

**Disability Emphasis
Week**

Barb Newman



**Family Devotions to
Celebrate People with
Disabilities
Volume I**

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DISABILITY EMPHASIS WEEK

Family Devotions to Celebrate Persons with Disabilities

Volume I

Introduction

Each morning as I drive to school, I give thanks for the inclusive education program in the school where I teach. Examples of love and belonging abound each day in my classroom, where I see children with and without disabilities living out the model for the church the apostle Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12. At my school, God is using students with disabilities to teach many things to everyone involved, and the lessons are a two-way street. The children with disabilities so enrich my life and teach me so many things, that at the end of my day I often wonder who has been the teacher and who the student.

This should not surprise us. In these seven devotions, I will provide you with some biblical examples of God's emphasis on people with disabilities, and on the gifts they have to offer the Christian community. My prayer is that this week of reading and meditation will allow us all to see how special the Christian community is and how God has honored us with the presence of people with disabilities.

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Any Questions?

Autism and Your Church

Body Building: Devotions to Celebrate Inclusive Community

Church Welcome Story

Circle of Friends Manual

The Easter Book

G.L.U.E. Training Manual
Helping Kids include Kids with Disabilities
School Welcome Story

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Disability Concerns

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Sunday Made Just Right

Bible Reading: Psalm 139:1-16

Key Verse: “For you created me inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

Psalm 139:13-14

Take a minute to look around at the people in your house. I’m sure you will notice that although there are many similarities, there are also many differences. What color eyes does each person have? Is everyone’s hair the same color? If you all lined up from shortest to tallest, who would be in the middle?

Now think about the many people you know who live in your city. Are they all the same age or color? If you were to ask each person to write down his or her name, would any of them write like you? Are anyone’s fingerprints exactly like those of anyone else? If you think about the answers to these questions, you will soon realize that we are all uniquely made.

The writer of Psalm 139 tells us that God is the one who planned and decided everything about us before we were even born. He watched you while you were developing inside your mother, and he wove together the person you would become. He decided the right combination for you, and made you

according to his perfect plan. Each one of God’s children is very special. He made us to be like himself; indeed, we are made in God’s image. In this way, each one of us reflects God in a different way.

God has a reason for making each of us the way we are. He has a job for you, and only you will be able to do that job. If you are born a fast runner, God wants you to use that talent for him. If you are an excellent reader, God wants you to use that gift for him. And if you were born with a disability, God has a special plan for you. God made no mistakes while knitting us together. He planned and created us exactly the way he wants us to be.

This week as we look at a variety of Bible stories that deal with disabilities, you will see the incredible gifts that each person has. They are a blessing from God to his people. In fact, you will see that people with disabilities are necessary to our churches and communities. Without them, the faith life of God’s people would be severely lacking. Let us praise God that each one of us is “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Activity: Gather your family in a circle. Take time to talk together. What is unique about each person? Talk about what God’s plan may be for each family member.

Prayer: Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for who you are. Thank God that he is the perfect weaver. Thank God for your family members and their special qualities.

Monday

Awesome God

Bible Reading: John 9:1-12, 35-41

Key Verse: “‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.’”

John 9:3

What do you do when there is a big thunderstorm or snow-storm? Do you hide under your bed, look out your window, or go outside and stand in it? The power of storms is amazing and awe-inspiring, and I enjoy watching them. Storms testify to the fact that we serve an awesome and powerful God.

God uses many ways to show us His power. One way He chooses to let us know He is working in our world is through the lives of people with disabilities. Such disabilities used to be understood as a sign that either those who have them or their parents must have done something especially sinful. In John 9, however, Jesus tells us that this is not true. People with disabilities have an important message to tell us through

their lives, namely, that God is working in our world.

I had a wonderful student who was born with a brain that had only one working half. The other half did not work at all. When she was born, the doctor told her mom and dad that their child would never walk or talk. In fact, he told these parents that they should not get very attached to their newborn child, because they would not be able to let her live at home. Instead, she would have to live in a big hospital.

But God worked a miracle in this girl’s life. Not only can she walk and talk, but she can also run, and she has a beautiful singing voice, which she uses to praise God. The same God who sends powerful storms tenderly caresses this child’s brain so that we can see His work in our lives. What an awesome God we serve!

Activity: Do you know of any person who has taught you that God works in our world? Retell that story and praise God for his might.

Prayer: Praise God for working in our world, and pray specifically for him to work through the life of someone you know who has a disability.

Tuesday Faithful Friends

Bible Reading: Mark 2:1-12

Key Verse: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’”

Mark 2:5

Would you like to have been in that house when Jesus healed the man who could not walk? What an amazing thing it must have been to see him have his sins forgiven and then stand up and walk!

But what about the man’s friends? I would like to have heard them talk. The Bible doesn’t tell us about their conversation, but it could have gone something like this:

“Jesus is in there.”

“Oh, if we could only get our friend to Jesus, I’m sure he would heal him.”

“But it’s so crowded.”

“Hey, I have an idea. Let’s take him up those stairs to the roof, make a hole in it, and lower him down right in front of Jesus.”

“That’s a great idea. Let’s go.”

When Jesus saw the faith of the paralyzed man and his friends, he healed him.

God wants our faith in him to be strong too. He has so many wonderful blessings for us, but it’s our job to believe that God wants to work in our lives and the lives of those around us. This is another important gift that people with disabilities can give us: the living of a strong, childlike faith.

One of my students had many seizures. Her doctors had a hard time stopping them. Although they tried many different medicines, none of them was effective. When I talked to the mother of this young girl, she told me that throughout a very hard year the one thing they did not doubt was that God was with them guiding their lives. She said her faith was made much stronger because of her daughter’s disability. What a wonderful gift this child gave to her whole family!

Many of you are friends with a person with a disability. Does this person’s life help you trust God more? Our faith must be like that of the paralyzed man’s friends. Jesus also has the power to heal our friends, and we, too, can set them in front of Jesus. We can do that every day in our prayers.

Activity: There is another story in the Bible that talks about the faith of a friend as the reason for healing. Read Matthew 8:5-13.

Prayer: Put one of your friends in front of Jesus. You don’t even need to make a hole in the roof to do so.

Wednesday

Heart of Compassion

Bible Reading: Matthew 20:29-34

Key Verse: “Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.” Matthew 20:34

In our school, each child with a disability is in a general education classroom. The most exciting thing to watch in this inclusive education program is how a circle of friends develops around each child.

I visit classrooms at the beginning of each school year to discuss the importance of friendships. In a second grade classroom, I explained to the students that one of their classmates with an intellectual disability didn't have many friends before she came to school. She had only her family members to be her friends. I watched the eyes of the child sitting next to her well up with tears. She reached over to the girl with the disability and put her arm around her, healing her heart of loneliness just as Jesus healed the eyes of the blind man. Through this small and caring gesture, this young girl was able to show the compassion of Jesus.

The opportunity to show compassion is another gift that people with disabilities can give us. God instructs us to live a life of service, one that follows the patterns Jesus showed us. When he saw the two blind men, Jesus had compassion on them. In the same way, Jesus wants us to show compassion to the people in our lives. This certainly does not mean that we smother people, doting on them and talking to them like children. It does mean, however, that our hearts must feel compassion, and that where we can, we should support them and help them grow into the people God intends them to be. I have also been thankful for some friends with disabilities who have the gift of compassion to show to me.

Compassion also means that we must not ridicule people with disabilities. We must find ways to build them up and not cut them down. It is our privilege to serve persons with disabilities as Jesus did. This is another wonderful gift they have for us.

Activity: Make a list of ways in which you could show compassion to someone with a disability or the way a person with a disability has shown compassion to you.

Prayer: Pray for a heart of compassion.

Thursday

Praise God!

Bible Reading: Matthew 15:29-38

Key Verse: “The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.” Matthew 15:31

I have a student who had a very bad accident a few years ago. He almost died. Thankfully, God saved his life. He was, however, very sick. He couldn't walk or talk, and his doctors expected him to be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Well, the doctors were wrong. This child can now run on the playground and play with his friends. He can use a computer to talk for him, and is doing very well. Praise God, who can heal our bodies!

I remember a student who was in my very first class. He struggled for many years to do such things as matching colors, saying hello to me, and putting on his boots. When we brought him in for tests, we were told that he had a severe intellectual disability, that he would never read or write, and that he would need a lot of help. This student is now a teenager. His current teacher, led by

God, began using a small keyboard with him. To my amazement, he spelled out “I am not an idiot.” He now types about current events, math, and reading. Praise God, who can heal our minds!

Another student was born with cerebral palsy. She walks with a walker, and learning continues to be a struggle for her. A few years ago she told me that she had made profession of faith. She said that Jesus lives in her heart and that she is going to go to heaven. Praise God, who can heal our souls!

When you hear about God's work in the lives of these students, are you amazed? These, too, are miracles being done today. Do they make you want to praise God? When the people in the Bible saw Jesus perform miracles, they were amazed and praised God. I believe this is a gift that people with disabilities can give us. Their lives can point us to God, so that we can praise him.

Activity: Rewrite the key verse for today so that it reflects the miracles you have seen in the lives of people with disabilities around you.

Prayer: Offer a prayer of praise in a sentence prayer. For what do you praise God today?

Friday

We Are the Body of Christ

Bible Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Key Verse: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:27

Many years ago, most people born with disabilities had to live in institutions. An institution is like a big hospital. Some of these institutions were very bad places, and the people who lived there were treated more like animals than like people. Other institutions were nicer, but even so, living away from home was very difficult for the children. They couldn't stay with their own families or have their own bedrooms. The only people they lived with were other people with disabilities and the nurses who took care of them. Would you like to live that way?

How silly it would be, for example, if we decided that every person with glasses or contact lenses had to move into a big building together. They would have to sleep in large rooms with many beds. They would have to eat at long tables, and could not choose what they would eat. They could leave only for weekends, and only if a relative would come to take them out. You people who are wearing contacts and glasses would be very upset, I'm sure, especially if you were forced to go. That must be how people with

disabilities felt when they were put in institutions.

Thankfully, there are not many of these institutions left. God intends for us to live together in our families and communities, without separating anyone who may have some kind of difference. God has led us to understand that we all need each other. People with disabilities help us to see God's work, to increase our faith, to have hearts of compassion, and to praise God. Why would we want to separate these persons from us?

The Bible tells us that people with disabilities have been given a special place of honor in God's family. We must include them in our Christian communities. Without such people in our schools, churches, and neighborhoods, we would be cheating ourselves out of an important part of God's gifts to us. I'm so thankful that I belong to a whole community, one which includes people with disabilities. They have taught me so much.

Activity: Talk about your church and school. Do they embrace differences, or do they want only certain people to be included? Would Jesus be happy with them?

Prayer: Pray for love in our communities so that all people can be accepted and celebrated as special gifts from God.

Saturday A Dream Come True

Bible Reading: Revelation 21:1-5

Key Verse: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”
Revelation 21:4

What comes to mind when you think about heaven? Do you see angels, streets of gold, or choirs singing? Although each of us probably has a different idea of what heaven will be like, I would like to describe for you what some of my students are thinking about heaven.

I had three students around the table in my room. We were having a lesson about God’s love for each of us. One of them with a visual impairment, looked up with great excitement and announced that she loves Jesus and is going to live with him forever in heaven. I asked her what heaven would be like, and she said, “You know, Mrs. B., in heaven I will be able to see everything, and it will be beautiful. I am so excited.”

The student sitting next to her can’t speak, but he looked up at me, pointed to his mouth, made a grunt of excitement, and smiled. I said, “That’s right. In heaven you’re going to find me and tell me lots of stories.” He nodded emphatically. I asked the student sitting next to him if he was going to heaven.

He said, “No, I’m going home.” When I assured him that his mom and dad would be in heaven too, he decided that he would go as well.

When we finished talking, we sang the song “Soon and Very Soon.” We made up new verses like “We’ll be talking there, we are going to see the King,” and “We’ll be seeing there, we are going to see the King.”

Many of us look at ourselves and think we are pretty good people; we don’t see too many problems. But God has healing to do in each of us. Whether that healing will be on the inside or the outside, God has exciting things in store for us as he makes us into a new creation.

Some of that healing God does right now on earth, and some of that healing will wait until we see him in heaven. Whatever God’s time may be for that healing in our lives, he promises to make a place where there will be no more sadness or sickness or dying or pain. Can you imagine that? What a beautiful promise God gives to us. Sign me up, I’m ready to go!

Activity: Make a big picture of heaven. Each person should draw a part that shows what he or she believes heaven will be like. Draw yourself in heaven too. What will you look like?

Prayer: Praise God for heaven. Tell God again that you want him to forgive your sins, and that you give him your whole life just as he gave his life for you.

