

Learning to Trust God

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Brethren, my subject today is about learning to trust God, and in my message, I'm going to be sharing a personal story about my son Samuel. I don't know if you guys have been "Samuel-ized" yet, but if he comes up and shakes your hand then you know you have been Samuel-ized. Samuel is a relatively healthy fourteen-year-old with Down syndrome. He is considered to be high functioning—he goes to school, he has fun within his class, he's the top reader and the top this and that. He's a very, very happy young man. But Sam had a really, really tough start in life. I think there are some lessons that we can draw so that's what I'm going to share with you.

Before Sam was born we had some sonograms, and the sonograms showed that Sam had a short femur, and they said that could be a sign of a number of things; they wanted us to do an amniocentesis to try to figure out what it was. They said it could be dwarfism, it could be nothing—but they wanted to find out. We did not want to find out because, I mean, what are you going to do with that information? So we decided not to do that. The pregnancy was normal. Sam was born at the birthing center where his sister had been born three years earlier. After he was born, they were looking for all the typical signs of Down syndrome, but Sam didn't show any of those signs. He didn't look quite as they expected but couldn't really hit any markers, so while his mom was recovering, they handed me Samuel and told me to go to the hospital and have him examined by a professional—a Down-syndrome-specific doctor.

So I took Samuel and we go to the hospital, and the doctor examines him and he says, I don't know, I can't tell, so we were dismissed to go home. The first week of Sam's life was just normal. He had a little problem latching on, he had weak tone and stuff, but there was nothing abnormal, and on the eighth day we took him to the birthing center to have his circumcision done and that's when everything kind of fell apart. He began to get this gray color—he was fine up until that day but now all of a sudden this tiny little thing turned this gray color. The people at the birthing center asked, does this baby look normal to you? We said no. They got an ambulance and we went straight to the hospital. They put him in NICU (the neonatal intensive care unit) and he's in a little bubble and they've got him wired up like you wouldn't believe. They've got IVs in his head, he's on oxygen, we have pictures of what that looks like, and there are more wires and gadgets in there than there is baby.

They began to run tests but the results don't come back quickly so you have to be in there for a little while. So the results started coming in, and Samuel had a cyst on his brain and it was making his head swell. His liver didn't work, he had a ventricular septal defect—a hole in his heart—and he had leukemia. So each of the doctors, each of the specialists came in, and each one of them was telling us that Sam would probably not

leave the hospital. He wasn't going to make it. That was their prognosis. After a few days, Sam began to get better. This little tiny baby, just covered with wires and everything (I can't look at my wife right now); it was a very difficult time. We don't know if this little baby is going to live or die—we have no idea. We've got a house to manage, we've got a business to manage, we've got a three-year-old sister to manage—we've got all this stuff going on, and guys, this is a big, big trial that we're going through. I know some of you are going through big trials right now and frankly, I've had bigger trials since then, but there are still lessons to learn from this one. So we're juggling a lot of things.

It was a very, very difficult time for us, but after a week, Sam was so much better that we got to take him home. When I say home, he was still wired with monitors and oxygen, and all this kind of stuff, and they were telling us at that time that Sam would be on oxygen for the rest of his life—this kid is never going to be off oxygen, if he lives. So now we've got him home but he's still got to be monitored. We've still got to check his oxygen—nobody gets to sleep through the night. We're using saturation monitors to make sure Sam is okay. His cardiologist is saying this ventricular septal defect (VSD), the hole in his heart, is a serious problem and he needs to have heart surgery right now. The cardiologist said if he didn't have this surgery he'd have maybe five months, and if he has the surgery there's maybe a one-out-of-three chance of survival. What do you do with that information?

That was tough—a very, very tough time. With the leukemia, we're taking him to the hospital every week and this little baby has legs this long and femurs this big—tiny little legs—and they have to poke him in the foot and then they have to milk his leg to try to get enough blood out to do the blood tests so that they can then test the blood for what they call a blast count, which is the cancer cells in the blood. So we go through that every week; we bring him in every week and they put heat on him and they poke his heel and milk his leg, and Sam didn't like that. He made a lot of noise—he didn't like that at all. The reason they wanted to do it every week is because there is something called infantile leukemia, where if your blast count goes down every week that means that the bone marrow is starting to produce white blood cells and the liver isn't, and it's going to resolve itself.

Unfortunately for Sam the blast count was going up—every week he had a higher blast count so they're preparing us to give consent to give Sam chemotherapy, and they have parents of other children that have gone through this, calling us and telling us it's going to be okay. Then a miracle happened. We go in to do the typical blast count (where they put a heater on Sam, poke him and squeeze his leg, and he's screaming and we're waiting for the results) and his mom is trying to console him. We're there for about thirty minutes and they come back in, and we're ready for the results because that's the way the test normally works, but when they come in, they want to do the blood test again. So now they take his other leg and they put heat on it, and then they poke him and they're milking his leg and they finally get enough, and they're gone and we sit there for another thirty minutes, just waiting. Thirty minutes later a different team comes back in

to do a third blood test and we're about to come unglued. Samuel is not really happy with us at this point. They go through the whole process again, take the blood, and send us home. They say go home, we'll call you.

In about two days, they called us back and they said his blast count was zero. That was a miracle. They didn't believe it so they had to do the blood test again. They didn't believe the second one so they had to do it again. That was one down. He's still on oxygen, he's still got VSD, he's still got all of this but he's getting better. In three and a half months, we're weaning him off of the oxygen and after three and a half months, we're able to completely remove the oxygen. The little boy that was never supposed to go home is now off oxygen.

When Sam was a year and a half old, the [new] cardiologist (we changed cardiologists because we didn't want to go through the surgery) said we could just give it some time and see how it goes. Well, they did a test; they put him under and they ran a tube up his groin into his heart to test the pressures in the chamber, and his cardiologist said, just give it some time, I don't think he's going to need heart surgery because the hole in his heart is staying the same but his heart keeps getting bigger and keeps getting stronger.

So this little baby that we brought home with all these wires and all these tubes, and, if you think about it, when we go to Church we're taking portable oxygen, we're taking portable saturation meters—we're taking all this kind of stuff and it's a big issue just living and managing the monitors every two or three hours, all night long. Now, he's off of oxygen—they said he would never be off oxygen. The leukemia is gone, and with the VSD, he's growing into it so he doesn't need surgery. It was a tough, tough time but look at what happened.

Just because all of those great things happened doesn't mean that Sam didn't still have health problems. If Sam got a cold, it always turned into pneumonia and he always ended up back in the hospital, so he was in the hospital four times his first year. He was in the hospital for the same thing, pneumonia, at least twice a year. The first year that he didn't go to the hospital was 2012 and that was a celebration. He actually got a cold and he got over the cold, and we didn't end up in the hospital. Small victories—we made progress.

What are some lessons that I've learned from this experience? If I were to tell you all the lessons I've learned, we would be here for hours. I picked a few, the traditional seven lessons, and maybe you can learn some lessons from our experience. I know we're all learning lessons from the experiences that we go through. Let's turn over to James 1:2. This is a very, very familiar scripture.

James 1:2 *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3) knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4) But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (NKJV)*

The first lesson: Trials that we endure bring us closer to God. Our prayers become way more frequent, way more fervent, way more urgent and we become far more aware of our total dependence on God. God brings us to that point. I had read this scripture many, many times but when you're in a trial that serious, these scriptures, these comfort scriptures, become way more meaningful, way more personal.

The second lesson is that we need to learn to accept circumstances that we can't change. We've had some folks in our congregation who a little over a year ago lost a baby, and it's a very, very difficult time for that family, and they are still struggling with that. When I was seventeen years old, my little sister died in a horse accident and that ended up bringing my parents out of the Church because they held God accountable—why could God let this happen to us? I've talked to people over the last many, many years and this is a very common sentiment—not being able to accept the circumstances that we cannot control. I wish Sam didn't have Down syndrome but I can't change that, so I've learned to accept that God knows exactly what I need, exactly what Sam needs, exactly what we all need. He is crafting our own personal obstacle course to bring us from where we are to where we need to be, and we have to learn how to accept that.

This is my third lesson: We need to learn to accept the fact that we're not in control. When I was younger I really had confidence, and I thought I was in control of a lot of things, but I've learned I'm not in control of anything. What I've also learned is that control is a dangerous delusion. If you think you're in control then that restricts gratitude, and that restricts the reverence that we need to give God, and it invites trials. Turn over to Daniel 4. I know it's a famous story but this is where Nebuchadnezzar had a dream—he had a lot of dreams. Daniel always told him what the dream was and what it meant. I want to start down in verse 24, understanding that this was recorded for us. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't converted, I'm sure of it, but he did learn something important and it's a lesson that we need to learn.

Daniel 4:24 [Daniel said] *this is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king:*

25) *They shall drive you from men, your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make you eat grass like oxen. They shall wet you with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses.*

26) *“And inasmuch as they gave the command to leave the stump and roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be assured to you, after you come to know that Heaven rules.*

27) *Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity.”*

28) *All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar.*

29) *At the end of the twelve months he was walking about the royal palace of Babylon.*

You can just see him full of pride, looking out over his Babylon.

30) *The king spoke, saying, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?"*

31) *While the word was still in the king's mouth, a voice fell from heaven: "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you!*

32) *And they shall drive you from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. They shall make you eat grass like oxen; and seven times shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses."*

33) *That very hour the word was fulfilled concerning Nebuchadnezzar; he was driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws.*

34) *And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, [this is amazing] lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom is from generation to generation.*

35) *All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done?"*

36) *At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my honor and splendor returned to me. My counselors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me.*

37) *Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, [that prideful king] praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down. (NKJV)*

This story is to teach us that God is in control. We can do our best and we should do our best, but we should never fool ourselves into thinking that we're running things, because we're not. Over in James 4 the same point is made. Verse 13.

James 4:13 *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit";*

14) *whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.*

15) *Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."*

16) *But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (NKJV)*

And that's exactly what Nebuchadnezzar was doing. Brethren, we're not in control.

The fourth lesson—a very important lesson—is it's not over until it's over. We never knew what was coming up next with Sam and frankly we still don't. When he was born, we didn't know if he would live or not. It was day by day, hour by hour—we didn't know. We didn't know how long he would live, we didn't know if he would go to school, we didn't know if he would learn to read, write, color, play—we didn't know. Day by day, the

hand played out. It's not over until it's over. Turning to Job 42, I think Job went through some trials that are way more severe than anything we will ever, ever face.

Job 42:10 *And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. (NKJV)*

Job didn't think that was going to happen when he was in the middle of this trial.

11) *Then all his brothers, all his sisters, and all those who had been his acquaintances before, came to him and ate food with him in his house; and they consoled him and comforted him for all the adversity that the Lord had brought upon him. Each one gave him a piece of silver and each a ring of gold.*

12) *Now the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; for he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys. (NKJV)*

It's not over until it's over; you never know what's going to come next. Samuel was in the hospital last year with pneumonia. It had been five or six years since he went through that but you don't know. He recovered; there he is, down there coloring. We did his reading homework yesterday. We've been playing Crazy Eights with the kids every day, a new game he learned this Feast. He's a happy kid. We were told Sam wouldn't leave the hospital alive, but he left in a week. We were told he had to have heart surgery but he didn't. We were told Sam had to have chemotherapy but he didn't. We were told Sam would be on oxygen for life; three and half months later he was off. It's still not over but he's having a great time at the Feast.

Lesson five is just simply trust God. This has been a recurring theme throughout many, many of the messages: God knows what's best. Sometimes when we're praying He says no; sometimes He says not now; sometimes miracles happen but not necessarily on our timetable. So we have to trust God. God is working in our lives to complete what He began. That's what Philippians 1:6 says.

Philippians 1:6 *... being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; (NKJV)*

We need to hang in there. At times things can look very, very bleak. Our future can look very uncertain. We ponder, what is God doing? I know with what the Church has been through and is going through, a lot of us are asking that question—what is God doing? We have to have courage, we have to hang in there. Turn to Romans 5. Some more comfort scriptures.

Romans 5:3 [Paul writes] *And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;*
4) *and perseverance, character; and character, hope.*

5) *Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (NKJV)*

This tells us our trials have meaning and purpose. Romans 12:10.

Romans 12:10 *Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another;*

11) *not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;*

12) *rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer;*

13) *distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.*

14) *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*

15) *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. (NKJV)*

That brings me to my sixth lesson: We are not alone in our trials. Sometimes we feel like we're alone. We feel like Elijah, when we read his story in 1 Kings 19, where he was feeling alone and God told Him there are 7,000 others that have not bent the knee to Baal. God has given us a family and you've heard that this Feast; God has given us a family to take care of and a family that takes care of us. Turn over to Luke 18:29; this is another one of my comfort scriptures.

Luke 18:29 *So He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,*

30) *who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life."* (NKJV)

God has given us a big family and sometimes we have to say no to some of our family because God's given us another, bigger family, more important relationships. Within the Church of God we do have a giant family. When we were going through our greatest difficult time with Sam we got cards from all over the world in bags. We literally couldn't read all of the cards. Months later we were still going through the bags of cards. We had brethren who babysat for us, who brought us meals. I can't tell you how many hours our pastor was there with us, comforting us, consoling us, grieving with us, celebrating with us. We're not alone, brethren—we are not alone. God has given us a lot of support.

Lesson seven is there are hidden blessings in our trials. Romans 8:28 is a memory scripture—we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose, but sometimes the good in our trials doesn't show up for years. We can look back and we can then really be grateful for what we've been through and what it's made us into. We have received a big blessing by having Samuel in our lives. Really big. He is so patient and so kind and so happy and so forgiving. He is such a good example for us. He's such a joy. Through God, through Sam, God has taught me a lot of things that I needed to learn. My priorities have completely changed from back when Sam was born. My perspective on life has

changed and I've become—I'm not a great person, yet—but I've become a better person because of Sam. God knew exactly what I needed.

How does learning to trust God relate to the Feast of Tabernacles? Fear, respect, trust, obedience—they are all related. I remember when Laura, Sam's sister, was a little baby, that I would lie on my back and I would hold her standing up with her feet on my hands, and I could balance her. She just loved playing that game where you throw her up and catch her. She was a little child. In Matthew 18 (you don't have to turn there), it says, then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them and said, assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. But whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Laura trusted me as a baby. We have to be like that; God wants us to believe Him and trust Him. He wants to see our fear, our respect, our trust in the choices and actions that we produce.

God will test our trust because He wants to know if we are trustworthy. Several people have referred to the command where Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham was going to follow orders. In Hebrews 11, we know that Abraham knew that God could and would resurrect Isaac, so he was going to follow through. He knew that God made promises that this nation would come through Isaac and he trusted God. He was ready, he was on the cusp—it was in that moment that the messenger of God said, stop—now I know that you fear God. God has got to find that out about all of us. How much do we trust God? Well, it's a process. We learn. Luke 18.

- Luke 18:1** *Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,*
- 2) *saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man.*
 - 3) *Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.'*
 - 4) *And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man,*
 - 5) *yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'"*
 - 6) *Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said.*
 - 7) *And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?*
 - 8) *I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"* (NKJV)

We're all here at the Feast of Tabernacles. It took some trust and some faith just to come. We left jobs, houses, various things behind, and we're asking God to protect our stuff. God puts limits on our trials. In Job 1:12, it says,

Job 1:12 *And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person."* [And then in verse 6,]

Job 2:6 *And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand, but spare his life."*

God is watching—He's got this, He's got our back. We can trust God. 1 Peter 1:3.

1 Peter 1:3 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,*

4) to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

5) who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

6) In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials,

7) that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,

8) whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,

9) receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. (NKJV)

Trials are important tools. We need to be grateful for them. In Philippians 4:6, this was a memory scripture that helped me get through all the trials. That's where it says,

Philippians 4:6 *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;*

7) and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (NKJV)

Have a great Feast!