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Father, Are You Abusing Your Child?

Larry Caviness

I have heard my friend Larry Caviness tell the story of his son Tad many times, but it never fails to move me. I lived through part of it with his family because Larry and I worked in the same office at the time. I've chosen to let Larry tell his story in his own words.

—DS

As soon as my wife, Linda, pulled into the driveway, I could tell that things had not gone well at the doctor's office. She'd taken our ten-year-old son, Tad, to the pediatrician after an accident at home earlier that day. I quickly opened the car door, picked up Tad, and carried him to the living room.

Linda hurried into the house behind me and went straight to our bedroom.

There was a large bump on Tad's forehead, he had two black eyes, and he was feeling nauseated, so I took some time to get him settled as comfortably as I could on the couch; then I went down the hall to the bedroom. Before I even got to the door, I could hear Linda's sobs.

She's a school teacher, accustomed to dealing with children and their minor accidents. But lately, the strain of caring for our handicapped son was taking a toll on her. This was the third time

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in one summer that Tad had fallen and hit his head hard enough to need medical attention, and I could understand if she was beginning to feel helpless.

But I was hardly prepared for what she said when I joined her in the bedroom.

“You OK?” I asked.

“No.”

The tears came again, and sobs.

“What did the doctor say?”

“How could he think such a thing?” she wailed. “How could he even think such a thing? He’s known Tad most of his life. He knows what we’ve been going through. How could he even think—”

“Who? Think what?” I was becoming alarmed.

“Doctor Bell.” Linda broke down in tears again.

“What did he think? What did he say?”

“He said . . . he said he has to . . . the State of California requires him to . . .”

“To what?”

“To report cases of suspected child abuse!”

“Child abuse!” My blood was suddenly boiling. “He thinks we’re—”

“It is the third time this summer.”

“But he’s been treating Tad since he was a tiny boy. He knows about his coordination problems. How could he even think we would—”

“He didn’t really accuse us, he just said—”

I was up and out the door before Linda could finish her sentence. I was headed for the telephone in my study. Hot words boiled in my throat. To think that our pediatrician, a friend of the family, would even let the thought cross his mind that Linda or I would do anything to injure our son! To think that I was being tacitly accused of child abuse! I’d have words with him and straighten him out quickly!

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Little did I know that a few years later the tables would be turned, and I would find myself unjustly accusing another father of child abuse.

Ten years earlier, Tad had joined our family as a special gift from God. The middle of three children, we hadn't realized just how special he was, or how much a special-needs child could teach us about our heavenly Father, until he was nearly four years old.

Up till then, he was just a normal, happy boy, full of smiles and mischief and the usual childhood sniffles, bumps, and bruises. But shortly before his fourth birthday, we began to notice that he wasn't developing new skills as quickly as we expected. And he was a bit more prone to taking tumbles than his older sibling had been at that age.

Our family pediatrician in Charlotte, North Carolina, checked Tad over carefully and assured us that it was probably just a phase that he was going through. "They hit clumsy spots once in a while, especially when they're having a growth spurt," he said. "He'll no doubt grow out of it. Give it awhile."

The months and years went by, but Tad continued to trip

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and fall a lot more than he should have. And then, even more alarming, he began to regress mentally. One day he could add and subtract just fine, and the next he seemed to be forgetting how to do simple math.

We took him to doctor after doctor over the next several years, but no one could explain what was happening. They conducted tests and gave one diagnosis then another, one treatment then another, but Tad never got any better.

Tad was four when we moved to California, where I took up responsibilities as youth director at the Northern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Linda began teaching at the local church school, and it was a proud day for us when Tad entered kindergarten.

It would be the only year of church school he would attend.

His condition continued to worsen. Whatever was affecting his coordination was also affecting his brain. It tore at our hearts to see him struggle to learn things that other children picked up almost automatically.

At the beginning of the next school year, a conference with the school principal led us to the inevitable conclusion. Tad needed to be enrolled in special-education classes at the local public school. It wrenched our hearts when we watched him bid farewell to his many friends in first grade. He cried and pleaded to be allowed to continue in “Jesus’ school,” but the school just wasn’t equipped to meet his special needs.

At this time we were living in Concord, California, and I simply can’t say enough good things about the quality of care and education Tad received when we enrolled him in special-education classes there. Without our even requesting it, California Children’s Services came to our aid by providing professional support. Several times a week, Tad worked with occupational therapists, who carefully watched his condition and worked with the teachers to give him every possible advantage.

Several years later, when the time came that he needed to

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have a wheelchair, the support staff sat with us and helped us pick out a design that Tad could live with. He selected a canary yellow one, and we gussied it up with black mag wheels. I figured if my son had to be in a wheelchair, it was going to be a sports-car wheelchair!

Our neighbors were so supportive at that time as well. Tad was literally heartbroken about being confined to a chair—because it was an admission that he would never be able to run and play with his friends.

But when we arrived home with that chair, there on our front lawn was a table, balloons, cake, and ice cream. And all Tad's neighborhood friends were there. They took turns pushing each other up and down the street in the chair for fun. One of the precious mothers in the neighborhood understood how hard it was for Tad to need a wheelchair, and she decided to have a party for him. It did a lot to lift the spirits of that twelve-year-old boy.

Pre-wheelchair days, when Tad was ten, he could still walk and even run, but that's when he began falling and getting such bad concussions that our pediatrician thought somebody must be knocking him around. When Linda told me that the doctor was going to report us to the authorities, I got on the phone right away and demanded to talk to Dr. Bell. "How can you accuse us of such a thing?" I demanded. "You've been working with us all these years. You keep telling us it's not going to get any worse. But Tad's condition keeps deteriorating! We come to you for help, not for accusations!"

Dr. Bell listened, and that night he gave it a lot of thought. The next morning he called and gave me the name of Dr. Bruce Berg, chief of Pediatric Neurology and also a physician-researcher at the University of California, San Francisco, who specialized in childhood neurological disorders.

Soon we were making regular trips to UCSF for tests and consultations, but even with all of that, it took a year before a clear diagnosis came back.

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I remember the day as if it were yesterday.

I had taken Tad in for some tests. When the tests came back, Dr. Berg told me he needed to do one more test to reach a definite diagnosis. It would involve taking some of Tad's bone marrow.

"Do you think it's leukemia, Doctor?" I asked.

"No. But I hope the sample will confirm for sure what we are dealing with."

It seems like it was only half an hour after the bone marrow sample that a nurse came to get me and took me to the doctor's office, right there at the hospital. I entered and took a seat, hoping at last to know what was wrong, and what could be done to help Tad.

"Mr. Caviness," Dr. Berg said, "I don't know how to tell you this, except to say that your son has Niemann-Pick type C, a very rare disease, and it is terminal." He went on to explain that little is known about this extremely rare disease.

"Most physicians have never seen a case like this because it is so rare," he explained. "Tad is not producing enough sphingomyelinase, an enzyme that helps produce white myelin to coat a portion of the nerve cells in the brain. Without that, the brain cannot send muscle commands efficiently. This disease progresses differently in each patient, but it is always fatal. Tad could die tomorrow, or he may live for a few years. I wish I could tell you more, but we just don't know."

I was in absolute shock. I'd had no idea we were looking at anything this serious. I fumbled around and asked a few questions. But I really couldn't even process the news that quickly.

"You need to be careful with Tad," Dr. Berg said. "Treat him like he's a normal child. Don't tell him he's going to die. God will reveal it to him gradually, as he's able to handle it."

I don't know whether it was weeks or months later, but one day when Tad was with Linda, out of the blue, he asked, "Mom, where am I going to be buried when I die?"

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At that moment we knew he understood what was happening. And on a certain level, he had accepted it.

A few weeks later, I had to attend a meeting at our church's youth camp—a place Tad loved to visit. We had spent entire summers there when I was conference youth director. I took Tad along, and as we drove out of the camp after the meeting, Tad was crying and turned to me and said, “Dad, I won't ever get to ride a motorcycle, will I?”

How my heart sank. Tad's older brother and I both had dirt bikes we'd ride whenever we were at the camp. Tad had dreamed of the day when he would be able to join us on our rides with his own motorcycle.

I had told him that if he could someday learn to ride a bicycle without training wheels, then he could ride a motorcycle. It was a goal he strove toward with all his heart. But his nervous system wouldn't cooperate. When he came to understand that he would never reach his goal, I tried to console him. “Tad, maybe Jesus will have a dirt bike for you in heaven,” I said.

He turned to me and smiled, but then asked, “Daddy, we pray every day that Jesus will heal me. Why doesn't He?”

How could I answer him? What could I say? I am a minister. I was supposed to have all the theological answers. But none of them seemed adequate at that moment. I talked to him about how we are living on a battlefield because Satan rebelled against God. In a battle, some soldiers are wounded, some die, and some go home uninjured. We can't explain these outcomes.

“Tad,” I continued, “you and I are soldiers in God's army, and our job is to help Him tear the mask off Satan's face so the rest of the world can see what he is really like. And in this battle some soldiers will die and some will be wounded, but all God's soldiers will be with Him in heaven someday.”

Maybe that was an adequate answer for Tad. But it didn't still the questions in my own heart.

As Tad's condition continued to deteriorate, it became harder

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and harder for me to cope. He began having seizures. At night, because of low muscle tone, his tongue would sometimes slide back and block his airway. We would run to his rescue to hold his chin up in a certain way to get him breathing again.

We installed a baby monitor beside Tad's bed so we would hear when he began to struggle to breathe. I remember one night I had to get up and help him with this, ten or twelve times. Each time, after getting him settled again, I knelt beside his bed, weeping and praying, asking God, *Why?*

That was when I found myself ready to accuse another Father of child abuse.

Why are You letting this happen, Father? Why are You letting this happen to one of Your children? I was so angry at God I was pounding my fist into my hand, silently screaming at heaven. Where are You, Father? Are Your promises not for me and my family? Don't You care? Can't You fix this? Don't just stand there with Your hands in Your pockets while my son suffers this way. Do something! If You can't do something, then just get out of the way and let someone else take over!

The next morning, I tried to do some work at my office, but I couldn't. Finally, I just got into my car and began driving around aimlessly, pounding on the steering wheel, crying and yelling at God.

After many miles had passed, I was exhausted. I had vented all my anger. And that's when I sensed my heavenly Father getting into the car with me.

I didn't feel His hand on my shoulder. I didn't hear a voice. But I sensed Him answering my questions. *I understand, He said. I understand what it is to watch a son die in agony. I watched My Son die too. It was so horrible I darkened the sky! I made the lightning flash and the thunder roar! I shook the ground! My Son was on that cross, and I couldn't stand the sight! I would have liked to rescue My Son from His suffering. But I had to leave Him there so I could save you.*

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In the silence that followed, God brought four lessons to my mind that would help me walk the dark valley ahead.

Lesson 1: Hope. Just because things aren't going the way I wish they were here on earth, it's not time to give up hope. As a Christian, I can look forward to the second coming of Jesus, a time when God will put right all the things that have gone wrong on this earth. This life is not all there is; the best is yet to come! We have this hope!

Lesson 2: We live on a battlefield. In war, bad things happen to good people. Why? Because it is the nature of sin. Satan is going about as a roaring lion, angry, wanting to devour God's children (see 1 Peter 5:8). Bad things happen, but all of them must pass through the filter of God's permission. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear (see 1 Corinthians 10:13). The trials we endure will build us into stronger and more lovable Christians. And that's what He wants to do—develop our characters.

Lesson 3: God will not forsake us. There were times when I felt forsaken. I even began preaching a sermon I titled "Have You Ever Felt Abandoned?" But after I had preached it a few times, I changed it to "A Testimony of God's Love." I learned to focus on His love and compassion. He promises, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Joshua 1:5, NIV).

Lesson 4: He will give us strength. Isaiah talks about His carrying the young lambs in His bosom (see Isaiah 40:11). He also reminds us that He will strengthen us and uphold us with His righteous right hand (see Isaiah 41:10).

When I got out of my car after that long drive, there was peace in my heart that I had not known before. I could finally see that even though I was suffering, I was not abandoned. God was with me to give me strength to endure whatever lay ahead.

For his part, Tad accepted what was happening to him, determined to be a good soldier for the Lord. There's a picture hanging in the hall at our house, a picture that Tad himself drew

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on the last day of kindergarten. Across the top of the picture are the words “I will be a preacher.”

In a real sense, Tad’s heart’s desire is being fulfilled even today. Every time I tell his story, it is a testimony to the love of God. In its own way, Tad’s short life still ministers to others.

But there’s another way he’s preaching today as well.

It began one night when he and I were home alone. Often at times like that we would sing songs together—songs he had sung around the campfire at youth camp. He couldn’t carry a tune. I teased him that he sang in the key of J because he loved to make a Joyful noise. That night we were singing “When the Roll Is Called up Yonder.” Tad was failing fast, and we knew he wouldn’t be with us much longer. As we sang together, the words of the song got to me. When we got to the chorus, there was a catch in my voice. I couldn’t go on. Tears were rolling down my cheeks.

Tad looked up at me and said something so profound that I will never forget it. “It’s OK, Daddy. Jesus will fix it someday.”

Tad died in 1993, just two weeks short of his seventeenth birthday. We laid him to rest in a cemetery in Chico, California. At first we couldn’t think of what to write on his grave marker. Then one day, it came to me.

Today, if you were to visit his grave, you would see Tad’s own words inscribed there, as a testimony—a sermon—to any who may come to that place grieving, wondering why God has allowed tragedy to darken their life.

Tad’s words are there in bronze. Words of hope: “It’s OK, Dad. Jesus will fix it someday.”