, because of Jesus, God loves us “no matter what, no matter what, no matter what.”

Placed by God

Because David is the oldest of our three children, each twenty months apart, we decided not to stigmatize his younger siblings by mentioning that there was anything “wrong” until they asked. One day, when they were about four and two years old, Christie and Michael came to me to say, “David is bigger than we are, but he can’t talk. What’s wrong with him?” I dreaded this question and asked the Lord to help me convey to them what a gift David was to us. I told them that when God was making families in heaven, He knew that David would need a lot of extra love and wanted to find a family that would give him what he needed. “He looked down and saw the Smith family with little Suzie and Johnny...they have such lovely toys.” Then God thought, “I wonder if I should give David to them?” Christie and Michael shook their heads with great concern. “Well, how about the Jones family? Their mommy and daddy are so nice and a lot of fun?” “No, no!”, they insisted. “Then, God looked down and saw your mommy and daddy and little Christie and little Michael, and said, ‘I wonder if I should send David to them? Would they give him the love that he needs?’” “Yes, yes, yes!”, they shouted, jumping up and down as if they had just won the million dollar lottery.

They later asked if David would ever talk and I assured them that certainly in heaven he would, if not on earth. They began to wonder what he would say. I suggested that he would tell us how much he appreciated all the kind things that were done for him by others. David is only a shadow now of what he will be in heaven. So are we all. Sometimes it is very helpful to think about each other as we will ultimately be in eternity.

This was the beginning of their awareness of David’s differences and difficulties. Both Christie and Michael were taught early on that the world isn’t fair. This was obvious in our own

family—each wasn't given the same mental or physical capabilities. So, fairness is not about giving the same to everyone, it is about giving what each one needs.

We tried to include David in our family activities as much as possible, and when the children were young, we tried to keep them all together. Later as they got older, I encouraged them to take David with them to youth fellowship where he was accepted by the others in the group. However, as they entered their adolescent years, I didn't want them to dread being stigmatized by David. Instead, I'd rather they'd enjoy having him around, so I was more careful about asking them to include him in their activities. Sensitivity to their different stages in their lives was important. I was going for the long-run; I did not want my children to ever say, "My childhood or family was ruined by my autistic brother."

When David became too big for me to take to the women's restrooms, I enlisted Michael to take him to the men's toilet. This was a way to give Michael responsibility for David, and though it was difficult, Michael rarely ever complained. In fact, when they were young, Michael had been known to get into fights with boys who were older and bigger because they made fun of David.

Both Michael and Christie chose to write about David in their college entrance essays. Christie wrote about how David taught her about her own perfectionist tendencies. Michael wrote about how he always shared a room with David as a child, and how he appreciated David's willingness to accompany him to the toilet in the middle of the night when he was scared. "How many older brothers would do this for you?" he asked.

Humor Helps

Humor helped a great deal in difficult circumstances. Instead of letting a situation completely embarrass us, we chose to laugh about it. A recent example of this was during a concert of the Boston Pops when we all sat in the back row of the balcony. During a brief interlude of silence in the middle of a piece, David (now age twenty-eight) leaned over and

passed some nasty loud gas which was perceivable in everyway to everyone. When we all looked at him with alarm, he said, as he always says when he is defensive, “No more!” When he began to lean over again, his dad quickly and without a word (so he wouldn’t loudly say “No more!” again) got up and took him out the nearest exit. We were almost doubled over trying to contain our laughter. We now fondly refer to this incident as “the Boston POP!”

Ministering with a Special Child

When David was nine years old, we planned to go overseas to Hong Kong to do lay ministry, but we were cautioned that we would be leaving the country with the best educational and support services for an autistic child. This move, the professionals said, would severely hinder his chances for maximum growth and improvement. However, we didn’t think that God would call us to serve Him and give us a child who would hinder us from this calling. We must be careful not to automatically think that such a child would eliminate us from ministry. We decided to trust God to help us meet David’s needs. After all, God is The One we trust wherever we are, whether in Hong Kong, or in the U.S. It is good to remember that I am also in the hands of the One who holds my special needs child, and He “works all things together for the good” for us all.

Sometimes when a family has a handicapped child, there can be a danger of overly catering to him and letting him define who the family is and what they do. This kind of focus is not good for any children, handicapped or not. In fact, all children can be spoiled, handicapped or not, and we should train and teach them that they are not the center of the universe. They are sinners, too, and need discipline and limits. While we do try our best to give David what he needs in his world, we also try to incorporate him into our lives and ministry.

Spiritual Needs of a Special Needs Child

I was recently asked, “Is David a Christian?” David doesn’t have the mental capacity to understand the plan of salvation or to pray a prayer of repentance, or respond to an invitation.

Some would say that he has not reached the mental age of accountability and therefore he will not be judged. I do know that David has had the benefit of being prayed for, of being loved through the Lord, and of experientially knowing God's unconditional love. He responds deeply to Christian music, loves going to church, loves being prayed with. Even his teachers say "he has an exceptional spirit." Why is this? The gracious hand of our loving God is displaying His work in David. I trust God for David's soul as well as for his life. God has taught me through David that He is complex, and simple easy answers are most often not sufficient. I too look forward to that Day when David will tell me about his relationship to the Lord, and I'll bet it will be riveting.

"Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."

I Corinthians 4:6

What gives us value?

I always prided myself in getting a lot of things done. When I got up in the morning, I'd make a list of things to do, and at the end of the day, I'd look over what had or hadn't been crossed off. If a lot got crossed off, I'd feel good about myself. If not many were crossed off, I would feel slightly depressed or annoyed. I thought what made a person valuable was what he/she could accomplish.

David took five years to learn to be toilet trained—and only after I took him to the toilet every hour of his waking day for a full year. Now here's a boy with "become toilet trained" on top of his list for five years. Does this mean that he isn't valuable? Many would say he wasn't. Many today take tests while babies are in the womb to find out if they should seek an abortion.

But I learned that what makes a person valuable is not what he can do, but what God can do through him.

And in this way, David is very valuable to God. God has used him in my own life to teach me such traits as empathy, patience, endurance, hope, and love. David has also taught me much about God's trustworthiness, wisdom, power, love, kindness, and grace. David has been instrumental in changing lives of his father and sister and brother, as well as the lives of people who know us as a family.

God Displays His Work through David

David has been indirectly responsible for introducing many people to our Savior. These people are usually the most unlikely and difficult people to reach. While we lived in Hong Kong, I joined the board of the Hong Kong Association for the Mentally Handicapped, an organization with fourteen schools and special needs programs. Lady Jackie Bremridge, the wife of Hong Kong's Financial Secretary, started this association. Unbeknownst to most, she has a handicapped daughter who was institutionalized from a young age. Because we were both mothers of handicapped children, we developed a relationship that led to her becoming a Christian. I still remember our first words right after she prayed to become a Christian. She said, "Miltinnie, I know that God has brought you to Hong Kong for a purpose." And I replied, "Jackie, if it weren't for David, I would never have known you." And I treasured in my heart that this was David's first convert.

Another time, I had a chance to give a written testimony of being a Christian parent of a handicapped child to Deng Pu Fang, who is the son of Deng Xiao Peng, China's past Chairman. He was the Director of all services to the disabled in China, and was the keynote speaker at a Conference on Special Education in Beijing in 1988. I attended as a board member of the Hong Kong Association for the Mentally Handicapped. I handed him a copy of my testimony, and Deng promised me that he would read it. As he gave the keynote, I thought back to the days

when I first wrestled with the “why” of David’s autism, never guessing that one day it would lead me to the opposite end of the earth to tell a very powerful person about God’s even greater power.

David’s autism was the catalyst for conversations with many other people with whom we came in contact. Initial curiosity about David’s autism led to further friendships. Our conversations often turned to spiritual matters and eventually to Jesus Christ and His ultimate sacrifice.

People seem to be more attracted to the Lord as He demonstrates His strength in our weaknesses, than in our strengths. Scripture tells us,

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

Very few people are drawn to the Lord by strengths that I have, but many are drawn by my weaknesses. This reminds me of the Apostle Paul’s words,

He has said to me ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, and with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

Many other people have been influenced by David in one way or another, but just recently I met a Christian who, upon hearing that I had an autistic son, put his hand on my arm, closed his eyes to pray and began to weep. While I did appreciate his compassion, I had to say in all honesty, “It’s not that bad.” And I meant it because the Lord has displayed His in David and has revealed Himself to us in the process.

Perfect or Perfected?

What is a perfect child, a perfect family, a perfect life anyway? Are they possible in this fallen world? We are all imperfect. But some are more obviously imperfect than others. Special children are a reminder of this. Christian lives are not perfect, they are forgiven lives, and because of God's forgiveness, they can begin to be perfected in this earthly life. James tells us:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:32-4).

We are to welcome trials because they help to perfect and complete us.

How do we welcome trials? One way is by not always assuming we should oppose them. Sometimes, these trials and sufferings have great lessons for us, but we can't begin to learn them until we accept or welcome trials as teachers. Circumstances, like having a special needs child, are neutral in and of themselves; it is how we view these circumstances and respond to them that makes them tragic or triumphant. Lee, my husband, points out that the year that David was born, about 6,000 autistic children born. When God dealt the "autistic father" card into his hand, he decided that instead of cursing, or trying to get rid of the card, that he would make the best of it. His response was, "Let me take this card and play it the best I can to the glory of God!" As believers we can take circumstances that look like major stumbling blocks and use them as stepping-stones to get closer to God.

Perfection, and Eternity

Before we moved to Hong Kong, Otis Connor, a friend, gave us a set of twelve records of Christmas music and programs he had produced for radio. We copied some of the music onto cassette tapes in order to eliminate most of the talking. Back then, tapes were not directly recorded from a record player, so we did it very clumsily, with pauses and stops in lots of wrong places. We were only able to make two tapes before our departure to Hong Kong. David, who

loves music, instinctively knew there was something wrong with some of the songs and prepared himself for sudden endings or starts by bracing himself with a grimace each time just before it happened. Sometimes he would get very agitated before those spots. Our family got used to listening to these tapes every Christmas and it became a family tradition to play these tapes, even with all the strange pauses, starts, and abrupt endings in the wrong places.

The Christmas after moving back to the US in 2002, Lee and I decided to play the original records. I didn't realize what an effect this would have on David. As usual, he braced himself for the spots with the copying mistakes. However, instead of mistakes, the records played perfectly. The look on his face was stunning—unspeakable satisfaction and joy. It was as if he was saying “Ah, yes, at last, the way things should be.” He always knew the music wasn't right, but now finally it is right.

This is how heaven will be. Things aren't the way they should be right now, but they will be then. The best this world has to offer is only a poor fractured imitation of the way it should be. We learn to live with the imperfection now in this life, but in eternity things will be the way they should be and we will finally find unspeakable satisfaction and joy in perfection. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12)