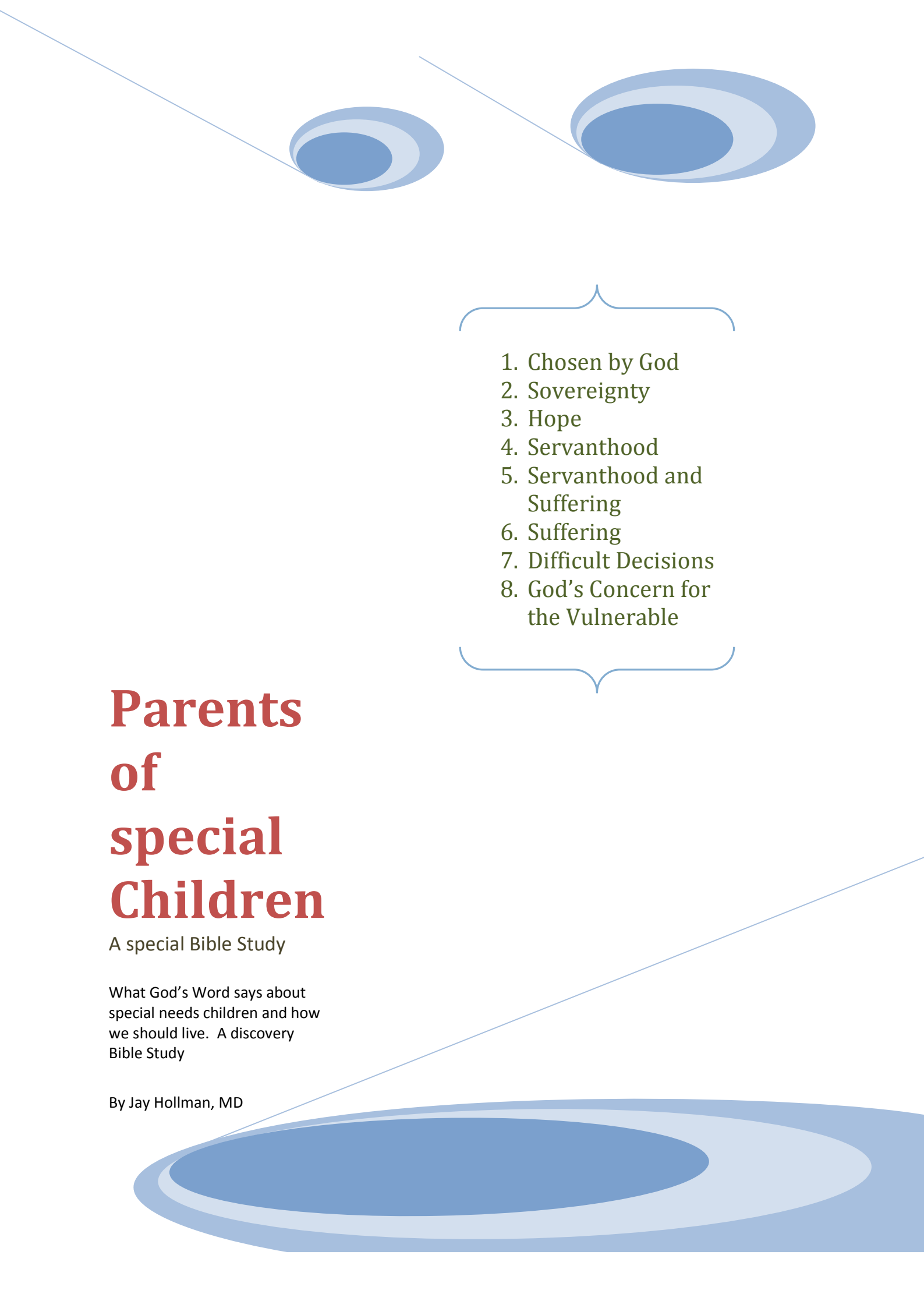



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# Parents of special Children

A special Bible Study

What God's Word says about special needs children and how we should live. A discovery Bible Study

By Jay Hollman, MD

## Introduction: Why?



While teaching in a pediatric hospital in Mongolia, Charlotte was confronted by E. K., the father of child with a significant birth brain injury. Charlotte had examined his child and determined that the child had experienced anoxic brain injury and was likely to be mentally retarded and have cerebral palsy, a condition that would significantly interfere with the child's ability to walk and live independently. Even though E.K. was financially much better off than most in his culture, he knew that he faced a real crisis. Two weeks earlier his wife had left him and his 15 month old special needs child; fortunately his 50 year old mother was available to assist in the care of his child. Two months ago, he stopped his heavy drinking and smoking, knowing that this was not giving him answers to the crisis that he felt in his life. He asked Charlotte why she had come to Mongolia. 'Did she work for the government?' When she told him that she had come as a part of a Christian

Medical team, E.K. asked if Charlotte was serious about God. Charlotte replied that she was serious about Jesus. In his excellent English that he had acquired during his three years of study in England, E.K. invited Charlotte to go to lunch with his mother and him that very day.

Perhaps you are like this father seeking real answers to difficult questions raised by the crisis of having a special needs child. Maybe this is not a child but a parent or a spouse with a debilitating stroke. Very few of us get through life without a crisis that comes from a medical illness that results in chronic disability for us or for a close relative. John Kennedy, our 35<sup>th</sup> President had a sister Rosemary who had mental illness with an element of retardation and who became more debilitated after a frontal lobotomy. The answers that we seek are sometimes found through science but usually only partially. We are interested in the why questions as well. When confronted by a man blind from birth, Jesus' disciples asked who had sinned, the blind man or his parents. The answer to this profound question is given in John 9. The Bible does give answers to these questions. It is our hope and prayer that as you study the Bible with the help of this study guide, you will find answers to the personal crisis that you might be facing.

This study has been prepared as a devotional study by people who believe that there are real answers to be found in God's Word. We do not regard these lessons as comprehensive nor should they take the place of medical consultations or consultations with your Pastor or Priest. We do pray that as you study together in the fellowship of other believers, that the Spirit of truth will be your teacher and that you will find joy in your role as a Special Parent.

# Chosen by God

My medical school roommate Oliver Stalsbroten made a wise decision after finishing his Family Medicine residency. He went to Pakistan and served for a year in a mission hospital while one of the career missionaries was on furlough. He had many adventures and difficulties including treating the only other physician there. This physician, a female internist from Europe, nearly died of overwhelming infection after she was treated with a contaminated intravenous solution. Oliver came back to the States and went into Family Practice in rural Washington State. I asked him why he did not commit to long-term missions. His answer was simple: he did not have a 'call from God'.

Pastors, Priests and other full time church leaders give great importance to the concept of calling, a sense of being chosen by God. A calling for these workers is the deep conviction that they have been given a particular ministry by God. As Oliver explained to me, without such a calling, the Christian worker will not be able to be steadfast during times of great trial. Discerning God's calling in our lives is a central issue because a calling determines our focus and energizes us during difficult times.

This lesson is not about discerning your vocation but it is about a special calling that each of us has. We have been chosen by God to care for our special needs children. Some callings are more elective such as vocational callings. Other callings are brought to us by circumstances. When Charlotte took over the care of her father's finances, this came naturally as a result of his failing mental health and her duty as a daughter. When our son James began his mental deterioration, we knew that we had been chosen to care for a special needs child. For each of us divorce is not an option, and we cannot walk away from the responsibility of parenthood. This type of a call is unmistakable; to not respond to James' problems would be to disobey direct commands of God.

## Day 1 Chosen by God-Moses

**Moses was a reluctant leader. Despite God appearing to him in a burning bush that was not consumed and performing miraculous signs, Moses demurs. Read Exodus 4:10-17**

**What was Moses' excuse for not wanting to say yes to God's calling?**

**Why did this excuse make no sense to God?**

**What was Moses' response?**

**This made God angry but he did allow Aaron to go as a spokesman. Have you been reluctant to accept your calling as a parent of a special needs child? Moses was reluctant to accept his calling but he did go on to do great things for God and His People through his humble service. Perhaps God will do great things through your life as you obey him and follow Him.**

## **Day 2 God's chosen people Israel.**

**Why was Israel chosen? Was it because they were righteous? Read Deut 9:4 for an answer.**

**Deut 7:6 tells Israel that they were chosen and verses 7-9 lists reasons why they were chosen and a reason that they were not? What are they?**

**In Deut 14:2 God reminds Israel that they were chosen to be his treasured possession but if you take time to read the chapters surrounding this verse, you will learn that being chosen was attached to many rules. Our being chosen to be parents of special needs children often comes with many rules and restrictions. One rule in the care of certain teenage autistic children is that they cannot be unsupervised. This changes the lives of their parents. Has being a 'chosen' parent of a special needs child placed restrictions or rules on your life and the life of your spouse?**

## **Day 3 A chosen people and a royal priesthood**

**I Peter 2:4-12 Speaks of Christians as being chosen by God. What is one of the purposes of our being chosen? See verse 9**

**Verse 11 is a summary of the holiness theme that begins in 1:13 and continues through 2:3. Do you see any characteristic in this list that God needs to perfect in you?**

**Verse 2:12 reminds me of the many Christian works that have been done in the name of Christ for people of special needs.**

**The Christian church in China has won favor with the government in part because of a program that they have established for special needs children including the adoption of some of these children into Christian families. Soldiers in Iraq have assisted in opening a school for special needs children, an uncommon opportunity in Iraq where these children are often hidden in the home. Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity were criticized for proselytizing but their humanitarian work with the poorest of the poor caused even her critics to praise her work and give glory to the God that she served. By treating your special child with love and compassion, you will be a testimony to others.**

#### **Day 4 God's purpose in choosing us**

**Do you ever respond like Moses: Here am I, Lord, send Aaron. Have you not asked God why He did not choose someone else? Why were you chosen to raise a special needs child?**

**I Corinthians 12: 1-31 speaks of the Spiritual gifts. These gifts are a part of God's purpose for us. It is not too much of a distortion of language to realize that as a part of God's calling and choosing us, He would also equip us.**

**Verses 12:12 to 12:31 speak of the need each of us has to be a part of the body of Christ. At times our gifts might be used to help another and at times another's gifts might be used to help us. Can you think of an example in your experience with your special child?**

## **Day 5 Living worthy of our calling.**

**Ephesians 4:1** summarizes the teaching of the verses that follow: 'live a life worthy of the calling you have received.' This is the most ambitious task to which we have been called. List what living worthy of your calling means (verse 2-4).

The parable of the Master and his Servant is found in **Luke 17:7-10**. This Parable is only in Luke and not one that is commonly taught. Read it and summarize the message below.

This parable is useful to me when I get a 'martyr's complex' for having to spend a day differently because of having my special needs son. Our duty is to love and care for our child. I need to do this willingly even if it means sacrifice. I have been called to be the father of a special needs child. Unlike the callings that full time religious workers have which can sometimes be difficult to discern, the presence of my son makes it clear that I have been chosen. I daily need His help to walk worthy of such a calling.

# Sovereignty

In modern times we often think of sovereign states and sovereign rulers. We might think of China's response to Western criticism of governmental suppression of what we would regard as individual rights. China can well respond that as a sovereign nation, it has the right to make and enforce laws.

When we speak of God's sovereignty, this is related to His absolute right to do anything that He desires. God is able to do this because of His absolute power, a property that theologians call omnipotence. It is like the riddle: where does a 900 lb gorilla sit? The answer of course is wherever he wants. The sovereignty of God is different from the sovereignty of nations or rulers; it refers to God's absolute right to do all things, rule all over all things and govern all things in His universe according to His pleasure.

The sovereignty of God is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the daily difficulties that we face with our special needs children. If God has the power to make them well, why does He not? This week's lesson will discuss this attribute of God and help us understand God and His ways.

## Day 1 Power

There is little reason to declare sovereignty unless there is power. A government may claim sovereign dominion but if the outlying regions are under the control of others (as the warlords were in Afghanistan prior to the US invasion) then there is no absolute rule because the central government lacks power.

## Read Psalm 19

The Psalm divides into two parts: verses 1-6 and 7-14. What are the themes of each section?

Many Christians in the sciences have regarded this Psalm as speaking of God's two great books: the book of nature and natural revelation and the Bible or his specific book of revelation. What do we know about the greatness of creation that demonstrates his power?

While the greatness of God is demonstrated in nature what attributes of his greatness are not accessible without biblical revelation?

## **Day 2 Power over Circumstances**

God's power in nature inspires us to worship him. Learning of God's goodness through the study of the Bible and His wonderful attributes of love, compassion, kindness, justice etc. will do little for us until we see God as involved personally in our lives.

In Hannah's prayer in **I Samuel 2:1-11**, she is rejoicing over the birth of her son Samuel whom God had given her in her barrenness.

Read again **I Sam 2:6-8**

What do you learn about God's control over life and death? Poverty and wealth? Power and humility?

One important lesson to be gained from studying the Old Testament and especially all the rules and laws is that God is concerned about the details of our lives. Have you been able to see God work in some of the small issues in your life? Would you consider sharing this with the group?

## **Day 3 God as ruler**

King Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful ruler in his time yet he had to be humbled to realize that God is the one who is truly in control.

**Read Daniel 4:4 through 4:37**

**What was the troubling dream that Nebuchadnezzar dreamt?**

**What confession changed circumstances for Nebuchadnezzar?**

**Can you see how believing in God's sovereignty leads to humility?**

### **Day 4 God's Choice**

**Read Rom. 9:10-18**

**Why did God choose Jacob over Esau?**

**To whom is God's mercy given? Why God demonstrates wrath or mercy towards an individual is often mysterious.**

**What happened to Pharaoh when God hardened his heart? (See Exodus 14:4-31).**

### **Day 5 Reactions to God's Sovereignty**

**Romans 9: 19-25 What do you think is the lesson of the pot and the potter? Do you think that God does not want you to speak back to Him? Is it wrong to complain to God? Read Psalm 13. Does David complain to God?**

**The prophecy of Hosea refers to a time when God would extend his grace beyond Israel. Why would these words be of comfort to the Romans?**

It is God's mercy and grace extended to us that has allowed us to enter into fellowship with Him. We can take comfort in knowing that God is in control. In a quite readable book *Rare Earth*, Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee discuss all the variables essential for a planet to sustain intelligent life: a certain type of sun, the presence of a shielding planet such as Jupiter to prevent frequent asteroid collisions with earth, a moon the size of ours to stabilize earth orbit etc. The scientific details are beyond this discussion except to realize that our earth is a very special place and we might be the only planet with life in the vast universe. With this background, science has also learned how easily life can be destroyed: a supernova explosion in our region of the Milky Way or collision with a medium sized asteroid could destroy life in a matter of hours or days. But we are comforted that the Creator God is also the Sustainer God and nothing will happen to earth except as He allows.

Among the hardest things for parents of special needs children to believe is that God could make our child well and yet chooses not to. It does not mean that we should not ask God to heal and use every valid medical therapy that might help our child. If we cannot believe that God is in control then we make for ourselves a god different from the God of the Bible. Such a god, limited to our imagination and sense of justice is not a god worth worshipping and serving. Embrace the mystery and comfort of the sovereignty of God.

# Hope

If there is anything that helps us in the care of our special needs children, it is hope. We hope for the best for them. Parents hope that a surgery will help the mobility of their child with cerebral palsy. Parents of children with epilepsy hope that the new medications will stop their child's frequent seizures. Parents of autistic children hope and pray for a cure. We long for something better for our children. Believing that our efforts might help our child keeps us trying special therapies, seeking the best medical advice and spending time on our knees in prayer.

Nothing can be more devastating to us than receiving the word that nothing more can be done. As an adult Cardiologist, I must at times tell a patient that nothing more can be done by curative medicine. There comes a time in heart failure when literally nothing more can be done from a curative medicine perspective. At this point, I am quick to point out that this does not mean that nothing can be done. I assure the patients at this point that we will do everything possible to keep them comfortable and that there are treatments that can reduce their pain and their symptoms of shortness of breath. I encourage them to still hope for good times during this terminal phase of their lives however short or long it might be.

The Bible speaks to hope as well. In fact we will learn that it is among the three virtues that endure. It is something that God wants us to have in good measure. Knowing the eternal perspective gives us a source of hope that our secular friends cannot access. Isaiah 40: 29-31 gives us the promise of a secret source of energy: 'He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.' Consider memorizing verses 30 and 31 so that you might draw encouragement from them during your next difficult time with your child.

## **Day 1 A Hope that comes from experience**

**Psalm 71** is a psalm that most scholars attribute to David in his old age. Read the Psalm.

**How long had David hoped in the Lord? See verses 5-8**

**What is the basis of David's hope?**

**What is his current prayer? See verses 9 and 18**

David demonstrates that hope comes from the memory of seeing God act in his life. You might not have experienced a faith in Christ from your youth, so you should be a little patient with yourself when you experience doubts. Faith and hope cultivated for a lifetime bring great depth of character and strength when facing even the trials of aging.

## **Day 2 Job's Hope**

Everything about Job's condition would extinguish even the smallest flicker of hope: the loss of his wealth and children, a nagging wife whose best advice was to curse God and die, and friends that ask him to come clean regarding some awful sin that he must have committed to deserve such a horrific judgment from God. Although Job is severely tested, he continues to hope in God.

**Read Job 13:13-19 and Job 16:18-21. What are the two sources of hope for Job?**

**What are the sources of hope for you with your special needs child?**

## **Day 3 The power and goodness of God**

**Psalm 147** is a mixture of God's general revelation through nature and specific revelation that should delight us. God not only determines the number of stars, calling them by name but He also heals the broken hearted and binds their wounds. Truly we praise him not just for His creative power but even more for his character.

What do we learn about the character of God from this Psalm?

How can we become someone in whom God will delight?

### **Day 4 More than Conquerors**

**Romans 8:18-39** is among the most positive passages in Scripture. Read it and see how much hope it inspires.

**Verse 26** tells us the name of one interceding for us. Is this what Job had in mind? (**Job 16:19-21**) Can you see also parallels from the Job passage and the work of the Spirit in verses 26 and 27?

What sources of hope can you identify in this passage?

### **Day 5 Joy after sorrow**

**Lamentations 3:1-57** Lamentations is the only book of the Bible that consists primarily of laments. Other books such as the Psalms and the Prophets contain laments but they do not dominate the book. But the lament is not without purpose—it leads to repentance. Chapter 3 contains great passages on hope.

What is the basis for Jeremiah's hope? **Lamentations 3:21-27**

Have you ever felt like your prayers for your child are not getting through to God? Would you describe this like Jeremiah? See verses 43 & 44

**Jeremiah was cast into a pit (Jeremiah 38:6). Yet in this time the Lord blessed him with a special presence. See Lamentations 3:55-57. Have you ever felt the presence of the Lord in a special way during your struggles with your special needs child?**

### *God's Presence*

Especially during the early years of James' autism when he was losing skills that he could earlier do—performing puzzles, speaking, potty training, I would pray intensely for James to be healed. I am sure that I wearied heaven with my prayers. We were at the same time doing every thing possible medically for James including his four day per week meetings with graduate students in speech pathology. One morning after I finished my quiet time with my prayers, I went out to get the paper. As I was coming back to the house, I saw for the first time a cross on the front of our house and heard in a voice different from my usual thought processes speaking this message: James will be healed in heaven. This is the closest to an epiphany that I have come. (The cross had been a part of the Tudor design on our house all the time but this was the first time I noticed it). I still pray for James, that we can maximize his potential and that we can obtain help for him but I no longer pray for complete healing. I have been comforted by His presence in this special event.

My hope is that some time in heaven after James and I are reunited, I will be able to have a long conversation with him and hear him tell me all of the things that he might have told me if he could have put it into words. This hope helps me keep a perspective on the challenges that we face during these years.

# Servanthood



Because of a job change and some other responsibilities, I was unable to go with Charlotte on a cruise. Charlotte did go with a couple of female friends who brought their normal sons who were friends of James' older brother Peter. Charlotte spent much of her day doing things that James wanted to do. When I spoke to her, I thought that she would be disappointed that she was not able to spend more time with the other parents but she came back having had a great time as a servant to James, helping him to have a great time. Clearly we serve all our children but the service of our special needs children often requires much more time and energy.

The Messianic allusions in chapters 42, 52, and 53 of Isaiah and Zechariah 3:8 clearly refer to the coming Messiah as a servant. Christ fulfilled these prophecies. He must be regarded as a servant of God in the highest sense. Indeed he called himself a servant in Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." What is there about servanthood and the Christian faith?

## **Day 1 Bond Servant Deut. 15:12-17**

**What is a bond servant?**

**Does this bear any relevance to our service of Christ?**

## **Day 2 The greatest in the Kingdom Matt 20:20-28**

Why is service so important for greatness by God's standard?

Is being a servant (or slave in most translations) an easy demand?

## **Day 3 The prudent servant Matt 25:14-30**

As a servant of Christ what do we have to invest? Talent is a unit of money worth more than a thousand dollars but does the word itself bring other issues to mind?

## **Day 4 The upper room discourse with the illustration of feet washing.**

Jesus gives an example of service in John 13:12- 17.

What was the activity that Jesus did for His disciples?

What does Jesus promise for our humble service?

Read John 15:12-17

Jesus tells his disciples that they are friends and not servants. What is the difference between a mere servant and a friend?

Is the friend still a servant? Why? See verse 14

## **Day 5 God's servant and the world**

Luke 16:13 Why do we have to choose between God and money?

John 15:18-25 What does Christ mean by 'the world' in these passages? Have you experienced any hatred from the world?

**Aristotle is considered the first to formalize the concept of what we now call virtue ethics. Ethics is the study of how we decide what is right and wrong. Aristotle believed that good people living consistently with certain virtues would make good decisions. For Greeks of this time four traditional virtues were courage, justice, temperance, and prudence. In the aristocratic society of Greece, humility and servanthood would not pass as a virtue. In Christianity humility and servanthood are on equal standing with the Greek virtues. Living as a servant makes us stand out from the narcissistic age in which we live. It also helps us to be better parents to our special children. Remember when we serve the least, we serve Christ.**

# Servanthood and Suffering

The Buddhist faith is quite distinct from Christianity in that it does not believe in any god and that suffering is the characteristic of human existence. The four noble truths of Buddhism are: 1. that human existence is unsatisfactory because of suffering 2. suffering is caused by clinging to impermanent things (a problem of ignorance) 3. the chain of cause and effect that produces suffering can be reversed resulting in liberation from suffering or nirvana. 4. This path to nirvana is achieved through the eightfold path of Buddhist practice. We must agree with the Siddhartha Gautama or the Buddha that suffering plays a central role in understanding the purpose of life. More people have kept from faith in God because of the seemingly senseless suffering that occurs on a daily basis. One of my partners in Cardiology was driven from a Christian belief system because of the prolonged suffering of his sister with mental illness.

Christianity presents clearly that suffering is not meaningless. Christ, as suffering servant, achieved our redemption. Through Christ's suffering we have a perfect high priest who can fully sympathize with our testings. In our own suffering our character is perfected and we gain the ability to sympathize and comfort others.

## Day 1 Servanthood—a glorious title

Servanthood is a recurrent title of distinction in the Old Testament

**Ex 14:31** the Israelites put their trust in Moses the servant of the Lord. Sixteen times when the name Moses is mentioned in Joshua, he is called a servant of the Lord.

**Numbers 14:24** The Lord's servant Caleb had a different spirit, following the Lord wholeheartedly.

**Ruth called herself a servant of Boaz at the time of their introduction on the threshing floor Ruth 3:9**

**Samuel's answer in his first conversation with God was "Speak, for your servant is listening." I Samuel 3:10**

**David repeatedly referred to himself as a servant to Saul in deference to the king. When king he referred to himself as a servant of the Sovereign Lord (2Samuel 7:20)**

**When King Solomon asks the Lord for wisdom in I Kings 3:1-9 he repeatedly refers to himself as the Lord's servant.**

**Elijah in the contest with the prophets of Baal asked that his sacrifice be consumed so that the people would know that God was God in Israel and that Elijah was the Lord's servant. I Kings 18:36-37**

**Nehemiah referred to himself as the Lord's servant Nehemiah 1:6**

**When the angel of the Lord told Mary, the Mother of Jesus the circumstances associated with His birth, she replied "I am the Lord's servant." (Luke 1:38) Mary had the witness of the servanthood of the prophets. Mary begins her Magnificat with "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant...." Luke 1:46-48**

## **Day 2 King Rehoboam—the non servant leader**

**When King Solomon died his son Rehoboam became king. He asked his father's advisers about how he should rule. The answer they gave is in 2 Chronicles 10:7.**

**Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked. *7 They replied, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants."***

Unfortunately, Rehoboam did not listen to their advice and followed the advice of his peers. You will need to read 2 Chronicles 10, 11 and 12 to get the full story.

**2 Chron. 10: 13-14** How did the king decide to treat the people?

As a result the northern 10 tribes became a separate nation under King Jeroboam, who started idol worship. The Levite priests living among the northern tribes were forced to move to Judah (11:13-14). Shishak, king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem and made off with much of the temple treasures (12:9).

What a mistake when we fail to see that our leadership positions are mostly about serving. As we are involved in leadership let us never forget that our main task is to serve those under us.

### **Day 3 The prophecy of the Servant Leader**

**Isaiah 42:1-4** "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. 2 He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. 3 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; 4 he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope."

This passage should be especially comforting to parents of special needs children. To whom does the passage refer? Confirm your answer with **Matthew 12:15-21**.

I like the way that **verse 3 & 4** of Isaiah are translated in *The Message*

**He won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt and he won't disregard the small and insignificant, but he'll steadily and firmly set things right. He won't tire out and quit. He won't be stopped until he's finished his work—to set things right on earth.**

To me there are no better verses to summarize the compassion of the Lord. How can we be imitators of Christ in this?

## Day 4 The Abusive Servant

**Luke 12:41-46** Peter asked, "Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?"  
**42** The Lord answered, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time?  
**43** *It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns.*  
**44** I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. **45** But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. **46** The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers

This passage shows the depth of Christ's teaching on service.

One of my jobs as the Cardiologist at Earl K Long is to care for prisoners. It was a great tragedy to encounter a retarded middle aged man who was sexually abused in an institution and now had to be housed in a prison for the criminally insane. Not only had the abuse given him the AIDS virus, it had also conditioned him to behaviors that would make him unsafe in a group home.

Tragically, there are those who would harm or take advantage of special needs children. We should know that they will face a judgment for such a behavior.

## Day 5 The Suffering Servant

**Isaiah 53** portrays with graphic detail and incredible accuracy the type of suffering servant who would redeem humanity.

What was the purpose of his sufferings? (see verses 5,6,10)

What is foretold in verse 11?

**How does Christ serve us even now (verse 12)?**

**The great mystery of the atonement is that through Christ's suffering as a servant and His death on the Cross, we have been made right with God. As far as we humanly know this is the only means by which we could be made right with God.**

**Hebrews 2:5-18 picks up on the role of Christ's suffering in effecting our salvation. Verse 10 speaks of the perfection of the author of salvation through what?**

**This is a great mystery why Christ, the Son of God should be perfect by suffering or through his passion as the Douay-Rheims Bible says. A partial answer comes in the last verse of the chapter: verse 18. Please state this in your own words.**

**We also share in the suffering of Christ: Romans 8:17 states: Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. Sharing in the sufferings of Christ might mean many things including certain persecutions, denying ourselves certain pleasures or having our lives changed by having a special needs child. One purpose of our suffering is so that we might be able to comfort another who also experiences the same trial that we have experienced. See 2 Corinthians 1:3-7:**

**3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.**

**7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.**

**Have you experienced comfort from others who have had a special needs child? Has God used you to comfort others?**

**We will learn from next week's lesson that we also are perfected by our suffering. So unlike the view from Buddhism, suffering is not pointless. We will escape suffering when we are with our Lord but in the mean time we should see suffering as a part of our perfecting process as servants of Christ.**

# Suffering

**Where is God when it hurts? One of the most difficult questions from a theological and personal perspective is what is the meaning of suffering? Some have phrased it: 'if God is all good and all powerful why does He allow suffering?'**

**Parents of special needs children experience suffering in several dimensions. We suffer as we see our child not able to do the 'normal things' that a child of their age would do. One mother of an autistic child expounded a litany of issues: he would not play on sports teams, he would not drive a car, he would not go to prom, he would never marry. Some parents suffer physical pain from an adolescent child who is physically strong but out of control. There is also the hassle factor for children with physical disabilities: loading the wheelchair in the car, and figuring out ways to navigate in buildings that have no access ramps.**

**At times, you might also experience rejection when you and your family are excluded from certain activities because they are unable to make accommodations for you and your child. Sadly this might also occur at your church. Remember the church is made up of imperfect people as well.**

**Once when we were on a panel at LSU discussing medical ethics, Charlotte answered a question regarding suffering of special needs children in a most profound manner. The expectation of the questioner was that special needs children are unhappy and suffer greatly and thus should be aborted. Charlotte's answer was that the happiness or sadness that these children experience is more contingent upon their circumstances in life than their disability. If they have loving parents who genuinely seek the best for them, these children will be happy. Depending on the severity of the disability, the lives of their parents will be changed. There is no doubt that this will result in a certain amount of suffering for the parents and the siblings of the special needs child. But of course there are joys as well.**

## **Day 1: The origin of suffering: original sin**

Prior to their sinning, Adam and Eve lived in communion with God; they were able to enjoy the fruit of the garden without having to work the soil. But after an undetermined period of time, they chose to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the only tree that they were commanded not to eat from.

**Read Genesis 3:14-19. This is the curse from original sin**

**What was the curse for Eve?**

**What was the curse for Adam?**

**During medieval times, some thought that special needs children were born free from original sin. It is not known which specific group of children they had in mind. Certainly many have observed that Down's syndrome children are often very loving and forgiving. Our teenage autistic son James is free from materialism, in part because he does not understand possessions and ownership. We know that our children have a sin nature but it manifests itself in different ways. Have you seen this in your child?**

## **Day 2: The origin of suffering: our own sin.**

**Read Romans 3:10-23 Verses 10 through 18 paint a bleak picture of mankind. What sins are listed?**

**How does verse 23 summarize the condition of man in relation to sin?**

**Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best selling book called *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. The book has many compelling passages as Kushner struggles with the tragedy of his son's battle with Progeria syndrome. This rare disease causes premature aging with death in the teenage years. He struggles with the classic issue of how can God be all good and all powerful and yet allow seemingly meaningless and cruel suffering. The answer from Scripture as to why bad things happen to good people is that there are no good people: we all sin. The reason that we do not experience God's just punishment for our sins is the richness of his mercy and his love {see Psalm 145:8}**

### **Day 3: Suffering because of other's sins.**

Sadly, you or some in your study group might have children who are suffering because of the sins of others. Cocaine babies and fetal alcohol syndrome are but two of the syndromes that can result in life-long problems for children as a result of their mother's sin. Tragically in Africa millions of children have been infected with HIV AIDS because of the sins of their parents. Some children are crippled for life because of a drunken driver.

**I Chronicles 21** tells the story of David taking a census. This is not one of the familiar positive stories of David's life such as David and Goliath.

What did David do wrong?

What were the consequences?

There are many applications for leaders from this passage but an important idea for us is that leaders make decisions that will have consequences for many. It was not wrong to ask for a census as God commanded a census in **Numbers 1:2**. This census was for David as an act of pride. We do not always understand the mysteries of why one person must suffer because of the sins of another.

### **Day 4 Attitude towards those who cause suffering**

Perhaps as you thought about your child's disability, you began to think of people or circumstances which might have contributed to his or her condition. We should ask ourselves what should be our attitude towards these individuals or circumstances?

**Matthew 6:14-15** directly follows the teaching of the Lord's Prayer. What are the consequences of failing to forgive?

**Read the parable found in Matthew 18:21-35. How many times should we forgive another person?**

**A talent was worth 6,000 denarii. A denarii was a day's wage for a Roman soldier. How much did the servant owe his master?**

**In this parable who is the master? Who is the servant?**

**Jesus is quite clear that we are to forgive. It is often good to forgive even before we are asked because many will never be able to ask for forgiveness. Others may not want to ask for forgiveness. A good rule of thumb is 'to never let the sun go down on your anger' Ephesians 4:26. Long term anger and resentment leads to bitterness with adverse consequences for your physical, emotional and spiritual health. For me, with some especially grievous offense, I must reaffirm my forgiveness several days or weeks in a row.**

**Forgiveness does not lead us to be naïve. If your child has a disability because of an abusive stepfather, you do not leave your child at risk for further injury as a consequence of forgiveness. Individuals who ask for forgiveness should be granted it immediately but the person forgiven cannot demand that all privileges be restored. Trust and strong relationships take time and consistency to develop. Forgiveness is a gracious gift to be granted freely; trust must be earned. People who are truly sorry will change their behavior so that trust can be earned.**

### **Day 5 God's purpose in suffering.**

**Some of you know the reason why you have a special needs child. Many of us do not.**

**In Romans 5:3-5, Paul explains why he rejoices in suffering. What good comes from suffering?**

**James asks us to rejoice in our sufferings (see James 1:2-4). What qualities do both Paul and James see as a result of suffering?**

**Suffering is truly a large topic. Peter Kreeft said it well when he said, 'Suffering fills the need to continually remind us of the obvious and evident truth there is, yet the one we are the most constantly forgetting in practice: that we are not God.' We learn through suffering life lessons that make us humble and able to sympathize with others. God uses this to perfect our character. We might never know until we reach heaven the meaning of much of our suffering but having a Savior who suffered for us gives us the hope and faith that all will work together for our good and God's glory.**

# Difficult Decisions

One of the 'children' in my practice is a 50 year old man with Down's Syndrome. He was a delightful person and I always enjoyed my visits with him in the office. I was always humbled by the devotion of his father and mother who cared for him in their home all his life. While he could have lived in a group home, he did not have the tools to live on his own. Because the boy had not had a heart operation as a child, he now had irreversible damage to the arteries that supplied his lungs. This would make him not a candidate for heart surgery and with the progressive damage to his lungs; he would likely die within the next several years. He is now nearly bedridden.

I received a note from his pulmonary physician that he was intending to start Maurice Jr on a special medication for his pulmonary hypertension (the condition of his lungs). This might help him live a little longer and slightly improve his blue complexion but this was an expensive medication and certainly not curative. After discussing the issue with Maurice Sr, now 81 years old and a widower for one year, I wrote the pulmonary physician and asked him not to start the medication. Although I wanted good therapy for my patient, I knew that there was something very important that the pulmonary physician had not considered: the wish of Maurice Sr. to care for his son to his death. He did not want to have him placed in a 'home'.

You might also be facing difficult decisions with your special needs child. The Bible does not contain specific answers but from the principles in sacred Scripture we can achieve wisdom for difficult decisions.

## **Day 1 Ask for wisdom**

**Read James 1:5-7.** Often we need wisdom in making decisions regarding what is best for our children. What condition does James attach to the promise of wisdom from God?

How do we ask for wisdom in faith?

## **Day 2 Insight from the Word of God.**

**Psalm 119** is remarkable for a variety of reasons but two that are fairly obvious are the length (it is the longest chapter in the Bible with **176 verses**) and secondly its **22 stanzas** all center on the value and application of the Word of God.

**Psalm 119:17-24** What are the promises regarding the Word of God as outlined in this passage?

How does the Word of God serve as counselor?

Our Bible study has representatives from a variety of traditions: Pentecostal, Evangelical and Roman Catholic. Unfortunately much blood has been spilt over subtle differences in theology such as whether Scripture alone is the ultimate authority or whether Scripture and church tradition are equally important. In truth it is a joy to be alive at this time when we can all value Scripture and study it for what it says to us and we can find unity in what the Bible teaches. It has been the testimony of Christian brothers and sisters that the study of the Word has made them 'wiser than their enemies' (see **Psalm 119:98**)

## **Day 3 Seeking counsel**

Decisions for the care of our children often involve many practical issues: whether to continue a certain therapy, where and how to educate etc. God's Word advises us regarding these decisions.

**Psalm 1:1** advises us where we should not seek advice. Who are the people from whom we should not seek advice? Do you have any examples of bad advice from such sources?

**Proverbs 15:22** Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.

**Proverbs 15:22** advises us to seek the counsel of many. Sometimes with our child it is best to get a second opinion or ask the advice of several physicians and health care professionals. Careful listening on our part is also essential. Fortunately there is also often good information available through the internet and support group websites. How have you used such information to aid you in decisions concerning your special needs child?

**Proverbs 27** has two verses that are relevant to seeking counsel, verses 6 and 9. Why is friendship and a caring counselor important?

#### **Day 4 Reading the Circumstances**

Often times we think that circumstances themselves are inherently ambiguous. But we can find direction when we filter our circumstances through Biblical truth.

Circumstances often determine what we can do. In **2 Corinthians 8:10-15** Paul is discussing the collection of an offering for the church in Jerusalem which was suffering materially. What were the circumstances of the Corinthian church? Does God expect us to give what we do not have?

What is the will of God for you? There are three items in **I Thessalonians 5: 16-18**. What are they?

If you find yourself ungrateful or unthankful or lacking in prayer then you should pray that God would change you or change the circumstances.

## **Day 5 Seeking ultimate counsel**

What if you have asked for wisdom, studied Scripture, received counsel from many caring advisors and have carefully weighed the circumstances and still do not have an answer? While it is unusual not to have an answer after following the above steps, there are some decisions that refuse to be peacefully resolved.

**In Psalm 35:13, David does not take unanswered prayers to mean that God was indifferent or irrelevant. What does he do?**

Humility and fasting and seeking God's promises should be an important portion of seeking his ultimate counsel. When fasting and praying, the church at Antioch was lead by the Holy Spirit to place their hands on Paul and Barnabas to send them forth as one of the greatest missionary teams in history. **Acts 13:1-3**

One of the titles for Christ in the Messianic passages of **Isaiah 9:6** is **Wonderful Counselor**. This responsibility is graciously transferred to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit promised to us in **John 14:**

**16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.**

This again is affirmed in **John 14:26** and **15:26**. The Holy Spirit working within us when we seriously ask for His direction will lead us. If you have not asked Christ to be your Lord, you likely have not received the gift of the Holy Spirit. While following the principles of Scripture will be helpful for any person, without the Spirit, you will miss the possibility of this internal and ultimate Counselor.

Followers of Christ also miss his leadership because they are not obedient to what they have been taught. Sometimes God in his grace does not allow us to know what He wants for us because He knows that we will not obey. **Luke 12:47-48** speaks to the consequences of knowledge without obedience.

**47 "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. 48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.**

**Do you really want Christ to be your Lord? Are you willing to obey no matter the cost?**

# God's Concern for the Vulnerable

During a recent telecast on autism awareness day, a CNN correspondent interviewed a well-to-do Mother of a child with fairly significant autism. Her comments were both disarming and troubling: 'I just hope that some day there will be someone who would care for my son that we do not pay'. At first, I thought that she was hoping that her son would find a mate and marry, but then I realized that this lady was sophisticated and realistic enough to know that this would not happen. She had never found anyone within her community that would show love and caring for her son unless they were paid.

In the fall of 2001, we were having some trouble getting people to take James out for the afternoon so that we could have some respite time. Charlotte mentioned this problem to one of her friends and she said that she knew someone from the place where she worked out who would take care of James. Well, James' older brothers, then 12 and 14, were somewhat jealous when the backup quarterback for the LSU football team showed up to take James for the afternoon. James had a great time seeing Mike the Tiger and other sites on the LSU campus. When they returned Matt Mauck did not want to take any money for caring for James. As a Christian involved with Athletes in Action, he saw this as an act of Christian service. After insisting on his taking some money, I gave him a small piece of jewelry that a patient had given me with the Prayer of Jabez (I Chron 4:10) on it. We talked briefly about the significance of the prayer. Two Saturdays later, Matt played in the Southeastern Conference Championship game and had to step in for the starting quarterback who was injured in the first half. He ran for two touchdowns and was named the game's Most Valuable Player as the LSU Tigers upset the #2 ranked Tennessee Volunteers.

I must say that as Christians, we have not had the problems of the Mother described in the CNN story. We have been blessed with many volunteers from our church who have assisted in a special needs class so that Charlotte and I could attend both the worship service and Bible class. We know of many who genuinely care for James and have received no financial support from us. This week's lesson will discuss the role of community and especially the Christian community in the support of special needs kids. But even more important is God's concern for the vulnerable. While not all in this study are Catholic, all Western Christians trace our spiritual heritage to the Roman Catholic Church. As a student of Medical Ethics, I am frequently gaining insight from Catholic scholars. One of the Priests with whom I frequently exchange insights has given me a statement that keeps me thinking. According to Jesuit theology, God loves all people but he loves the poor, the oppressed and the vulnerable just a little bit more. If he is right, then we have the privilege of caring for one of God's favorites—our special needs child.

## **Day 1 The law and those in need**

**Read Exodus 22:21-24 Why were they not to take advantage of the foreigner or outsider?**

**What was the penalty for taking advantage of a widow or orphan?**

**Israel did not obey and would fall under judgment for its treating of the oppressed and the poor. See Amos 2:7-8 and Amos 8:4-6**

## **Day 2 God's view from the Psalms on the weak and needy.**

**Whose prayer moves God in Psalm 12?**

**Psalm 72:12-14 states God's response to the cries of the weak and the needy: 'For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. 13 He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. 14 He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight'.**

**Psalm 82: 3,4 exhorts us to do God's work. Read this passage and state God's expectation of us.**

**One of the joys of being in a Bible study with parents of special needs children is the opportunity to meet parents who are going through some of the same trials as you are. Is there anyone who perhaps has a more severely involved child who might need some respite help? Is God nudging you to help?**

## **Day 3 Who is caring for the sheep? Ezekiel 34**

**What are the Shepherds doing wrong?**

**Who are the Shepherds and who are the sheep?**

**In verse 16, the Lord demonstrates his heart of compassion. There are times when the community can be quite cruel toward us. One woman with a special child related the scorn that she experienced from her secular friends when she told them that she knew that she was carrying a Down's syndrome child early in her pregnancy. Her friends thought that she had a duty to abort such a child. Can you see a different attitude in verse 16?**

#### **Day 4 Criteria for Admission to Heaven**

**Matthew 25:31-45 contains the important parable of the sheep and the goats. Of all Scripture, I find this to speak most directly to me regarding the manner in which we and the Christian community should care for our special needs children.**

**Who are the sheep and who are the goats?**

**What are the criteria for separation?**

**Do you see your special needs child in this story? Do you believe that when you help meet your child's needs, you are serving Christ?**

#### **Day 5 Christ's tenderness and true religion**

**Matthew 12: 17-21 quotes Isaiah 42:1-4. This passage gives a beautiful description of the tenderness of Jesus. What is that phrase?**

**James 1: 27** reminds us of what will pass as true religion. Two of the three criteria are relevant to our lesson. What are they?

It is often said (and sometimes justifiably) that a doctor thinks he is god. This is not a flattering description and usually describes a physician who is power-driven, egotistical and self-righteous. Something totally different is implied when we are called to be sons (and daughters) of God. God is not only powerful but He is also a compassionate servant seeking to help the needy and the sick. We imitate God by imitating Christ's humble service of others. I believe that this type of activity is essential for us if we would want to experience other aspects of His character such as power.