

Your Special Child's Destiny

✖ *Don't lose hope if your son or daughter has special needs. God has a great plan for both of you.*

When a child is diagnosed with special needs, it can be an overwhelming, even devastating event in a parent's life. My husband, Jack, and I know because our son Nicholas was diagnosed with autism in January 2001.

If you are the parent of a special-needs child, you've experienced the agonizing pain, shock and even hopelessness that can grip your soul with such a diagnosis. In the midst of what seems to be a "dark night," one question may be burning in your spirit: Where is God?

Within that question lies many others we are often left to ponder: Does God have a plan for those afflicted with autism, ADHD, Down's syndrome or any other disorder? What destiny could they possibly have? Can God, will God heal them?

And what of the families? You may be wondering, as we were: Will we ever get our lives back? Will our marriage survive? Will we survive?

God has given all of us a promise we can hold on to: "'For I know the thoughts that I think toward you,'" says the Lord, "'thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart'" (Jer. 29:11-13).

As you face one of life's greatest trials, know that God is there for you. Despite numerous challenges, there is good news: You can still experience the joy of the Lord.

Joy and Sorrow

I remember the first time our son Nicholas said the word *shoe*.

Though that may not be a big deal for most parents, it was one of the most joyful moments of my entire life.

For months we had gone through the same ritual every day: I showed him the shoe, said the word over and over and then said, "This is a sh..." I always paused hopefully, and yet many days I felt the tears well up as I finished the sentence myself.

I felt lonely, confused and unheard by God. "Please," I pleaded, "just let him say one word!" And yet, day after day, nothing. The well of disappointment in my heart became deeper and deeper.

Then came that miraculous day when I said, "This is a sh..." and heard our son, diagnosed with nonverbal autism, say "shoe." Everything within me jumped! I laughed, wept and shouted. I hugged him and thanked God over and over.

The joy I felt that day was intense. It was easily as intense as all the pain I had felt each day that he had not responded.

Almost every parent of a special needs child can relate to this story. There has been some breakthrough somewhere that they struggled to see. When it finally came, the joy could not be described.

And yet, even though there can be moments of intense joy and victory, more often than not there is grief and sorrow.

So here's the big question: Can you live a life of joy and victory even if you have a child with special needs? I believe the answer is yes.

Sorrow and joy are firmly linked. Perhaps it is because the deeper we experience sorrow, the more capacity we have for joy.

That is why I felt such a deep sense of joy the first time Nicholas said "shoe": because I had felt such deep sorrow each

time he did not.

Although right now we may see only the sorrow and tears of the night, God has planned a bright and beautiful morning full of joy. The Bible tells us this over and over:

Weeping may go on all night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5, NLT).

“You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy” ().

“‘Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy’” (John 16: 22, NIV).

There are seasons in our lives when we will mourn and have sorrow. But there also are times that are meant for joy.

God sends times of refreshing to us. But regardless of the season, He is always at work to strengthen us and bring purpose and meaning to our lives.

His Joy Is Our Strength

One reason God may have for bringing joy after a season of sorrow is to bring a new wind of strength to our spirits. Grief and mourning rob us of our strength, both spiritually and physically.

But God knows that joy brings a new vitality and strength, for the joy of the Lord is your strength (see Neh. 8:10). Joy produces the kind of strength we need to move forward.

It is often very easy for us to believe that we cannot experience joy until we see this or that breakthrough in our children’s lives. We can actually come to the place where we feel disqualified from a life of joy because of the burden we bear.

But quite honestly, that is a lie from Satan, who is the father of all lies. Satan knows that if he can prevent us from

experiencing the joy of the Lord, he will keep us in a place of weakness and defeat.

Satan has a stake in keeping us separated from the joy of the Lord because it is linked with our strength. If we are sapped of strength, we will have difficulty in moving forward out of the hassles, anxieties and warfare we are in. Furthermore, we will not have the ability to receive the strategy we need to move into our next season.

As parents of special needs children, we are not disqualified from the joy of the Lord; we absolutely need His joy in order to remain in a place of strength for all that is required of us. God has promised us abundant life, part of which is joy.

Here are some of the disciplines that can help us maintain a joyful, abundant life:

Meditation. One of the ways that God has provided for our joy is contingent upon our willingness to take time to meditate on His Word. Why? Because if we just read God's Word without taking the time to give it thought, we deny ourselves the opportunity to receive personal revelation, refreshment and the promises He has for us and our children.

Prayer. Very simply, prayer is communicating with God. We will never advance in any aspect of our Christian lives without prayer. When we pray, the channels to God open—both ways. To neglect prayer is to neglect God Himself.

Fasting. For the Christian, fasting is essential. Often you cannot gain the revelation you need for your next step without it. Even Jesus agreed that some things simply could not be accomplished without fasting.

Fasting does not always have to mean food; it may mean other things we enjoy, such as television. But by choosing to give up something temporal in order to pursue something eternal, we make it possible for the Lord to reveal Himself more

powerfully to us. And to the degree that we allow ourselves to hunger after God, to that degree we will be satisfied by Him and experience His joy.

Giving. It is the very heart of God. And it is linked with worship. We cannot come into all He has for us in our lives if we are unwilling to give because we cannot reap what we will not sow.

Warfare. Whether we like it or not, we are in a war between the power of darkness and the power of light. There are times when we must enter into warfare-style praying in order to gain the strategy we need to defeat the enemy in whatever battles we face.

Worship. This is the place where we can come into intimacy with God. Worship is a lifestyle of focusing our minds and hearts on God and all that He is. It is a response to all He has done for us, and it is essential to living in joy.

Work. Many times we can speak to the mountain and see it removed (see Matt. 21:21). But other times we have to dig through the mountain to get to the other side.

This is what I call spiritual work. Most parents of special needs children that I have met understand this and are great at working for their child's recovery.

Rest. It is so essential to regaining strength and, in this way, it is linked with joy. We need rest for several reasons:

1. Rest is a matter of obedience to God. He directed us to rest through the observance of the Sabbath.
2. Rest is an issue of trust in God. If we are at rest, God is going to have to "watch the stuff" for us as we regain our strength.
3. Rest is a factor in our physical well-being. God created rest for us to stop and meditate on Him.
4. Restful quietness is necessary for us to receive revelation

and strategy for moving forward toward victory.

Destined to Overcome

It is my prayer that you will allow the Lord to bless you with abundant life, great joy, and a fresh wind of strength that will carry you and your family through to victorious days ahead! To help you, my husband and I have created a Web site that sends out daily prayers and scriptural encouragement for parents, family and friends of children with special needs.

Here is an example of a parent's prayer:

"Dear Lord, You see the pain and hopelessness that this disorder brings. You have seen my tears and know my heartaches in the midst of this devastating trial. And yet, God, You say that You have plans for _____ to bring him or her a hope and a future.

I thank You, God, that You have promised that when I call upon You, You will listen to me. So, Lord, I pray that You will begin this very day to set that hope and that future in motion.

Father, You do have a destiny for _____ beyond the confines of this illness. You have a great purpose for his or her life. I thank You, Lord, that I can trust in those promises and believe that there will be breakthroughs in days ahead.

The best is truly ahead, for You have many promises in Your Word concerning _____. Show me each and every day how You would have me pray to see all Your promises come to pass. In Jesus' name, Amen."

God has promised you hope, life, restoration and a future. Begin to receive His provision of joy and strength today. Seek Him and pray.

Grab hold of all that God offers You. You'll discover that He

has a plan and a destiny for every child.

Read a companion devotional.

Rebecca Wagner Sytsema has co-authored several books with Chuck Pierce, including *The Best is Yet Ahead* (Wagner Publications) and *Possessing Your Inheritance* (Renew), from which portions of this article were adapted. Sytsema and her husband, Jack, hosts a website for parents of autistic and other special needs children, .