

Tales from the Parsonage

PART ONE: JESSIE'S STORY FROM HER DADDY

WRITTEN BY JULIE BARRIER

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION:

Romans 8:26-39

PRAYER FOCUS

Dear Jesus,
Help me to take every painful
event in my life as an opportunity
to hear Your voice and grow in
my faith.
Amen



Hearing God in Our Pain

“Intra-uterine growth retardation,” the doctor announced. “Your baby has stopped growing.” I could feel all of the blood rush out of my face. My hands were clammy. I could barely speak. “What does this mean, Dr. Rafael?” I heard myself ask. “It could mean your wife is less far-along than we thought, or your child is in trouble.” Julie, my wife, was supposed to be six months along in her pregnancy. Then she developed gestational diabetes, and the prognosis became more ominous. I slept less and prayed more.

At nine months, on the dot, Julie went into labor. The birthing room didn't seem warm and inviting. It felt cold and austere, and we were filled with an odd sense of foreboding. Then it happened. Nurses and doctors came rushing in en masse with monitors, EKG equipment, and sonography. Dr. Rafael asked me to leave the room. “Your baby is in respiratory distress.” His voice was measured and intense. “We'll do a c-section immediately. We've got to get your daughter out.”

Minutes later Jessie was born. But it was not the joyous, exciting moment we'd anticipated. Jessie was three pounds, fourteen ounces. The nurses rushed her to ICU. When the medical team had hooked her up to every tube imaginable, I saw my little girl for the first time. She was a ghastly shade of blue and I could see her bony little sternum heaving up and down above her tiny diaper. She looked so cold and helpless.

I wanted to wrap her in a blanket and run away, but the ICU personnel shooed me out of the room and told me to wait. And wait. And wait. I couldn't even see Julie. I sat in the waiting room from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. before the pediatrician paid me a visit. "Roger, I am sorry" the new pediatrician said. "Your daughter has a rare-actually, a very rare condition called trisome 18. Everything on her 18th chromosome is defective. She has a hole in her heart, brain damage, and a set of lungs that are not fully formed. We give her a week at best." The words felt like a knife. (They were wrong, by the way. Jessie struggled for life nine months before she died.) The nurse came into the waiting room and told me I could see my wife in an hour or so."

I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. All my dreams for my little girl were dashed to pieces. There would be no baby dresses, no dolls, no rocking chairs and no playground. Only an empty house and two grieving parents would remain. I wept until I had no tears left. I saw Julie only briefly that night. I kissed her and prayed for her. She was under heavy sedation. I'm not even sure she fully realized what had happened.

Only early the next morning did my parishioners trickle in to pay a visit. But God and I wrestled that dark night. "God, I'm your preacher. I've given my life to serve you-and this is how you treat me?" After arguing for a couple of hours, I settled down and tried to remember my checklist.

First: Am I being punished for a sin I've committed?

Second: Is this trial intended to keep me from future sin?

Third: Is this suffering designed to increase my faith and God-dependence?

Fourth: Is this suffering designed for my personal growth and/or spiritual maturity?

Fifth: Is God using this trouble so that His glory may be displayed in my life?

Sixth: Is God using this affliction to mold me into the image of Christ?

Seventh: Is it time for Jessie to die?

I knew that any one or all of those answers could be true. But I wouldn't have an answer until three weeks later. I was showering in the early morning hours, preparing to visit Jessie in the ICU. The still, small voice was so clear in my spirit. "Roger," God said, "do you know how terrible it feels to have a baby who won't grow up?" "Yes, God," I replied. "It's devastating." God spoke quietly. "That's how I feel every time one of my spiritual children refuses to grow up." That concept seemed so foreign to me. God, the God of the universe, is deeply grieved. And yet, my Heavenly Father hadn't finished speaking. "Roger, the agony, disappointment and grief you have experienced will not be wasted. I have called you in this life to help baby Christians grow up. Never forget it." And so I haven't. After thirty years of ministry, my passion to see young Christians mature has only intensified. God uses His refining process to conform us into His image. "God, make me a spiritual man or woman at any price!"

That is the prayer God always answers.

- Read Romans 8:26-39. Can you remember any painful experiences in your life when you needed to know that God was crying with you, interceding on your behalf, and waiting to use that experience to make you like Jesus? What were some of those times? List them below. How do you feel as you were in the midst of your pain? Does it comfort you to know that God was weeping with you? Does it encourage you to know that no experience of your life is wasted? Spend some time praying for God to open your eyes to His care and His plan for you.