

“Having worked around the globe with families experiencing disability, I have unfortunately seen firsthand that fathers of children with disabilities are typically absent, ashamed, or apathetic. But I have seen others. I have watched fathers live a different story and lead their entire family—including their loved one with a disability—into a deeper, more meaningful life. Jeff and Becky remind us that these men don’t just happen. They are the ones who lean in where others flee.”

—**MATTHEW MOONEY**, cofounder of 99 Balloons, author of *A Story Unfinished*, and host of *The Atypical Podcast*

“Finally, a book written specifically for fathers of kids with special needs and disabilities. *Common Man, Extraordinary Call* speaks directly to dads in their language because the author, the late Jeff Davidson, is their brother. Davidson speaks frankly about how he failed his wife, Becky, and son after Jon Alex was diagnosed with multiple special needs. Jeff describes his remarkable transformation from absent dad to loving father as he came to comprehend the gift he and his wife had been given in Jon Alex. With love and eloquence, Davidson encourages dads to join him in the fight to protect, parent, and provide for their children.

“Becky Davidson, who completed the book after Jeff died unexpectedly, describes the powerful legacy her husband left for her, their son, and the community of special-needs dads. Becky reveals to readers what those blessed to meet her husband know to be true. What God did for Jeff, this humble father vows, God will do for the ordinary men who accept his call to become the extraordinary leaders of their special-needs families.”

—**JOLENE PHILO**, author of the Different Dream Parenting Series and *Does My Child Have PTSD?*

“When we got our son’s autism diagnosis in 2010, we each reacted differently to the news. The testimony of another special-needs dad was what God used to get us on the same page and moving forward together. That’s why we believe Jeff’s message specifically for men is

so important. Jeff has a pastor's heart for coming alongside dads in the toughest season of their lives. And his words will equip men to engage in the battle, encourage their families, and build endurance for the path ahead. Jeff lived out the message of this book, and we are so thankful Becky was able to complete this mission."

—**DR. LEE PEOPLES**, pastor of Heights Baptist Church, Alvin, Texas,
and **SANDRA PEOPLES**, author of *Unexpected Blessings*

"Jeff Davidson was a true champion of fathers of kids with special needs. His ability to speak into the lives of men struggling with the feelings of hopelessness and loss common to dads in families impacted by disability is irreplaceable. *Common Man, Extraordinary Call* tangibly demonstrates God's love for special-needs dads through Jeff's words of wisdom and encouragement to men who missed out on the blessing of knowing him in this life."

—**STEPHEN GRCEVICH**, MD, president and founder of Key Ministry,
and author of *Mental Health and the Church*

COMMON MAN, EXTRAORDINARY CALL

**Thriving as the Dad of a
Child with Special Needs**

JEFF DAVIDSON with BECKY DAVIDSON

 **Kregel**
Publications

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*To my father,
Bill Davidson,
who taught me everything I know
about how to be a dad.*

*“The Lord gets his best soldiers out of
the highlands of affliction.”*

CHARLES SPURGEON

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword: The Bravest Man I Ever Knew</i>	9
<i>Preface</i>	11
<i>Introduction: Shock and Awe</i>	13
1. Drafted	19
2. Absent Without Leave	37
3. Basic Training	51
4. Protect and Defend	69
5. Provide	83
6. Strengthen	99
7. Equip	113
8. Emotional Land Mines	133
9. Surviving Civilian Assault	147
10. Band of Brothers	159
11. Marching Orders	173
<i>Afterword: A Letter from Becky</i>	185
<i>Appendix: A Band of Brothers Study Guide</i>	187
<i>Notes</i>	201

The Bravest Man I Ever Knew

A Tribute from Retired
Master Sergeant Rick Imel

The bravest man I ever knew never served in the military. That is quite a statement because I served my country for twenty-three years and have witnessed bravery on the battlefield in spades. The bravest man I ever knew had a deep love and respect for men and women in the armed forces. He would buy meals for those in uniform anonymously. He would place signs in his yard thanking vets on Veterans Day and Memorial Day. He studied military leaders to gain insight on leadership. He would listen with rapt attention whenever I let my guard down and discussed my military experiences, but he never heard angry shots fired, never dragged a wounded comrade off the battlefield, never applied a field dressing to a wounded soldier's jaw ripped apart by shrapnel, and never had to calm his men and steel them for the fight that was to come.

The bravest man I ever knew was my friend Jeff Davidson. He fought an unseen Enemy. He would often tell me how much he respected me for my service, yet he was too humble to realize that his bravery was much greater than anything I had ever done on the battlefield. My enemy was simply those who were trying to kill me or my men, and we were trained and had the means to strike back.

Jeff's Enemy was unseen. He could not fire back. He had to maintain his faith in God and God's plan for his life.

Jeff gave up a lucrative career because God told him to. We must all give thanks that he did. Jeff's passion was for families who have children with special needs. He founded a ministry catering to the needs of these families. But what most of you do not know is that Jeff was attacked physically and mentally by the Devil for these efforts.

I would tease Jeff that he was a modern-day Job. He gave all he had in this world to do God's will, and from that moment on, he was afflicted to the point of death. In May 2017, Jeff lost this battle. God saw his suffering and called him home after he had fought the good fight.

Through all his pain and suffering, he continued to provide for his family and the community he so dearly loved. He never let his afflictions keep him down for long. Once, when I sensed he was very discouraged, I took my Bronze Star and pinned it on his chest. He deserved it much more than I did.

Jeff, through all his afflictions, never lost sight of his God-given mission. He remained an obedient, selfless servant of God and his flock. The best way to honor the bravest man I ever knew is to continue what he started. We must be the men we need to be for our families and others who need us. I miss you, my friend, but I shall never forget. I will gladly pick up the standard you carried and continue to march up that hill.

To watch someone you love live his passion boldly is an awe-inspiring privilege, especially when he's fighting for his life as he does it. My husband's passion was to support and encourage the special-needs community—in particular, dads who have children with special needs. Jeff's life was committed to helping fathers stay in the game. It grieved him that so many dads walk away from their families after a diagnosis. That reality kept him up at night. He felt he had to do something, something essential to change the course of the future for these families.

In the spring of 2017, Jeff signed a contract with Kregel Publications. He was honored and overjoyed at the prospect of having this platform to speak directly to the men he knew were so in need of hope. His dream was coming true. Despite his own significant health issues, he was determined to make the most of this incredible opportunity. When Jeff passed away unexpectedly on May 23, 2017, one of my greatest fears was that his dream had died with him.

I am incredibly grateful to Jerold Kregel from Kregel Publications and Karen Neumair from Credo Communications. They held fast to the vision for this project and were unwilling to let it fade. They knew how important this book was to Jeff, and they believe in the critical need for this message.

I am also thankful to the amazing team of friends and special-needs dads from around the country who contributed to the book. Profound gratitude goes to retired Master Sergeant Rick Imel, one of Jeff's best friends and a fellow special-needs dad, who served as the military consultant and a contributor to the book. Thanks also to Eric Nixon, a volunteer with Joni and Friends Pennsylvania. He

too was a friend to Jeff and is a fellow father of a child with special needs. His guidance and input throughout this process, and his significant contribution to “A Band of Brothers Study Guide” (see the appendix), have been invaluable.

This book is composed of Jeff’s writings, public messages, and personal notes, along with messages from other dads on the front line. I have also included some personal letters of encouragement to the troops. It has been a source of comfort and healing to me during this time of often unbearable grief to read Jeff’s writings and be reminded of what an amazing husband and father he was. Jon Alex and I live in the legacy of his love for us.

One of the things I always appreciated about Jeff was his willingness to be transparent about his own shortcomings and truthful about how raw and challenging life can be. He didn’t try to sugar-coat the facts. He wrote openly about his own mistakes and what he had learned from them. You will find these hard-fought lessons in this book.

Jeff would often say about being the father of a child with profound special needs, “I am not the dad I thought I would be, but I am becoming the dad God wants me to be.” It is my hope and prayer, just as it was his, that this book will be life changing for you and your family. May it help you thrive as the dad God has called you to be, and may you bravely lead your family to greatness.

Blessings from the Homefront,
Becky Davidson

Shock and Awe

I wasn't ready to be the father of a child with special needs.

Who is ready?

One moment I was an up-and-coming thirtysomething whose life was aligning with the American dream, just as planned. I had a happy marriage, a successful career, and a new home, and my wife and I were expecting our first child. Everything was on track for the future I had imagined.

Then my world exploded.

We celebrated the birth of our “perfect” son—only to realize, as the months passed, that things weren't as perfect as we had thought. Little by little, a heartbreaking reality took shape. Our son wasn't achieving typical milestones. He wasn't developing as expected. One doctor visit led to three. Eventually a diagnosis was made, and then another and another. Finding out that our son would face lifelong, profound special needs was my own personal Hiroshima.

Everything I had hoped for, dreamed about, and so strategically planned was blown to bits. I realized that nothing about raising my son was going to be as I had expected—no playing catch in the backyard, no training wheels or bike rides, no shooting hoops in the driveway after dinner, no vacations to the beach, no University of Tennessee football games enjoyed together—nothing I had envisioned.

“Shock and awe” is a modern military strategy designed to render an opponent utterly powerless. The goal is to paralyze your adversary with overwhelming power and staggering force. This tactic

overloads their will, perception, and understanding to such a degree that they are unable to fight back and can be easily overtaken.¹

My son's diagnosis landed squarely on my heart with shock-and-awe impact. I was torn apart mentally and emotionally. I was powerless and easily overtaken by grief and fear. It would take years for me to get my bearings, accept my mission, and engage the fight, but I did so—and so can you.

Your journey as the dad of a child with special needs will be as unique as you are.

Your journey as the dad of a child with special needs will be as unique as you are, but maybe your world has been torn apart too. Maybe your dreams have been shaken, and you're not sure how you feel. Maybe you don't feel anything at all, and if you do, you're hesitant to express your feelings in words.

You probably find that your thoughts are a turbulent concoction of fear, disappointment, and even rage. You have difficulty focusing. Some days you teeter on the edge of freaking out. Other days you want to crawl into a cave and escape.

Maybe you're angry, but you're not sure who you should be angry with. Maybe you're afraid. Mostly you're overwhelmed, disappointed, frustrated, and confused. I would bet you feel pretty alone right now. How do I know?

Because that's exactly how I felt when I was drafted for this mission. I found myself caught in the middle of a conflict I never dreamed I would have to engage. I had no idea I had been specifically *chosen* for this assignment. I had no idea there was a plan and a purpose in all the chaos. I had no idea that one day I would recognize that my son with special needs was the best gift I had ever been given.

I've been a special-needs dad for almost twenty years now. I feel like a pro. But I was an absolute disaster of a dad in those early years. I'm not proud of that, but I am grateful that the grace of God transformed

me and turned me into a warrior for my son and others with special needs. For years I asked God to change my son and heal him. In his sovereignty God decided instead to use my son to change and heal *me*.

I lived in denial and anger for the first couple of years. Honestly, I almost let our circumstances destroy me. You are going to be tempted to go down that road as well. It's a wide, beckoning road, and it's very easy to travel—but don't. It is an endless circle going nowhere.

You're a man, so your natural first response has likely been, "I can fix this." That's what I thought too. I became obsessed with problem-solving. I was too busy "fixing" my son to be his father. But the truth was that he needed a dad, not another therapist. I beg you, don't take that road. Trust me—I tried to navigate it, only to discover that it's a complete dead end.

If your journey is anything like mine, you're already shaken, so let me give you one thing to focus on now. There will be time later to deal with everything else, but let's start with the one thing that will matter most.

To be a successful dad to your child with special needs, you must wholeheartedly accept your mission.

Your mission is this: embrace your child exactly the way God created him or her. Love your child unconditionally and passionately, with all your heart.

Here is what I have learned: if you want to determine the depth of a father's strength, you must measure the depth of his heart for his child.

You have been drafted to father a unique child, and there is much to learn. As a special-needs dad, you need to know some rules of engagement. Let them sink in because they're opposite from what you might expect. You'll find that life with a nontypical child often requires you to unlearn typical ideas.

THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

- Your strength will be most magnified by your surrender.
- Your toughness will be displayed through your tenderness.
- Your significance will be measured by your selflessness.
- Your success will be determined by your sacrifice.

You have a choice, Dad. You can flounder, stuck in anger, denial, blame, and an obsession to fix the brokenness, as I did, or you can embrace the brokenness with unconditional love. That's what God does for us. God takes the brokenness in our lives and from it creates beautiful gifts that he then uses to reveal himself.

Can I tell you a little about my own journey?

As I have said, I was a heartbroken young father in the early days. During that time, I had an encounter with God. Eighteen nights in a row, I walked down the street to a willow tree by a creek in our neighborhood. For eighteen nights I raged at God. I shouted at him, accused him, and even questioned whether he existed. For eighteen days I cried. God had defied my plans, my dreams, and my prayers by giving me a son with profound special needs. I was convinced that he had wrecked me and ruined my life. Like so many other dads in this situation, I took refuge inside a cyclone of my own anger, frustration, and denial.

Then one night, through tears of desperation, in a moment of stillness and clarity, the Holy Spirit whispered, "I've given you a blessing. What you do with the blessing is up to you."

Almost twenty years later, I now realize what God was trying to tell me. I thought that being a father to my son would be a burden and a hardship to be endured, but it's a mission, a purpose, and a blessing. The same is true for you and your child.

You've been given a gift. What you do with it is up to you.

The world looks at my son and sees a nonverbal young man crippled by cerebral palsy, intellectually disabled, and profoundly affected by autism. The world sees a boy who can't walk, talk, or function independently.

I don't see that. I see a beautiful masterpiece.

I see a tapestry of God's grace, God's beauty, and God's love woven together in a humble child. The world sees paint on damp plaster. I see the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The world sees a broken boy. I see Michelangelo's *David*.

The world sees a damaged human being. I see God's magnum opus.

God takes broken things and uses them to reveal himself to the world. It's true that his ways are not our ways. God has used my son to teach me the essence of unconditional love. God has used my son to show me how to embrace my own brokenness and accept my vulnerabilities. God has taught me that I don't have to understand him completely to obey him fully. God has shown himself to me and demonstrated the essence of our father-son relationship through my experiences as a dad to my own son. And he will do the same for you.

Our life has been excruciatingly difficult at times. We have suffered more challenges than we could ever have anticipated or imagined. We have cried oceans of tears and battled the deep waves of anguish. We have ached in our despair and wallowed in the dark pit of hopelessness.

We have questioned God, doubted God, and pleaded with God.

Despite all of that, today we stand certain of one truth: God hides beauty in brokenness. This is part of the mystery of God. Your child is perfect, and so is mine, because God creates nothing but masterpieces.

“For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

The call to be the dad of a child with special needs isn't an easy one; in fact, it's a highly classified mission for which only the elite are chosen. If you've been chosen, then you're honored to be graced by God himself.

In my home I have a living picture of how God uses the ordinary for the extraordinary. In my son I have a living, breathing temple of the Almighty—a window into the heart and soul of God.

Now I understand what God meant when he said he had given me a blessing. My prayer is that this book will help you realize that you too have been given a treasured gift in your child with special needs. Not only is your child a gift, but God has placed you on a specialized mission. You have a new purpose and a new destiny. You're a soldier in an essential army—and you have what it takes.

Let me share with you what God has taught me. Let me help train you to be a part of this army. Together we can change the world and speak up for those who have no voice. Together we are brothers in arms.

Drafted

“I want you.”

UNCLE SAM

When were you drafted? Was it the day your child was born, or did you come to the realization a bit later, as I did? When Jon Alex was born, we rejoiced, as all parents do. We celebrated the arrival of our firstborn child, a son! I remember looking down at his tiny face and feeling such incredible pride and joy. I was flooded with anticipation of our future together. This was my little guy, and we were going to be the dynamic duo. I would coach his Little League baseball team, just as my dad had coached me. We would play basketball together and go on great adventures to remote places. I would teach him to shave, drive, and make great barbecue. He might even ask me to be his best man, just as I had asked my father. My heart was overflowing with hope and expectation.

Not long after our son was born, however, it became clear he had some developmental issues. Over time we saw more and more concerning indicators. Eventually he was diagnosed with autism, cerebral palsy, and epilepsy. Although I didn't know it at first, I had been drafted to be the father of a child with profound special needs. I didn't have a clue what that might mean. I didn't understand anything. In time I would come to consider being drafted the greatest honor of my life, but I didn't know that in those early years. It felt like I'd been cheated out of my dreams. To be honest, I didn't handle it well.

How are you doing?

Seriously, how are you holding up?

I want to be honest with you right from the start. Being drafted is, by nature, something that happens to you without your expressed consent. It happens *to* you. In other words, you didn't pick this. The trouble with things you don't pick is that they can easily become things you resent. This is a tricky path to navigate unless you have some help. When I was new to this, there wasn't much help out there, and dads were walking away from their posts in droves. That trend is still in effect—and it has to stop.

I'm writing this book because I don't want you to be one of those dads. I'm going to tell you the truth about my journey, the places where I almost lost it, the depths of my despair, and the path to victory. You've been drafted, and nothing can change that, but how you respond has everything to do with your ultimate success.

DECISION TIME

When a man is drafted, he is being called up into a bigger story. His own life is put aside for the sake of joining forces for the greater good. No one is drafted to fight alone. The transition from draftee to soldier is dramatic. To become a soldier, a man undergoes a radical transformation. He sheds his old clothes, his old way of life, and even his hair, and takes on a new identity. Much of the new identity is first established in basic training because that is where he learns how to think, talk, and act like a soldier.

I'm not going to ask you to shave your head, but I am going to ask you to begin to let go of things in your head such as expectations you have had about how your life was going to go. I am asking you to let yourself imagine what life could look like if you become a well-trained soldier in service to your family and a community who desperately needs you. This book is designed as a guide and basic training manual to help you. If you use it, you will find yourself better equipped for what lies ahead. You will also be more likely to find a "band of brothers." We cannot fight this battle without friends in the foxhole. Having other men in your life who get what you are going through is essential to your success.

Becoming a soldier is no small thing, as any military man can tell you. It will push you beyond what you think you can bear and demand everything you've got, but you will be the better for it, and so will the people you are fighting for. You have been drafted, and you must decide how you will respond. Before basic training begins, you will have to deal with the reality of your situation and how you are coping. We are going to look at the typical responses to being drafted. Only after you have dealt with these concerns can you fully accept your mission and become a soldier . . . so let's get moving!

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

When I finally began to grasp the gravity of Jon Alex's disabilities and what they meant for our family, I was wrecked. I couldn't cope. In the interest of full disclosure, I felt as though God had ruined my life and had *purposed* to harm me. Realizing that my precious son would never walk on his own, speak, or live independently was a nuclear holocaust to my hopes and dreams. I was in the belly of the beast, and I had no idea how I would ever get out.

Any time you suffer a significant loss, even the loss of hopes and dreams, there is grief to deal with. For most of us a diagnosis of special needs is an automatic loss. Our hopes and dreams for our child have been compromised, if not destroyed.

Are you feeling that loss? Have you allowed yourself even to think about it?

I'm going to walk you through the stages of grief and how they presented in my life. I share this with you for one very specific reason: our culture tells men they can't and shouldn't *feel*. We're shamed and discouraged from showing emotion, and that lack of emotional expression can make us seem less human. Suppressing feelings is like ignoring cancer. It eats away at you until your natural, God-given feelings slowly begin to wither. It's essential for your success as a special-needs draftee to address your emotions. Don't be ashamed of *anything* you feel.

Disappointment, humiliation, guilt, rage, an uncontrollable need to fix the situation, depression, hopelessness, loss of faith, loss of drive and focus—these are normal reactions to profound grief. If any

of these feelings don't apply to you, consider yourself fortunate; if they do—as I suspect may be the case—then stick with me.

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
 and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
 How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
 Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
 and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
 and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love;
 my heart rejoices in your salvation.
 I will sing the LORD's praise,
 for he has been good to me.

(Psalm 13)

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was a Swiss-born psychiatrist who pioneered studies in dying and, in 1969, wrote the groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying*. It was in this book that she first discussed the now-famous five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Her research suggests that many people pass through these stages at some point, but not necessarily in this order. These stages are very similar to what I experienced working out my own grief. Knowing what the stages are can help you better understand your feelings and what to do with them. I recognize that feelings can be tricky business for guys, but here's what I can tell you: *you can't be real if you don't know how you feel*. And you have to be real in order to be who God designed you to be. It isn't feelings that are the problem but trying to pretend to be a real person without knowing your own heart.

After almost twenty years as a special-needs dad with a career in

special-needs ministry, I am much more attuned to my feelings than I was in those early months and years, and I understand my emotions far better than when I first started. I can readily grasp the inner workings of my heart now. I can also see the suppressed emotions in so many dads who are just starting this journey. When we don't proactively deal with our emotions, this repression can cause irreparable damage to our families. Our emotions are telling us something vitally important, so we must confront them in a godly way throughout this mission.

I realize that we're all coming to this battle from different places and with different backgrounds and experiences. Maybe your situation is unique. Maybe you have a child who defies current medical knowledge. Maybe your child is higher functioning and closer to typical. Maybe you have been able to accept your child's diagnosis. If you have waited years to have a child and have finally seen the realization of that dream, you may view this assignment differently. It isn't wrong to have different feelings and responses from the ones I had. It's only wrong to be less than real.

I want you to complete this training manual with me, even if your story is different from mine. I want you to become part of a movement of men who are showing up to their lives as special-needs dads—men who are leaning on each other and finding hope and courage together. Men who are telling the truth about their lives—the good and the bad. Men who are real. Men who are strong. I am inviting you to fight alongside brothers who know what it's like to be a member of an elite group: common men with an extraordinary call.

THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”

C. S. LEWIS

Denial: If You Don't Say It, Then It Isn't Real

My denial was so deep that I refused to say the word *autism* for three years after Jon Alex was diagnosed. I told myself I didn't want to

accept any label put on my son, but in reality, I didn't want to believe his diagnosis might be accurate and think about all that this would mean for our family. I was terrified to let him be defined by some medical moniker, but even more, I dreaded facing the truth that my son wasn't going to be who or what I had expected.

I remember desperately clinging to the words *developmental delay* because they implied a time would come when his development would catch up. Those words were the anchor of my hope. But as my son got older, the gap widened instead of narrowing. Our "normal" was constantly being modified and adjusted. Every month we would reassure ourselves that Jon Alex would catch up, but with each missed milestone, our hope took another hit. It was a losing game.

**I couldn't believe that I would
never hear him say, "I love you,"
never hear him call me Dad.**

I couldn't accept that my son would remain nonverbal his whole life. I couldn't believe that I would never hear him say, "I love you," never hear him call me Dad. It was a loss I could not calculate. How would he let me know when he was hurting? How would I know what he needed?

I couldn't accept that Jon Alex would never be able to walk independently, or that we would have to feed him every meal by hand. I couldn't grasp that I would never get another good night's sleep because his sleep patterns were so unpredictable. I shut my eyes to the truth that he would always need our help with everything: bathing, dressing, shaving . . . all his basic needs.

I was in full-blown denial, but denying the truth doesn't change the reality. Jon Alex was my son, and by refusing to accept him just as he was, I wasted time I could have used getting to know him better.

I stuck my head in the sand to avoid seeing and accepting the obvious. I hid from the truth in plain sight. I hid behind my desk, wrapped up in my job. I justified my choice, believing that I was doing what is required of a dad: working to provide for my family. But that was just an excuse.

My wife, Becky, would have to call down to my basement office to tell me she and Jon Alex were headed to bed because I would hide out until bedtime. I'm not proud of that, but it's the truth. I wasted time in denial because I didn't embrace what was. I wanted to hold on to my hopes and expectations instead of accepting what God had given me. It was a fool's errand, but it was all I knew to do.

It is completely normal to need time to let the truth of your situation sink in. It is right to expect it to be a process to assimilate your reality, but it is not okay to disengage because you are afraid to face the truth. It is not okay to pull away just to protect yourself.

You are the leader of your family. If you hide, there will be no one for them to follow. *You* are the standard bearer—the soldier who carries the flag of your unit, your regiment. That flag leads the troops into battle. It shows everyone which direction to go, and it infuses them with courage! That's what you are for your family, but if you hide, they'll be left in confusion and will have to make their own way.

Denial Checklist

Here are some signs you might be stuck in denial:

- You're anxious, easily irritated, intolerant, and frustrated. Your mind knows something is wrong, and it's trying to tell you there's something you need to work out (like that annoying gravel in your shoe).
- There are topics you refuse to talk about.
- You might acknowledge that there's a problem, but you feel powerless to do anything about it.
- You work hard to change circumstances you have no control over, but you ignore what you can change.

- When confronted about yourself, you deflect or project the problem onto others.

Dad, I encourage you to surrender your pride and give your disappointment to God. Ask him to help you see your child and his or her disability as an opportunity and to give you a new identity as a special-needs dad. Ask him to help you love your child the way he does. Ask God to help you accept the gift you've been given.

God helped me accept my child's disabilities and my new reality, but it took a long time. When I finally accepted the truth, our world shifted, and life became easier. I was no longer fighting what was. Instead, I learned to welcome what could be. I don't want you to suffer and cling to denial like I did, so I offer this prayer for you:

Father, thank you that this man is here and willing to ask for the truth to be revealed to him. Please show him what he needs to see. Show him what a gift his child is and how lucky he is to be drafted as a special-needs dad. Be strong for him and help him be a righteous standard bearer for his family. Reveal to him the brave warrior you have made him to be. Amen.

Anger: Where There's Anger, There's Pain

Anger was the first emotion I felt when this journey began. I was angry, and I wanted someone to blame. Who caused this? Why had this happened? How could something like this be happening to us? Denial quickly followed because to face the magnitude of how all this was going to change my life was simply too much. I danced between anger and denial for years, and, oh, how I wanted someone to blame for my pain.

Maybe you don't feel angry. Maybe you feel frustrated, irritable, or like every day is a bad day. All these feelings can easily disguise anger. If you did not grow up in a home where emotions were allowed, then you may not have any idea what anger really feels like.

If you were not allowed to be angry, then you might have learned to use frustration to cover your anger.

Anger Checklist

Anger is almost never a primary emotion (meaning that it's a warning sign, not a root problem). It's a reaction to mask fear, hurt, and our need to avoid guilt or shame. We often feel angry to cover an unbearable sense of our own vulnerability. Here are some red flags to look for:

- You find yourself blaming and attacking people, especially your spouse.
- You use silence and distance as tools to keep other people away.
- You mull over the times you've been wronged and refuse to let them go.
- Your feelings smolder under the surface and erupt without much control on your part.
- You secretly feel bad about things you've said when you were stressed.
- People don't readily share their feelings or concerns with you for fear of how you may respond.
- Your mood makes people feel tense, as though they're walking on eggshells.
- You have forgotten how to have fun.

I made the near-fatal mistake of letting anger and denial destroy me in the early years of our son's life. I acted out of my anger and let it affect my relationship with my wife, family, and friends. I mulled over how I had been cheated. I felt robbed of so much . . . and I was furious. I fantasized about building a massive bonfire of baby milestone books and hosting a giant book-burning party. I would invite all the parents of children with special needs to throw their milestone books on the fire too as it stretched out toward a bloodred sky. We

would feel the glow of the fire against our faces as we shook our fists and raged at an unseen God.

I was angry at life and furious with God. It was a bitter time. That's the thing about anger. It's a reasonable and appropriate response to feeling betrayed and disappointed, but if you hold on to it for too long it becomes corrosive. Anger is a warning sign. It's supposed to alert you to the fact that you've been hit. Somewhere inside you there's pain. You've been hurt. Anger tells you there's something deeper going on. If you refuse to dig beneath the anger to unearth the root of the problem, it will eat you alive. Unresolved anger becomes bitterness, and bitterness is incredibly dangerous. Sadly, I've seen some special-needs dads who've never gotten over their initial anger, and life has not gone well for them.

So what do you do? If you find yourself unable to loosen your grip on anger, you have to go to God. Ask him to show you what you're really angry about and help you resolve the issue.

Don't be ashamed of your anger; it reflects how much you care, but don't mistake anger for power. I have seen many men throw around their anger to intimidate and control other people. Anger isn't a joystick you can use to control your world. It's a tool meant to help you cope with overwhelming feelings. Surrender and confess your anger to God. Ask him for help. Don't let anger rob you of your joy, peace, and contentment.

Anger also becomes one of the biggest obstacles in our relationships with our spouses. Men tend to transfer or direct their anger toward their wives and other family members, lashing out with predictable results. If you aren't careful, anger will rob you of any hope of a positive relationship with your children. It can destroy your marriage and family life. We must realize early in this journey that men and women grieve differently. We must allow room for that difference and understand that we may not be at the same stage as our spouse or children. Again, I have seen more special-needs dads destroyed by their inability to let go of anger than perhaps anything else. Be aware of your unchecked anger!

This is my prayer for you:

Wise Father, you created us with powerful emotions. You gave us anger for a reason. Your Word tells us to be angry but not to sin (Ephesians 4:26). Help this man find the root of his anger. Help him see his pain and give that pain to you. Give him the courage to let go and move on to life and hope. Direct his path. Lead him to freedom. Amen.

Bargaining: The Great If/Then

In our brokenness and desperation, we can find ourselves trying to negotiate with God. I remember in the early days telling God that if he would just heal my son, I would go all over the world sharing the amazing story of his faithfulness. I really thought I could make a deal with God. Many of us, in our most desperate moments, try to conjure up some magical way to change our circumstances. We feel trapped and think we can orchestrate a way out.

Bargaining as a stage doesn't often last long, but it's an important part of the process of moving through grief. If you're bargaining, then part of you is settling on the fact that your circumstances are out of your control. The most important part of this process is to admit that you have *no* control over the circumstances surrounding your child's condition. If God doesn't respond to your offer to trade, you have no other option but to accept your circumstances for what they are. The irony is that there is power in doing just that! To accept what *is* allows us to be present, connected, and engaged with what is real.

.....
Do you believe God is working all things together for your good? This is where the rubber meets the road.
.....

When we pass beyond bargaining, we see our situation in terms of what *can be* instead of what needs to change. Our prayers become more about asking God *to use* our circumstances than *to change* them. If God doesn't respond to our cries for change, then we must

accept that he has a plan to use this struggle for our benefit. We can know that he not only will walk with us through it but will ultimately work it out for our good (Romans 8:28).

One of the toughest things you need to determine is what you believe about God. Do you believe God is good? That he has your best interest at heart? Do you believe God is working all things together for your good? This is where the rubber meets the road.

If God is who he says he is, then we must accept that whatever he says is true. *You are* loved by God. You matter to him—infininitely so. God cares deeply about what you’re going through. He cares so much that he wants to go through it *with* you. Make the decision to believe him. Settle your mind on it. If he is for you, and your circumstances don’t change, then there’s purpose in what he’s allowing in your life. Get on the same page with him, and you’ll find that there’s a lot less frustration and resistance in your life. Fight him, and you’ll find your very existence unbearable.

God’s Word tells us, “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments” (Deuteronomy 7:9) and “The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing” (Zephaniah 3:17).

Bargaining Checklist

You know when you’re bargaining with God, but you may not realize what bargaining says about you. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is it I really want?
- Do I know what’s best for me/us/our child, or do I just want relief?
- What do I really believe about God?
- Can I trust God even if he doesn’t do what I want him to?
- Is it possible that my situation is actually designed to bring me closer to God?

Lord, help this man settle in his heart that you are for him.
Help him to know to the marrow of his bones that you care
for him and mean him no harm, only good. Amen.

Depression: The Dark Night of the Soul

We're all familiar with sadness. We know what it means to be broken-hearted. When we are grieving, it's totally normal for us to feel overwhelmed by sadness. Some men respond to this by withdrawing and becoming very quiet. They don't feel like talking and don't want to be bothered with questions about how they're doing. Men don't generally show or share feelings easily. We learn to hide our emotions as a sign of personal strength. We love to feel as though we're in control. The problem comes when the sadness persists and isn't dealt with. It can all too easily become full-blown depression. I know because I have struggled with this myself.

In addition to handling Jon Alex's profound special needs, I have also experienced life-threatening health issues. I have battled one dark day after the next and have experienced loss after loss, including the loss of my foot. I haven't been able to drive for several years, and I find myself in the demoralizing position of having to depend on others for the simplest of daily needs. I know how tough life can get.

As a soldier, it's important to know when you are safe and when you need to call for backup. Usually sadness can be managed with time, self-care, truth, and some mental toughness. What I mean is that with the passing of time, some attention to our own emotions, a firm grip on the truth of God's Word, and some mental fortitude, sadness will typically pass on its own. However, depression is a different matter. If you are depressed, you need backup. How is depression different from sadness?

When we're experiencing sadness, painful feelings usually come in waves, mixed with times of joy or happy memories. When experiencing depression, we tend to stay down for an extended period. Depression, unlike sadness, also robs us of our self-esteem. If you're sad, you typically still feel fundamentally okay about yourself, but with depression you can struggle with a sense of worthlessness or

even self-loathing. With sadness you can cheer up, but with depression it seems nothing can lift your spirits. Sadness and depression can overlap, but depression is usually accompanied by a sense of defeat.

Depression Checklist

People who are experiencing depression may feel or exhibit the following:

- Lack of interest and pleasure in daily activities
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Lack of energy or inability to concentrate
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide²

It's important to remember that being depressed doesn't mean you're less spiritually mature or less of a man. Many faithful men of God have struggled with depression, including Moses, Job, David, and Jeremiah. Being depressed doesn't disqualify you from being a man after God's own heart.

Depression can be very serious. It's vital for the success of your mission that you know your own heart. If you don't, you can spend years simply trying to survive something you can't control. Be brave and get honest with yourself. Are you sad? Are you depressed? Ask the Lord to help you discern the difference and to lead you if you need to seek help. There's never any shame in calling for backup. It's wise to know what you need and to ask for it.

Father, give this man a clear understanding about what is going on in his heart. Shine your light on his grief and give him wisdom to know when he needs help and the courage to ask for it. Be his joy and restore his hope. Amen.

Psalm 34:18–19 assures us that “the LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous

person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all.”

Acceptance: It Is Well with My Soul

When I finally came to accept Jon Alex’s profound disabilities and what they meant for our lives, everything changed. This milestone brought about a palpable shift for our family. I saw with new eyes what could be. With acceptance, I was giving God the leeway he needed to teach me what my role would be and to show me our future. Life made more sense as I embraced my responsibility as a warrior for my family.

If you’re struggling to accept your role as a special-needs dad—if you feel cheated out of life or robbed of your dreams—I can’t encourage you enough to work through your feelings and give God a chance to speak hope to you. Acceptance isn’t the same as resignation; on the contrary, it’s a powerful, positive act of the will. Acceptance is a choice you make to refuse to argue with what is. Acceptance says yes to what is happening right now.

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, he used the name “I AM” to identify himself as the God of Israel, the same God who appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 3:14). I love that God calls himself “I AM.” Simple as this may sound on first hearing, it’s a strong declaration. If you want to be with God, you must be present in the life he has assigned you. You can only be with God in the *now*. He didn’t call himself “I was,” as though he were living in the past, or “I will be,” as though he would manifest himself at some point in the future. No, he is “I AM”—here and now, active and available in this present moment. If we want to be where God is, we must be present—available and fully yielded to him—in real time.

In this mission as a special-needs dad, you will feel an incredible temptation to try to escape the hardships of the assignment. You will want to run, to hide, and to check out—but don’t. You will miss all the destiny and purpose that have been written into your story. Long before you were born, you were assigned good things to accomplish.

You were sent here to do specific things that only you can do. Don't second-guess God, as I did. Accept his call on your life and walk in the fullness of it: "Before I made you in your mother's womb, I chose you. Before you were born, I set you apart for a special work" (Jeremiah 1:5 NCV).

Lord, help this man fully accept his reality. Help him see the purpose in his assignment and catch a vision for his mission. Draw him into this army of men who serve and protect the neglected and overlooked of this world. Help him see that you are here and that you long to walk every step of this mission with him. Amen.

Now here's the truth: it would be wonderful if you could deal with your grief once and have it over and done with, but that isn't the case. You will again and again be faced with situations that revive these old feelings. Your child gets a new diagnosis, you get another call from a frustrated principal, your friends are celebrating their kids' championship victory while your child has never thrown a ball—each time you'll have to reckon with your grief anew. When you find yourself there, come back to this chapter and read these words, turn to your friends for support, and ask God to meet you where you are. Each time you do, you'll get stronger and the downtime will get shorter. Each time you face this challenge, you're being given an opportunity to improvise, adapt, and overcome. You're becoming a soldier, and this is what we do.

A Story from the Front Line

Chad Quarles lives in Arizona with his wife, Staci, and their two daughters, Madelynn and Kayla. This is a personal story from his life on the front line.

We learned that our daughter Madelynn had a cyst in her brain during my wife's first ultrasound. What was supposed to be a joyous

and memorable moment quickly turned out to be devastating and overwhelming. Over the next month I had a deep feeling of self-shame and responsibility. I couldn't help but replay all my old sins and wonder if they were the cause of my daughter's disorder, as though somehow my sins had finally caught up with me. This experience shed light on my inaccurate understanding of God's grace and Jesus's finished work on the cross. During that one month I determined to live as righteous a life as I could, hoping I could earn God's healing. I read numerous books and essays on healing and how to convince God to grant this blessing. These thoughts and efforts were baseless and fruitless, and through them God helped me understand the nature of grace.

My breakthrough moment occurred one evening as I was cleaning the gym floor in a local church. I had just purchased a portable radio and headset so I could listen to music while I cleaned. Over the course of several weeks, I tried to tune in to radio stations, only to be disgruntled that there was no clear reception in the building.

However, one evening my radio remarkably tuned in to a Christian station that was playing a sermon on John 9, the story of the man who had been born blind. The pastor spent much of the message explaining the question the disciples asked of Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?" As he described the love and heart of God toward people impacted by medical disorders and disabilities, and how their lives could be lived daily for the glory of God, all my presumptions and guilt began to erode. This was the first moment since we had learned about our daughter's condition that I found hope and realized that God wasn't punishing our family.

MISSION CRITICAL

- Assess your current emotional condition.
- Surrender your pain to God.
- Choose to embrace your mission.