

“A parent’s gripping journey of awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of her two boys dealing with significant challenges brought on by autism. With the power of faith in the Almighty, Karla addresses head-on questions pertaining to family life, medication, early intervention, and education, equipping her children to maximize their potential. Karla gives all of us greater understanding of what it means to be human.”

—STEPHEN MARK SHORE, EdD, professor, speaker, author of *Understanding Autism for Dummies*, and individual on the autism spectrum

“Thorough and insightful. For the parent of a child on the autism spectrum, *A Pair of Miracles* is a comforting travel companion on the road Karla Akins has walked herself. With grace and candor, she brings both practical advice and biblical truth to readers prayerfully finding their way.”

—JOCELYN GREEN, coauthor of *Refresh: Spiritual Nourishment for Parents of Children with Special Needs*

“I wish I had had a reference like this on hand when my son with Asperger’s syndrome was of elementary school age. Karla Akins writes from the heart as a mom learning to cope with the many aspects of autism affecting her sons, and she skillfully covers the medical and technical issues of the spectrum as well. Chock-full of suggestions and aids, including detailed charts which facilitate working with your child’s educational team, *A Pair of Miracles* is not solely an excellent reference book but also a guide to loving and parenting children with autism.”

—DEE YODER, author of *The Miting: An Old Order Amish Novel*

“This book is a must-read not just for parents, schools, and churches but for everyone. My granddaughter is autistic, and had this book been published when she was diagnosed, it would have alleviated a great deal of anxiety, frustration, and despair. The inclusion of Scripture and Karla’s personal insights leave the reader with a better understanding both of autism and the spirit of hope.”

—PATTI J. SMITH, author of *Moments with God*

“Karla Akins has the rare gift of teaching without preaching, encouraging without admonishing, and entertaining while uplifting. Her insights are honest, genuine, and gained from experience. Enjoy this encounter.”

—DR. DENNIS E. HENSLEY, author of
The Power of Positive Productivity

“If you are the parent of a child or children with autism, like I am, and you need encouragement or just need to know you are not alone on this journey, please read this book—it was written for you.”

—MARY BETH DOLMANET, mother of a teen with autism

“*A Pair of Miracles* is an important book from Karla Akins about each stage of life with her two sons on the autism spectrum. By sharing her experiences, the good and the hard, Karla is a gentle guide through this unique life calling. I’m thankful to have mentor moms who have walked this road before me and share their wisdom!”

—SANDRA PEOPLES, community manager for Key Ministry and
coauthor of *Held: Learning to Live in God’s Grip*

A Pair of Miracles

A STORY OF AUTISM, FAITH, AND
DETERMINED PARENTING

Karla Akins

 Kregel
Publications

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*To Isaiah Michael and Isaac Matthew.
I'm amazed and grateful God gave me the miracle of you.
Oh, how I love being your Motherbird.*

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Introduction

*People were also bringing babies to Jesus
for him to place his hands on them.*

—LUKE 18:15

*Christmas 1998
Bentonville, Arkansas*

Where were they?

I scanned the children on the stage, eager to spot Isaac and Isaiah in the matching outfits I'd dressed them in for the Christmas program. I hoped their new shoes didn't bother them too much. They hated shoes.

One by one I checked each precious face, searching for my babies, but they weren't there. I checked again, certain I'd missed them in the confusion of teachers lining children up like living dolls—side by side—across the front of the enormous stage.

But there was no set of twins on the stage with matching outfits and brand new shoes. No crooked little smiles and droopy eyelids. No identical miniature boys with botched haircuts (because of their incessant wiggling) that helped others tell them apart.

My neck felt hot and tears pushed against the corners of my eyes. I stood and walked the long aisle to the back doors, a definite no-no for a well-mannered pastor's wife. I couldn't sit for one more nanosecond.

I had to find them.

Jo, one of my friends who often helped me with the twins, met me in the hall.

“I knew you’d be out here,” Jo said.

“What’s going on? Where are they?” By this time I couldn’t hold back the tears. Hurt and disappointment mixed with fear, creating a heavy pounding in my chest.

Jo blocked my way. “The teachers thought it best if they didn’t participate. I knew you’d be upset, but there was nothing I could do.”

“So, where are they?”

“In a room with David.”

David? The janitor?

I ran to the education area of the building with Jo at my high heels and found David staring at my confused, raging little boys banging their heads against the wall.

“What’s going on?”

I ran to the boys and took them in my arms.

The janitor shrugged. “I don’t know. I was told to watch them.”

“Jo, please help me find their shoes. We’re going home.”

I did my best to calm them, but they would not be consoled. It was too much. We had failed them. All of us. Me and their new outfits, the church, and their inexperienced teachers. I stuffed their shoes in my bag.

“C’mon, sweethearts. Let’s go.”

Jo picked up Isaiah and I scooped up Isaac. Together, we carried them screaming through the halls of the church.

A few weeks later in a private meeting with the head pastor, he shared some of his observations and concerns about the boys and then asked me something I’d never thought of before.

“Do you think you missed the will of God when you adopted them?”

I was stunned.

Did I? How was I to know? Were they not as worthy of love as anyone else?

My husband looked at me and I cleared my throat. Standing to leave, I said, “If I did, it doesn’t matter now, does it?”

That meeting reminded me of others who had warned me not to take this journey:

“You already have a ministry.”

“You’ll never have a successful singing ministry now.”

“You should think of all the other people who need you. Let someone else do this.”

“When you found out they were damaged, why didn’t you give them back?”

I’m glad I didn’t listen to them. It’s been a difficult, challenging journey, and I’m the first to admit I’ve made mistakes along the way. I’m far from a perfect parent and advocate. But I do not regret for one moment being what Isaiah says I am: their Motherbird.

Chapter I

The Call

Here I am; you called me.

—1 SAMUEL 3:6

I peeked into the car seat for the fifth time to see if he was real. “I can’t believe they’re letting us drive away.” I glanced out the back window. No one followed us. We were thoroughly alone with a brand-new human in tow. “They just handed him to us and here we are. I’m the first mom he’s ever known.”

My husband, Eddie, glanced at the rearview mirror. “I keep thinking someone is going to stop us.”

No one did.

The squirming little package snuggled deep in his car seat was safe—at least for now—from the frosty Iowa night and an uncertain future.

“Just in time for Christmas.” I sighed. “What a happy Christmas this will be.”

“He’s twice as small as our boys when they were born.” Eddie chuckled.

I nodded, remembering how fat and healthy our eight-pound sons had appeared when they came screaming into the world. This little fellow weighed just over five pounds and he practically disappeared in the soft blue sleeper I’d bought him.

Infertility issues brought us to foster care, and our love for children kept us hoping to make a difference in young lives. We initially became licensed foster parents, thinking perhaps we wouldn't be blessed with another child. But God did indeed bless us with a second son, and after moving to a new pastorate, we kept our foster license active.

"I'm already in love with him. It will be difficult to let him go when the time comes." I fussed with the blanket framing his face.

Eddie nodded. "He's a beautiful baby."

As an abandoned child myself, I kept a permanent corner of my heart for foster children and needy kids everywhere. My dream was to feed and comfort them all. I wanted them to know they were planned for and loved by God. I ached for hurting kids.

Eddie turned down the radio and glanced back at us. "What shall we name him?"

"Can you believe we get to give this tiny angel his first name?" I stared out the window at the stars in the black November sky. "How about Gabriel?"

"I like it. It's strong."

I looked down at the tiny bundle sleeping without a care. "What do you think, little cherub? You like it too?"

A Family for Gabriel

We were only supposed to have Gabriel for six weeks. Three months later the phone rang.

"Mrs. Akins, it's Carol from Lutheran Social Services. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Due to Gabriel's background, we're having a difficult time placing him. Because we don't know his developmental potential and the circumstances surrounding his birth, we—"

"Then why can't we keep him? I mean, he's three months old already."

"I wish that were an option, but our agency's policy is that we only adopt to childless couples."

“That’s not fair.”

There was silence on the phone. “No, it’s not. I’m sorry.”

I looked at Gabriel, smiling up at me from his bouncy seat. I was his mother. He was my son. How much longer before they took him?

It was too easy for me to grow attached: the night feedings, the smiles at changing time, the way he grabbed onto my hair. I was completely in love with that little man. And if there was one thing I wanted him to know, it was that he was wanted. He was loved. He had a purpose.

I kept a diary for him:

Dear Gabriel,

Today you reached for me and my heart melted. How very precious you are to me. You are such a dear, sweet baby. You cuddle up with no fear of tomorrow. You’re secure in your little bed as you sleep next to Mama and Daddy each night. Oh, how very much we love you. But I know that one day, I’ll not be able to hold you in my arms because you belong to someone else. I wish it wasn’t so. I even pray it isn’t so. But I want God’s perfect will for your life, dear one. I want you to grow wise and strong, and for you to fulfill the purpose God has for your life. How very precious you are to me, but how much more precious you are to God.

Love, Mama

Six months grew into nine months. Eddie and I filed papers with the state of Iowa to adopt. We submitted to a home study and revealed every single wart and skeleton of our lives. If no one was willing to adopt Gabriel, we were. We loved him as our own.

I prayed constantly.

“Dear God, please give him to us if it’s your perfect will. If not, please help me to let him go. But you should know, I don’t want him to leave. I want to keep him. Please, if there’s any way at all, please let him stay.”

Months went by and as he grew, we were hopeful that God would allow us to adopt this beautiful boy. He loved playing peekaboo with our youngest, Noah, and laughing at our older son, Jesse. He adored our daughter, Melissa, and squealed when she walked into the room.

“Mama.”

He called me Mama!

When he was nearly eleven months old, the phone rang.

It was Carol from Lutheran Social Services.

“This is hard, Karla, and I have strong mixed feelings. We’ve found a family for Gabriel.”

I couldn’t speak. My eyes welled up with tears.

What do you mean you found a family?

He already has a family.

And just like that, with one day’s notice, he was no longer ours. He belonged to Them. Those I Did Not Know. And I would never see him again. He would call someone else Mama and she would watch him take his first steps, learn his ABCs, and graduate from high school.

The next day I dressed him in his cutest outfit and packed all his clothes, except for the outfit I found him in at the hospital, his ID bracelet, and a pair of shoes. I sent his diary and a note to his new parents about all his favorite things: steamed carrots, listening to music, strawberry ice cream.

I imagined how excited they must feel to finally have their own child. Something they undoubtedly had longed for and prayed for. I imagined his reaction to them and how he would delight them because he was a bubbly, happy baby, and he’d had much attention from siblings and church folks and wasn’t afraid of strangers. I was certain they would fall in love with him immediately.

I couldn’t carry him out to the social worker’s car. I stood in the kitchen beside him in his car seat on the table and kissed his happy face with my tears. The little angel had no idea he’d never see me again—that he was going somewhere new and strange and wonderful. Finally, Eddie picked him up and walked him out to the car, and I could hear the tears in his voice as he spoke to the little fellow that he too had grown to love.

“You’re getting a new mom and dad, Gabe. You’re going to have a wonderful life.”

The pain was the most excruciating I’d ever known.

It was worse than death because he was out there somewhere and I didn’t know what he was feeling or if he was hungry or scared. I had to get away, to wrestle with these overwhelming emotions and cry out to God. He and I had business to take care of.

Wrestling with God

My friend Nancy, who is now with Jesus, had a family cottage on a lake. It wasn’t fancy but it was a peaceful, comforting refuge. How I managed the hour drive I can’t remember. But once inside the security of its walls, I cried as I’d never cried before.

“Is this what it’s like to lose those you love, Lord? How many of your children never return?”

Over and over I cried, “Though you slay me, I will praise you.”

In every room of the house, I shouted it aloud, thankful that it was off-season at the lake and no one was close enough to hear my gut-wrenching wails. It was a primal kind of crying I’d never experienced and hope I never will again.

Weeks later I got a picture of Gabriel and his new parents from the social worker. They were adorable. She was petite and pretty and he was extremely handsome with dark features. With Gabriel’s dark brown eyes, he could easily pass for their own biological child.

I was happy for their joy, but felt as if God had chosen them over me because they were more worthy. “What’s wrong with me, God, that you couldn’t see fit for us to keep him? What do they have that we don’t?”

Grief can skew your thinking. And I was confused, hurt, and not sure what to do with these overwhelming emotions.

But God knew.

And three months later?

We got the call.