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A Mother's Prayer through the Five Words of a Son with Autism

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Dear mother, Dear father, Dear guardian, Dear caregiver,

Recently, my friend has been figuring out that her child has autism, processing what that means for education, for church, and for family life. She grapples with lost expectations, daily challenges, confusion, and isolation. My parenting journey is not her own, but I relate to her pain and her hopes. I wrote this first for her and now share this piece in love specifically for parents of children with disabilities. Through a very specific lens of parenting a child with a disability, using the five words of my son with severe autism, I reflect upon the deep meaning of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:8-13.

Five Words

Due to severity of my son's autism, he is technically non-verbal, communicating very little using some pointing, motions and grunts, with only five actual words or signs. He uses approximations for two signs, and he speaks three utterances that work as words. Recently, I switched from disappointment that he has only five words to appreciation for the efficiency of those five words. Oh how well Johnny's five words summarize my Christian faith, as expressed through the *Lord's Prayer!*

Sign for Restroom—Our Broken World

"...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation...." Matthew 6:12-13

In American Sign Language (ASL), one can communicate a need for a restroom by forming either the letter "R" for "restroom" or "T" for "toilet" and twisting the wrist. Johnny uses an approximation of that sign by holding up and shaking his fist. How does communicating "restroom" relate to spiritual life? Frankly, disability hurts, and for many it just plain stinks. Adamantly, I declare, your child's disability is NOT due to YOUR sin or any fault of your own! I do believe that as a consequence of that first sin (Genesis 3), the earth entered into this fallen state. That fallen state includes weeds, thorns, and bee stings, sweat, tears, and disabilities. The world's fallen state hurt my son. That fallen world has hurt your child. That stinks!

When I pray the Lord's Prayer, yes, I ask forgiveness of my personal sin and protection from temptation (Matthew 6:12-13). I also acknowledge this world is a mess. I am part of this mess. My child's disability, not the result of his own sin, not the result of a parent's sin, is indeed the result of man's fallen state. So starting there, disability stinks!

Nah—Deliverance

"...deliver us from evil...." Matthew 6:13

One of Johnny's verbalizations is "nah" or a forceful grunt of "nuh". That works to answer "no", to decline an offered item or activity, or to express objections. Johnny's autism is intense. In desperation, we spent quite a bit of money and time chasing therapies offering any hope for communication or behaviors of autism. What we were really chasing was a fix to the fallen state of this world!

When I pray the Lord's Prayer, beyond praying for forgiveness of my personal sins and temptation, when I ask *"...deliver us from evil"* (Matthew 6:13), I'm also pleading for a fix to

the fallen state of our human existence, to every consequence of earth's sinful state, even to the end of all disability. I love my child deeply, all of him as he is! Still, I long for the day when he will no longer be limited by his disabilities. I plead for his deliverance from consequences of this world's fallen state. I know one day it will be so!

Yah—Yes to Worship

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Matthew 6:9

Johnny communicates “yah” paired with a single dramatic head nod to answer yes, or to accept an offer. “Yes” communicates acceptance, agreement, alignment. One lady in my church has complex disabilities. During worship, she sometimes plays along on a toy wooden violin, smiling broadly, aligned with God in worship. Jesus models for us to start prayer with acknowledgement of our familial relationship with God as “*Our Father*” the only one worthy of worship with a “*hallowed... name*” (Matthew 6:9), aligning with God in that relationship.

Johnny's sister once illustrated a vision of Johnny in heaven playing a wind instrument from which hearts blew out in heavenly worship. In Revelation 5:11-13, we have this beautiful vision of all “*...living creatures*” joining together in one voice to exclaim, “*Worthy is the Lamb... To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!*” I declare YES! Yes to the day when even those who are nonverbal can join in a loud voice declaring worship of the only one worthy of our praise!

Sign for Eat—Sustenance

“Give us this day our daily bread...” Matthew 6:11

Several signs in ASL use specific hand shapes, positions, and motions to communicate “eat”, “drink”, “food”, “snack”, or “water”. Johnny signs an approximation for all those by slapping his open palm against his mouth (sometimes gently, sometimes not so much). In Johnny's particular experience of disability, he lacks the skills to prepare meals or regulate food intake, so like an infant, Johnny is totally dependent upon caring adults to access food.

Despite my sometimes self-sufficient perspective, I too am completely dependent upon God to meet my needs. When Jesus modeled praying, “*Give us this day our daily bread...*” (Matthew 6:11), that bread goes beyond bread or food, to simply relying in faith upon God to meet all my needs. I recall intense moments as a parent of a child with a disability when God demonstrated His unique and sustaining care. In one such instance when my husband was out of reach on a mission trip and I needed to make a hard disability-related decision, I slumped to the

floor, praying desperately, “Lord, send me someone, anyone!” Instantly, I heard the crunching of gravel as a friend pulled into our driveway. An hour before I prayed, Debbie felt spiritual urging to hop in her car and drive 45 minutes to my home. That day, she was the miraculous tangible agent of Christ’s love on earth, meeting my exact need. When I need reminders of how God meets my needs, I remember that moment. As Jesus introduced this model prayer, he reminded me that, “...*your Father knows what you need before you ask him*” (Matthew 6:8). God knew what was happening in Johnny’s life before I did. God knew I would need emotional support that day. God provided. God knows our needs. God will sustain.

Ga Ga for Urgency—Come Lord Jesus

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:10

Finally, Johnny frequently utters a double syllable “ga ga” to communicate “now” or urgency or to express emphasis when folks are slow to respond to his communications of needs. We most frequently hear this in a request for a ride, or in the kitchen when the aroma of food preparation makes it hard to wait for dinner.

Somberly, I reflect on the situations of two families I know whose children live with degenerative disabilities. Their experiences with disability include less time together, so everything feels more time pressing. For the rest of us, what’s so urgent in our faith? For parents of children with disabilities, some days are heavy, some seasons are wearisome, and maybe it feels hard to see the hope. In Revelation 21, God gives us a picture of our future when God establishes his kingdom. In verse 4, God declares that, “...*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.*” In verse 5, he promises to make “...*all things new*” and in verse 6 he assures us that “*It is done!*” We trust in the promise that the broken state of this fallen world will be no more. All will be made new. That includes that in His establishment of His kingdom on earth, disabilities will be no more. Our hope in Christ includes this newness that is not wishful dreaming, but assured.

So how does this connect to Johnny’s utterance of “ga ga”? As this prophecy of heaven continues into Revelation 22, we see God’s own promise that we do not have to wait long. In verse 7 He declares, “...*behold, I am coming soon.*” In fact, in the last prayer of God’s word to us, in Revelation 22:20, we read, “*Surely I am coming soon... Come, Lord Jesus!*”

Conclusion

And so I join Johnny in my own worshipful plea and hope of “Ga Ga!” While on this earth, walking with others who parent a child with a disability, I know that one day, disabilities shall be no more. While on this earth, hurting with others who are weary in this journey of challenging parenting, I know this world’s brokenness is temporary. So we return to Christ’s introduction in his model of prayer, when we join Him in praise and hope, “*Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come*” (Luke 11:2). Even more emphatically, in Matthew’s reporting of this prayer (Matthew 6:10), “*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*”

Reference

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. (2008). Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles.

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