

Autism's
Hidden
Blessings

Autism's Hidden Blessings

Discovering God's Promises
for Autistic Children & Their Families

Kelly Langston

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Publications

Autism's Hidden Blessings: Discovering God's Promises for Autistic Children and Their Families

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*To all of God's unique, blessed, and beautiful children
who walk this earth with a special need.*

*Your very presence here teaches us more than any book ever
could. Know this: God's heart—which has no limit—is for you!
You are greatly valued and loved beyond your wildest dreams.*

Oh, that I might comfort some of my Master's servants. I have written out of my own heart with the view of comforting their hearts. I would say to them in their trials—My brethren, God is good. He will not forsake you: He will bear you through.

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

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Preface

Throughout the writing of this book I've had you in mind. You're the parent or loved one of a child with autism. I'm so thankful for the opportunity to walk this journey with you, if only for the time it takes you to read this book. We are, after all, walking in similar shoes. I have no doubt that God led you to pick up this book. He has been leading me, in fact, to write it for a number of years as He walked with our family through times of darkness.

I remember the day when Alec was first diagnosed, when we received from the team of specialists evaluating our son the unexpected words, "Your son suffers from an autism spectrum disorder."¹ They each offered us a formal handshake, the last pressing a thin brochure into my hand as they ushered us out the door. We knew nothing about autism then and had no idea what to do next as we slumped out into the fog of that morning. We were speechless, like our son, knowing our entire lives had changed. Looking back on those days, I see now that God not only walked with us, but carried us as well.

There have been days when I've sat on a curb in tears. I'd tried to get Alec into his school building for a preschool party, a pizza in one hand and my son in the car, refusing to get out, kicking and screaming in a tantrum that could shatter glass. Other times I've rolled over and over on the carpet with him, wrestling shoes onto his chubby feet. This was during January, but despite the cold, he couldn't stand to wear them. I've sat on the side of Alec's bed at night and cried out to God, *Oh Lord! I want Alec to know You! How can I teach him about You when he can't even speak with me?*

We've also had moments of fantastic victory, like watching Alec in

the kindergarten school play, singing every word to every song; or seeing him argue with his older sister, Elise, just like any little brother would do. I've treasured the sight of him jumping off the afternoon school bus with his arms wide, rushing into my arms, and I've thought, *Lord, what a blessing to receive such love!*

Dear reader, I don't know where you are on this journey. But wherever it is, I want you to know that God has a message for you and your child with autism.

That message is this:

Your child is greatly loved by God.
Your child is greatly valued by God.
God has a wonderful purpose for your child's life,
No less than that of any other child.

And here's something else: God never intended for you, as a parent, to walk this journey alone! In fact, He has given you powerful treasures in His Scripture that will give you wings to soar above the oppressive grip of autism. No matter how overwhelmed you might feel, no matter what challenges you face, financial burdens, stress, weariness, or even intense loneliness, know this: God gave you this child for a reason. God believes in you, and He is for you!

This is why I'm writing this book. I want you to know that you are not alone, and never have been. No matter whether you are a single parent, or a married couple, or a loved one trying to support a family dealing with autism, God has a message for you and the child you love. And He has provided mighty tools to overcome autism.

While this book does offer helpful resources for parents and loved ones of autistic children, it is not intended as a medical manual for dealing with autism. Rather, this book encourages you to discover the promises that God has made, to claim those promises, and to apply them to your life and the life of your child living with autism.

Never doubt for a minute that God loves your child with a love so wide and long and high and deep that we cannot comprehend its measure. God, who has woven every cell and every DNA strand together,

knew your baby before you ever laid a kiss to his cheek, and He has chosen *you* to parent him for a specific reason. He sees your potential to nurture this special being that He has placed in your arms to help him become all that He intended him to be.

Did you know that God has a treasure box of promises stored up in His Word for us and our little ones? These promises can strengthen us and can provide hope, wisdom, and direction on how to care for our uniquely made, incredibly beautiful kids—kids created by God’s own hand to serve an extraordinary purpose!

Did you know that, through Christ, God gives us everything—and I mean everything—we need to carry us through in this battle with autism? And we will more than survive the battle; we will conquer autism with an overflowing and abundant joy in our lives such as we have never known!

If you will seek to really know God, even as you are doing in reading this book, and if you study and apply the precious promises of God to your family life, then the sun will shine again on your walk and you will feel its warmth return to your days. You will break forth into singing, with a new song, one of strength and confidence in place of worry, fear, and stress. God’s truth is this: We have nothing to fear. He is for our children.

The book in your hands presumes that you have a working knowledge of autism. If, however, you’re unfamiliar with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), I have placed two sources of information at the end of this book to help you learn more. In Appendix A—“What Is Autism?”—you’ll find helpful information including statistical data and a list of signs and symptoms of the disorder for early diagnosis and intervention. Appendix B—“Autism Resources”—lists books and online resources for therapies and treatments, as well as places to go for support and further information.

Are you ready? Come on, then! Let’s take a journey into the scriptural promises of God. Let’s uncover them, one by one, holding them up to the light, turning them over in our minds. Let’s try them out. The Bible says “Taste and see that the LORD is good. How happy is the man who takes refuge in Him!” (Ps. 34:8).

My personal promise to you is this: God's promises will profoundly change the way you think about autism. As you study them, I pray that God will lift the veil from your eyes so you can see your child as God does: entirely beautiful, full of value and worth, precious in every way, and filled to the brim with a powerful, special purpose.

These promises will make a vast difference in your life. You will smile again. You will laugh again. You will love more than you ever thought possible, and as you open your heart fully, allowing God to love your child through you, your arms will be His arms; your smile, His smile. You'll be filled with the majesty of a love that knows no limit and no end. It's a miraculous love that only strengthens and multiplies when poured out. It cannot be contained.

In this process you'll receive an added blessing; you'll get a glimpse of the magnitude of God's love for *you*. You'll understand a little more about the wondrous mystery of love itself. And you'll be empowered to pass on God's wisdom to others on this journey.

Yes, I've had you in mind. So let's get started, shall we?

*Blessed are you who are hungry now,
because you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
because you will laugh.*

LUKE 6:21

Acknowledgments

It takes a village to raise a child. The truth in this old adage, commonly attributed to an African proverb and popularized by Hillary Rodham Clinton, is never more obvious than when the child in question is autistic. To list all of the many people who have helped our family is not possible. Each day our family receives a new gift of kindness from someone, and in each of these persons we are forever blessed.

That said, I thank all of Alec's teachers and caregivers who have welcomed my son into their arms. Where would we be without teachers who see only the possibility—not the disability—of a child: teachers like Sue Ann Belcher, Crystal Lail, Deborah Mullen, Natalie Whitaker, and Amanda Eisel? We watched our son literally reconnect to this world through the caring hands of Julie Thompson, Betsy Spaeth, Wyndi Stitt, Sharae Lattimore, Tammy Cone, Nancy Dill, Carol George, Susan Fletcher, and Michelle Goode. And how many times have I thanked God for the courage and prayers of Susan Kincaid, Karen Apple, Robin Gladden, Betty Bogart, and Beth Berkland?

I could never forget school principals like Rachel McKenzie and Martha Carpenter who provide welcoming school environments to every child, regardless of disability. May God bless you in abundance for each provision of love you give to autistic children in your schools. They are worth your efforts.

I can't tell you how heartening it has been to have Candace Wilson of the Council for Children's Rights stand with our family. In fact, God bless all the advocates out there!

Many children have been real-life heroes in Alec's life, such as

George and Sam Hunter, Jerrod Gervasi, Cassidy Calbreath, Lily Farr, Keegan Ruark, Andrew Utesch, Ryan Pierce, Bradley Thompson, Grantley Bone, Hee Lim Kim, Christopher Pendleton, Joshua Lee, and Ben Stokely. You looked beyond autism and welcomed my son as a good friend. What an example you are! You have no idea what you have meant to our family.

Whenever the darkness of autism closed in, I always could call on other autism moms to share some of their wisdom. Quite simply, autism never stood a chance against the remarkable strength of women like Colleen Jenny, Beth Fields, Melissa Myers, Pam McCarthy, Tracy Reed, Betsy Spaeth, Deanne Nelson, Sally Miller, and Jill Urwick. Ladies, Jeremiah 31:16–17 is for you!

Jennifer Krueger, do you see how powerful one word of encouragement can be? And to my prayer warriors—Nan Henderson, June Davies, Joy Stuart, and Debbie and Dean Gutch—and our Bible study group, thank you for every single prayer. God heard each one.

I can't forget the people at Kregel Publications, who made writing this book a joy.

And of course, I must thank my family members and friends who are with us in the battle. To Mary Ann and Norman Langston and Margaret and Dan Saltrick—thanks for listening, caring, and being there. Your smiles have lightened our load. To my sisters and brothers-in-law Wendy and Michael Jones, Rachel and Tim Taylor, and Sarah Richards—thanks for allowing me to be me, even when I wasn't so fun to be around, and for providing laughter when we desperately needed it. A special thanks to my sister Amanda Hankins, who selflessly offered many prayers and words of comfort—you are one of the greatest blessings in my life.

To my mother, Susan Grimm, who shaped my life as she dried the tears from my cheeks when I was young—from you, Mom, I learned what love can do, and I will never forget it. I love you so much!

To my father, Ted Smith, who was crazy enough to believe me when I told him I felt God's call to write this book. Your faith is amazing! Thanks for the countless calls during the process of writing it. Dad, you have been my sounding board, and this book would not exist

without your input, advice, prayers, and support. So many times you kept me going. I love you, Dad, and I trust that all four coin cans are finally mine. You know what I mean.

Thanks to you, Elise, my sweet daughter. You are Alec's best teacher and have melted my heart with your compassion and sweet spirit. What plans God must have for you! I gaze at you in awe, knowing God is painting your life with the most beautiful of colors. Never be afraid to speak out for people who need a voice. God is with you, my child.

To my sweet Matt, who sacrificed daily with me to write and live out this book: you are my hero. I have no idea why God blessed me with a man like you, but I thank Him every single day for doing it. You never complained, never gave up, and always believed in the impossible. Matt, you have the entirety of my heart . . . and you always will.

And certainly not in the least, thank you, Alec, for teaching me the power of love. Your story is only beginning, my son, and I will forever be cheering you on. God moved mountains to rescue you! Thank you for the joy that I have found in being your mom. Now I am the speechless one.

But above all, this book would not be in your hands if it were not for my Father and His precious son, Jesus. As I wrote it, I could feel an overwhelming magnitude of love for children with autism and their families. There is nothing more powerful than God's love. It moves mountains and heals broken hearts, and has changed me forever. This is His story.

Introduction

Life's Detour

Landing on the Dark Road of Autism

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

I CORINTHIANS 13:12 (NIV)

I didn't know he was autistic.

I didn't, in fact, know anything about autism. As it did for so many people, the movie *Rainman* provided the only description of autism I knew at the time.

I did know, however, that a “good mother”—an adept mother—should discipline an unruly toddler into compliance before the child gets too big to handle. I'd heard this parenting rule many times. A greenhorn of mothering with only a few years of experience under my belt, I was on a constant hunt for golden nuggets of advice from the parenting experts of the day, militantly studying their recommendations like I once studied my collegiate courses.

I also knew everything about the bathroom at Target. It is cold, with five bright red stalls, four porcelain sinks, and glossy white walls that echoed the swats I rendered to my son's behind to obtain the compliance that every good mother requires. I sought refuge in this room whenever Alec threw a tantrum in the store, which was about every time we visited Target during his toddler years.

Our local Target was a place to go to grab a cold soda from the snack bar and get out of the energy-sapping, North Carolina sun. Saturated

with sweat and boredom, I took Alec and Elise there when I needed a break from their toddler world, if only in terms of surroundings. I went to Target to hear an adult voice in days filled with Playhouse Disney shows, nursery rhymes, and little toy trains. The store is large and always full of mothers toting along their smart-looking children. They were families that looked as if they came right off of the pages of *Family Circle* magazine.

In my frequent retreats to the bathroom to wait out one of Alec's fits, I'd smile apologetically to the mothers as they entered the room. I'd try to act like I had Alec under my control.

I didn't, of course.

Looking back, I don't recall exactly when Alec transitioned from an engaging infant to a challenging child. But once Alec reached his toddler years, I frequently found myself in stormy situations that took every ounce of my strength and limited parenting wisdom to navigate.

Typical family gatherings and holidays were becoming a source of stress for our family. Even Halloween. I thought every child loved to don a costume and canvass the neighborhood for treats. My older daughter bubbled with pure joy as she toddled around in her cow outfit, proudly smiling at the "awwwws" of neighbors as they tossed candy into her small plastic pumpkin. Yet two years later, Alec sat on our living room floor in that same cow outfit, his face purple and twisted in rage. He tugged and pulled at the fake fur, making every effort to discard it. Eventually, I left him at home with my husband, Matt, and took Big Sister Elise, in disguise as Eeyore, to enjoy the night collecting candy.

On our way to play in the park that same winter, I rehearsed my canned explanations. Other mothers at the park would point out that it was, in fact, quite cold outside and my son wasn't wearing his shoes. *Yes, I know*, I'd think bitterly. A little bit of cold weather couldn't convince my two-year-old to leave his shoes on his plump little feet in the park.

It seemed strange to me that Alec demanded events to be in a specific order. With no knowledge of the obsessive-compulsive tendencies often found in children with autism, I couldn't understand why Alec

was such a “difficult” child. Over time, as if by unintentional conditioning, I discovered that life was less problematic when I did things in the order and manner that Alec preferred. This was easier said than done because Alec couldn’t communicate with words. His pediatrician assured me Alec was merely a late bloomer in terms of speech. So I was forced to play guessing games to determine what Alec wanted at any given moment, and it was a source of increasing frustration for both of us. Out of the blue, Alec’s ripple of fussiness would become a tsunami of violence and power.

One afternoon I wasn’t adhering to my son’s unspoken plan during our shopping trip. Once again I’d managed to hit the invisible trip wire activating Alec’s ear-shattering screams. So commenced The Guessing Game.

“What do you want, Alec?” I anxiously asked, well aware of the glances from the *Family Circle* moms around me. Alec responded by screaming louder, pressing his chubby palms to his ears.

No stranger to this game, I frantically searched everything around me trying to locate the source of Alec’s distress. “Alec, do you want this book?” I asked, grabbing the nearest item and hoping to distract him. To this suggestion, my brawny son began kicking me from his seat in the cart, his shrieks an earsplitting 11 on a scale of 1 to 10.

In tantrum mode, Alec was a pint-sized Tasmanian Devil transformed from cartoon to flesh. People peered down the aisle at the unpleasant scene and scurried away. An elderly woman rolled her eyes and glared at me. Parents grabbed their children by the hand and vacated the area. As I struggled with my son, I felt the sting of everyone’s unspoken question: *Can’t you control your child?*

Here we go again, God. Now what do I do? The tantrum intensified despite my efforts to soothe my frustrated son. Nothing seemed to work, and tears of embarrassment over my own incompetence slid down my cheeks. I looked at my shopping cart of items I needed at home and considered how to wrestle my son out of it and bolt out of the store.

God, what am I doing wrong?

I’m convinced that God leaned down and sent help my way. My

mother-in-law, Mary Ann Langston—a well-educated woman with a Midas touch in social situations— unexpectedly appeared by my side. She seemed to have been teleported from some other world to this aisle of our ongoing battle.

“I was on the other side of the store,” she explained gingerly, with an unsure expression on her face, “and I recognized that cry.”

She could hear it all the way across the store? Still, I was never so glad to see someone in my life! She swiftly pulled Alec from his seat, took my shopping cart, and ushered us to the exit so I could take my distraught son home while she stayed behind to pay for all my items. Blood seeped from my bitten lip as I fought back tears and walked Alec outside, ending yet another battle at Target.

As the year went on I learned small tricks to deal with Alec’s tantrums. One was The Preschool Shuffle. I learned the locations of the exits at my son’s morning preschool. I’d discovered that if I picked up Alec just five minutes late from our church preschool, I could miss the other mothers retrieving their children. This small delay would spare those mothers from the daily episode of Alec angrily beating my back as I carried him tossed over my shoulder—the only way I could transition him out of the classroom—down the hallways to the nearest and most isolated exit.

At the time, I didn’t know if Alec was just a demanding child, or if I simply bore the humiliation of being an inept mother. With each passing day I was filled with more pain as my son’s frustrations increased. A mother wants only to comfort her children when they’re in despair. Alec was struggling but I had no idea how to help him. With every beat of my mother’s heart, I wanted to believe that, in spite of Alec’s daily fits of rage, deep inside he was a sweet little boy desperate to be understood—and I wanted others to know him in this same way. But how could I reach him?

I needed more advice!

Once more, I scoured the Internet, news columns, and books for recommendations from the parenting gurus who worked with difficult children. The predominant advice was to provide stringent consequences for unacceptable behavior. The *Charlotte Observer*, for example,

runs a weekly column from a nationally respected expert in parenting. Matt and I read his column every week and usually agreed with his advice. An authority in helping parents bring strong-willed children to obedience, he encourages parents to grow a backbone and stop allowing their children to run the family. He advises parents to incorporate strong and persuasive consequences for bad behavior.

This must be what our Alec needs. I thought. *Alec is simply a strong-willed child.*

Determined to succeed, Matt and I began a zero-tolerance policy for bad behavior. Alec would get one warning to get in line with our expectations and if not, we began consequences. Typically, this meant a time out or an exile to his room. If the behavior persisted, we would in no way back down. If Alec acted out physically by hitting or kicking, he would receive a swat to the behind.

Matt and I formed a cohesive parenting front against Alec's numerous daily tantrums. We were certain that by uniting as strong parents, we could stop the tantrums.

What we didn't understand, though, was that Alec was not a strong-willed child. Unbeknown to us he was suffering from *sensory integration dysfunction*. This condition is experienced by many children on the autism spectrum. Their developing brains are not able to correctly process the barrage of information pouring into their senses. Bright lights, for instance, stabbed at Alec's steel blue eyes. Ordinary noises clashed like cymbals in his ears. Further, he was hyposensitive to touch, which meant he would constantly smack and crash into things, or people, in order to receive sufficient stimulation to find himself spatially.

My Alec was living in a bizarre world that his tiny body was not able to translate for him. My son was in pain. He was calling out for help, but I didn't understand him. He was a child without the ability to communicate his needs to his own mother. I'm not proud of the fact that I was totally oblivious to what was really going on with my son. Instead of seeing Alec's critical need, we continued on with our tough-love policy.

Winning the Battle, Losing the War

One of the biggest battles in this war for compliance was The Battle of the Chicken Bite.

A typical problem many kids on the autism spectrum share is that they don't want to sit down for meals. And many are self-limiting in terms of what they eat due to sensory issues—foods that taste good to us are overwhelming in flavor or texture to them. Suddenly you're faced with a child who won't eat.

My son's bill of fare was limited to a small handful of foods: peanut butter crackers, pizza, french fries, bacon, pretzels, and occasionally some starchy cereal. Let's see, what am I forgetting? Hmmmm. Nothing, I guess. No fruit . . . unless you count Fruit Roll-ups. I don't think so. No veggies . . . unless you count the potato in the french fries, which is a starch. But I was desperate enough to consider it a vegetable.

No doubt, a good mother wouldn't let her child eat such an unhealthy and limited diet. Determined to be a good mom to this boy, I was going to set him straight and get him to eat!

On a sunny September day, I prepared for the battle to get Alec to try some chicken. He was scrounging for pretzels and junk food at the time, so I quickly nuked the chicken with some french fries and sat Alec down. Then I ordered him to stay in his chair until he tried one bite of the bland white meat.

Alec started to get up. Determined to grow a backbone, I said, "Alec, if you take one bite, you can get up and play. Just one bite."

This was an easy offer, after all. *Maybe too easy*, I thought. Alec tried to slide off his chair so I put my hand on the seat to trap him there. I did not budge. He began to cry, so I pleaded with him, "Alec, if you take one bite, then you can get up."

The cries became sobs, then deafening wails, but I remained calm and resolute. It was a warm day and every window of our home was open to let in the fresh air. That also, of course, made all the neighbors privy to the table war going on inside our home.

Alec stood his ground with fierce screaming and wails. His little round fists beat the table. His stout legs kicked his chair and my arms. It sounded like I was torturing him, but I was only preventing

him from sliding off of his seat. I'd never heard such earsplitting shrieks.

Five minutes passed . . . then ten. Then fifteen, and twenty, and the screaming escalated. I began to worry. *What are the neighbors going to think? The police will be showing up at my door any minute. Surely Children's Services will be notified to take my son into their custody!* Beads of sweat covered my forehead. *Should I cave in to him? What would the parenting experts say?*

Then forty-seven horrid minutes from the start of our battle, Alec put *one bite* of chicken into his mouth.

"Good, Alec!" I exclaimed with tears of joy running down my face. I was eager to pull my son into my arms and end this torturous battle. "Just chew it up and swallow it and you can get up to play!"

And my exhausted, sweaty son did just that. I had won this battle! I was a tough mother capable of bringing my strong-willed child into compliance! I had a backbone!

And then in that split-second moment of victory, Alec threw up.

God, what am I doing wrong? Why won't he just do what he needs to do? Our war for compliance continued. It seemed that every day was filled with sickening tantrums. Alec spent more and more daily episodes in his time-out chair. I feared going into public places, knowing that I'd probably have to leave, dragging my son back to the car in a violent fit. In the process, I became proficient at avoiding the eyes of other mothers in stores so I wouldn't have to explain my son's behavior.

Each day I got out of bed determined to mother my son with love, compassion, strength, and a backbone. But by the afternoon my determination had faded, my head hurt, and my heart ached as I tried to understand why my son did not respond to our disciplinary tactics. The worst part was that some intuition informed me that my son was not a little monster. When I looked into his eyes, I was sure I saw light in there. I sensed that deep inside he truly wanted to be a good son and make me smile, and I clung to the belief that he truly wanted to please me.

Now over two years old, Alec was still not able to communicate in words to me. He didn't even call me "Mama." He spoke mostly

gibberish, but at times he would repeat an exact phrase from a cartoon. *Should this count as language?* I wondered. I took him to his pediatrician again to help determine if Alec's lack of language was a problem.

"Don't expect a boy to learn to communicate as quickly as your daughter," she instructed me. Matt and I had written down Elise's repertoire of expressions when she was eighteen months old. They added up to over sixty-five words. *True, Elise is exceptionally bright,* I tried to reason away my concerns. *I must be an overly concerned mother. I just need to relax and ease up on my expectations for Alec.*

But the fact that I could count on one hand Alec's two-year-old vocabulary remained unsettling. I longed to converse with my son. How could I teach and instruct my son without words?

Months went by as Matt and I struggled to grow our backbones. We were discouraged to find that our zero-tolerance policy was not resulting in the more stable, happier child the parenting experts had promised. Instead, I was now a frazzled, self-doubting mother on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Even worse, my beautiful son, Alec, was an emotional mess showing no signs of improvement.

Looking back, I realize that up to this point I hadn't truly sought the wisdom of God. My silent appeals to God had been merely pleas, not real prayers—not a decision to turn our struggle over to God. I don't know why Matt and I didn't run to God for help with Alec in the first place. He is the Creator. He made every neuron, every combination of DNA, and every cell. God's Word confirms this: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jer. 1:5 NIV). Why did I spend so much time seeking help from experts who had never met my son, when the One who masterfully knit my son within me had all of the answers?

I didn't know it yet, but I had an extraordinary Helper who was just waiting for me to surrender my battle and call His name. God promises to grant us wisdom in any situation if only we ask Him. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5 NIV). I'd searched every other resource, however, before I cried out to the Father for help.

When I at last raised the white flag and called, God, who never

forsakes us, came and removed the veil from my eyes. Before I had merely hoped that I'd sensed a spark of willingness in Alec. God now granted me one moment, both marvelous and terrible, when I looked into Alec's face and clearly saw the anguish in my son's soul.

Through a Glass, Darkly

The day I called out to God and was answered was particularly taxing, filled with nasty battles with Alec. He had fought my every request, kicking, screaming at me, and refusing to comply with anything I asked. Nothing was going right that day.

I could feel my blood pressure rising and my face heating. As he lay prostrate on the floor, screaming, my ears were aching, my back was sore from wrestling his clothes on, and my internal pitcher of love was quite empty. I was about to lose control.

This was a moment when I should have walked away. I should have called for help. I should have disappeared upstairs, taken a few deep breaths, counted to twenty, or anything other than what I did. I should have known.

But I didn't.

It was a moment I'd give anything to live over. Have you ever had one of those? It's a memory that cuts so deeply into my soul that it may never heal. It left a scar so dark, it may never completely fade. It was a moment of brutal honesty when God pulled away everything that kept me from seeing what is really inside of me, and it was terrifying.

All at once, a year's worth of rage and desperation exploded from my soul. I grabbed my son and plunged him onto the sofa. I then stood before him and screamed like I've never screamed before. In the face of my two-and-a-half-year-old son, I emptied my heart of its desperation. My face twisted with resentment, my eyes clenched shut, and my heart was devoid of understanding.

"Why can't you behave!?" I shouted at him. "Why can't you be good!?" On and on I railed at my little son.

And then I looked at him.

What I'd only sensed before was now plainly expressed in his body language. He was still sitting cross-legged on the sofa, but as I watched

he seemed to collapse into himself. His little hands were clenched and his arms crossed over his chest as if in a fetal position. His little face was pinched in pain and tears, his mouth opened wide in silent sobs.

In incredible agony, I watched as he slouched forward, sinking even more into himself. Then my beautiful son turned away from me, like a little flower that felt unworthy of the sun's love.

My heart shattered in that very moment. In that instant, God removed the veil from my eyes, and I saw Alec's desperate desire to please me. I saw the torture he endured of not being understood, of not knowing how to communicate or how to love and be loved. I saw the grief, the pain, and, worst of all, the absence of hope.

And I understood. Alec was doing all that he could! He was trying to reach out to me, but he didn't know how. He was a prisoner, trapped in a troubled world that neither of us understood. The parenting experts were wrong. This child did not need stronger discipline. He needed more love. He needed me to go into that shadowy world and rescue him, to carry him out of that isolated place and back to us with the full authority of Christ's love.

In that terrible moment, I knew I had failed my son miserably.

My knees gave way and I sank to the floor, weeping. "God, oh, God! I need You so much! I see now. Help me be the mother that this child needs!"

Then God showed me what I had to do. I got up and scooped my weeping boy into my arms and carried him into the bathroom. I took a washcloth and dried his tears. I knelt before him and tenderly grasped his wet chin in my palm, lifting his face to my own.

"I'm coming to get you, Alec," I whispered and took him into my arms, holding on to him with every ounce of my being for what seemed like an eternity. "God will help me. I'm coming to get you, Alec."

And from that moment on, we were on a different road. There, God walked with us to guide the way, His love illuminating the darkness. God was leading our family back from the abyss and on to a new level of joy such as I had never experienced in all my life.

Yes, joy was to return, and it would bring along all of its companions: laughter, smiles, victories, promises, and most of all—hope.

Chapter 1

God's Promises

Our Lifeline to Overcome Autism

You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding. You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal. You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning.

LUKE 6:20–21 (MSG)

Joy? Blessed? I can hardly imagine what you might be thinking as you read these verses from Luke. How can anyone be blessed in the face of something as devastating as autism? In fact, you may blame God for the hardship that autism has caused your family. At one time, I did, too.

Where can you go when faced with the mountain of responsibilities involved in caring for a child with autism? What can you do when hope seems so distant? Who will be there in the dead of the night when you're alone with your sleepless child—children with autism often have sleep disorders. Where do you find light when you're afraid of a future that seems so dark?

Who answers when you ask, "What will happen to my child? Am I spiritually, physically, and mentally up to the demands of caring for a child with special needs? What can I expect now that my life is drastically different than what I expected it to be?"

I know these questions well, because I've asked them, too. I've shared your experiences. You've felt blood on your lips as you bite back the tears, holding your precious child's hand as dreams of what could have

been fade away. You don't want to get out of bed in the morning, waking to an avalanche of responsibilities that overpower your thoughts before your feet even hit the floor. As you survey your current situation, taking everything in at once—every need, every concern, and every fear—how can you not feel overwhelmed?

Yes . . . I know the feeling. It's an emotion I fight daily myself. And yet I write to tell you that there is hope. And yes . . . I write to offer you some practical resources to help you in the fight. But I write mostly to tell you this: God does care about children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Moreover, He has a special plan not only for your child, despite autism, but He has one for you, too! And He has given you promises that you can claim for you and your autistic child, and that you can live out daily.

If that's hard to believe, read on.

Life's Detour: A Turn onto the Dark Road of Autism

In early 2003, my husband, Matt, and I sat anxiously at a small conference table in a colorless room. Around the table sat a group of specialists who had just completed a series of tests on our then two-and-a-half-year-old son, Alec. After reviewing the results of each test, they uttered a word we never dreamed we'd hear in connection with our family: *autism*. At the pronouncement of that word, a fog descended upon us, threatening to suck away the room's oxygen.

The evaluation complete, we stood and thanked the specialists, offering weak smiles and handshakes all around, yet secretly despising them for every word they'd just said about our Alec. One of them pressed a small, repulsive beige pamphlet into our hands as we walked, bewildered, out the door.

Thinking back on that pamphlet, I recall only that unspeakable word *autism* on its cover. My *Rainman*-based definition of that word did not harmonize with my mind's vision of Alec's future—a strapping, gifted, and capable son running for touchdowns, scoring soccer goals, and surpassing all others on achievement tests.

It was a diagnosis I did not want for my son, Alec.

I looked at my husband after we walked back into the morning

sunshine. We stared at each other, searching for words of comfort, but we had only silence to give. Everything around us buzzed by in warp speed while we struggled to make each step back to our van, our legs like lead, dragging a truth we had never considered. Everything was entirely different now, and we were not prepared for it. We felt so alone, as if the world had left us behind.

But we were never really alone.

Our family life had just turned onto a detour, a bizarre new road that we never knew existed. We had yet to realize that we'd begun an adventure that would color our lives in ways we could not imagine. Alec's autism would change us, but only for the better. Hard to believe? Yes, I know, but it's true.

A Light in the Darkness

Imagine this little drama for a moment. Trust me, it won't be hard.

A young couple have a beautiful toddler, a son who was once full of smiles and life, but now is slipping away from them. His vocabulary disappears and his smile is missing. He stops meeting the gaze of his parents. He's sick all of the time. He won't turn to Mom or Dad when they call his name.

So they have him tested. And the diagnosis? "It's autism."

The couple hires a slew of therapists. Speech therapists. Applied behavioral therapists. Occupational therapists. The couple consults with doctors and neurologists, and start to see progress.

Then the bills start rolling in. The insurance provider doesn't cover autism. Still, the child is improving, so the parents get a second mortgage and research area schools that specialize in helping children with autism spectrum disorders.

The months pass by and the bills pile up. Their nest egg dwindles away until nothing is left. Creditors begin calling, so Dad picks up some extra hours at work. Mom clips coupons and shops at discount stores and yard sales. The calls for payment on past due accounts are coming daily now. The economy takes a turn for the worse, bringing high gas prices and inflated food and clothing costs. Then the couples' old car blows its transmission again. More bills arrive, and they pay

what they can but it's not enough. They hit rock bottom when Dad's position is outsourced overseas.

They are despondent!

Then one day the parents get a call from an attorney who wants the couple to come to his office immediately. Their hearts pound as they wonder what bombshell will drop next. The attorney sits down and looks at them.

"It seems my client," he begins, "a vastly notable gentleman, happens to be a patriarch of yours and has included you in his will."

"That can't be!" the mom exclaims. "We don't know of any patriarch who would leave us a dime!"

"Oh, yes," the attorney continues, "I have it all listed here. Many items of incredible value have been given to you."

"I don't believe it," the young dad is skeptical.

"Well," the attorney says, "you can believe it. It's all here in writing. I have the list here. All you have to do is accept them."

The attorney pulls out a contract with the couple's name written across the top with the word *beneficiary* beside it.

"This is you, correct?"

"Yes," says the young mom, "That's us."

As the attorney reads the items of their inheritance, page by page, gift by gift, a strange peace falls over the couple as they realize that their benefactor has bequeathed resources that will answer their every need. Nothing is left for them to do but accept the gifts and put them to good use.

Does this sound like an implausible story?

You do, indeed, have a benefactor who loves you so much that he has left you a treasure of great worth. That benefactor is God, the great I AM, and those treasures are His promises for His children. They are written in Scripture—His sacred Word, penned throughout the course of history and divinely inspired by Him—and they are signed by Christ. For every need you will ever have, God has graciously given a promise. These promises can strengthen us and can provide hope, wisdom, and direction for how to care for our uniquely made, incredibly beautiful kids.

Applying God's Promises to Your Life

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the Billy Graham of his time, wrote *Faith's Checkbook*, a compilation of daily ponderings about the promises of God. In the preface he writes, "God has given no pledge which He will not redeem, and encouraged no hope which He will not fulfill."¹ Spurgeon provides an eye-opening comparison that relates a divine promise to a check made payable to believers:

A promise from God may very instructively be compared to a check payable to order. It is given to the believer with the view of bestowing upon him some good thing. It is not meant that he should read it over comfortably, and then have done with it. No, he is to treat the promise as a reality, as a man treats a check.²

God never meant for us to wallow in the muck and mire of life's difficulties. He stocked His precious Word with promises to help us soar like eagles, to run and not grow weary through life's difficult circumstances. Yes, God intends for us to soar above autism. Why? So others will see His glory in us and be led to Him, and because He loves us and wants to be our God.

A check is merely worthless paper, unless it is cashed. And many Christians fail to draw on the treasury of God's promises to help them live the abundant life that Jesus desires for us. How, then, do we claim a promise and see it work in our lives? Again, Spurgeon answers this question in the allegory of the divine check:

[A Christian] is to take the promise, and endorse it with his own name by personally receiving it as true. He is by faith to accept it as his own. He sets to his seal that God is true, and true as to this particular word of promise. He goes further, and believes that he has the blessing in having the sure promise of it and therefore he puts his name to it to testify to the receipt of the blessing.

This done, he must believingly present the promise to the

Lord, as a man presents a check at the counter of the Bank. He must plead it by prayer, expecting to have it fulfilled. If he has come to Heaven's bank at the right date, he will receive the promised amount at once. If the date should happen to be further on, he must patiently wait till its arrival; but meanwhile he may count the promise as money, for the Bank is sure to pay when the due time arrives.³

An element of faith is required to walk into a bank, speak to the teller, and present a check. If you know that the bank's monetary resources are gone, you wouldn't bother even to walk into the bank.

"Some fail to place the endorsement of faith upon the check," Spurgeon continues, "and so they get nothing; and others are slack in presenting it, and these also receive nothing. This is not the fault of the promise, but of those who do not act with it in a commonsense, businesslike manner."⁴

Just as cashing a check takes faith, so does cashing in on a promise from God. You have to claim it like a check, only instead of taking it into your hand, you hold it in your mind and spirit by reading the Word of God. You mull over it, seeking its value and considering where in your life you can best apply it.

Look again at the promise at the beginning of this chapter. I can imagine what you might think when you read it. It might seem, in fact, like a huge slap in the face to hear God promising blessings and joy when one of your beloved children is diagnosed with autism.

And that promise may, indeed, seem worthless—unless the One who makes it is trustworthy. Can you trust God? Is He faithful to His promises? You may very well be angry at Him for allowing this to happen to your child, and I understand why you might feel that way. It is impossible to have faith in a promise—and by this I mean putting action to it, staking something of your life in it—if you have no faith that the promise maker will keep his word. In order to believe that a promise is true, you must have a relationship with the one who issued the promise in the first place.

So in the next chapter we spend some time with the Promise Maker.

We'll step back to an era long before the existence of autism, and ask, "Can I really trust a God who allowed this to happen to my child, and to our family?" and "Does God care about my child? I mean, really care?"

I will also tell you about the greatest Advocate my son has had or ever will have. This Advocate is ready to help your child, too. He is, in fact, thoroughly familiar with your case file and is waiting for your call.

PROMISE TO TREASURE

God's faithfulness

I'll never forget the trouble, the utter lostness, the taste of ashes, the poison I've swallowed. I remember it all—oh, how well I remember—the feeling of hitting the bottom. But there's one other thing I remember, and remembering, I keep a grip on hope: God's loyal love couldn't have run out, his merciful love couldn't have dried up. They're created new every morning. How great your faithfulness!

—LAMENTATIONS 3:19–23 (MSG)