



## **Jesus, Children & Special Needs**

### ***The Story of Scripture – Part 34***

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open with me to Colossians 1.

Ministry to children and families with special needs is a high priority here and as you've seen today, some of our participants in the Access Ministry even helped lead in worship today.

Last Sunday brought up some questions from many people about children and adults with special needs and I believe those questions are really important. So if you weren't here last week, we asked the question, "What happens to people who never hear about Jesus?" We saw that people can't go to heaven if they don't hear the gospel—the good news of how Jesus died for their sins. As a result, hundreds of people stood and said, "I believe God may be leading me to leave here and move to unreached parts of the world." It was an awesome day. We have started a process of following up with every single one of those people.

Whenever this question about what happens to people who never hear about Jesus comes up, many people automatically wonder, "What about babies? Or young children who die? Or what about people with intellectual disabilities who may not have the capacity to comprehend or respond to the gospel?" That's a really good question, particularly in light of so many people in our church who have lost children or who have children with varying levels of intellectual disability.

Much like we talked about last week, there is not one place in the Bible that says, "Some of you may be wondering about this question. Well, here's the answer." But again, that doesn't mean the Bible is silent. It just so happens that Colossians 1 contains powerful truths that apply to this question. By the way, this question is not just important for those who have lost children or who have special needs in their lives or families. This question is important for all of us, because, as we're about to see, the truths that answer this question hit at how every single one of us understands our lives in this world and in the world to come.

This is why at the end of our time together, I'm going to invite every single person in this room to respond to what God says. I'm going to invite you to put your faith in Jesus today and/or to be baptized—on the spot, today, at the end of this gathering. We have shirts, shorts and towels for people today who

have never put their faith in Jesus and who confess faith in Jesus today, or for followers of Jesus who have never been baptized. I'm going to invite you to do that today.

For followers of Jesus who have been baptized, I'm going to invite you to respond in your life with urgency to what we're about to hear from God. So here's how we're going to go about this. We're going to start with God's Word in Colossians 1, then watch three videos. The first is a story that Jill's House put together about Matt and Shannon McNeil, their daughter Waverly and their son Oliver.

As most of you know Jill's House is an amazing, powerful ministry that MBC started years ago that is spreading in all kinds of places beyond here. It provides respite care to children and families with intellectual disabilities. We're going to watch this first video, then begin to dive into five truths the Bible teaches when it comes to Jesus, children and special needs. Let's start where we always need to start—with God's Word. Colossians 1:15-23, talking about Jesus. The Bible says:

*<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*

*<sup>21</sup> And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, <sup>22</sup> he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, <sup>23</sup> if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.*

Let's stop there for now. We'll pick up in verse 24 in a few minutes. Let me introduce you now to Matt and Shannon, Waverly and Oliver McNeil. Watch this with me.

**Shannon:** Parenting Waverly and Oliver is parenting children who progress so far, then just lose everything they've learned. It's like parenting a perpetual infant, a toddler in many ways.

**Matt:** Emotionally, the impact of Sanfilippo and ultimately a terminal diagnosis, changes over time. It's so acute and immediate when it first happens, then we have to continue to live and do things that normal people do, in spite of the fact we feel anything but normal. We are thankful for every day we can get at this point, because that first day without them will be unbearable.

**Shannon:** Can you go say hello to Oliver? Say, 'Hi Oliver.'

**Waverly:** Hi.

**Shannon:** Say, 'Hi Oliver.' There you go. Yeah! I think a diagnosis with Sanfilippo is a very strange grief process to go through. It is a death of dreams you have for your child.

**Matt:** You just sort of assumed that normal things will happen, that there would be a graduation, sleepovers, a wedding day, walking down the aisle.

**Shannon:** Say “Ma.” I know you can do it. Ma. Definitely this is regressive disorder, what typically happens is a genetic condition. They’re lacking an enzyme that typically would break down a build-up, but because they’re lacking it, this build up in their brain causes brain damage. So kids with Sanfilippo will typically develop normally until the age of around three or four—that’s average. Then they start to plateau, then they start to lose all their skills.

**Matt:** In our life we really appreciate our friends who knew Waverly when she was little, because they knew her when she was running, singing, talking, telling stories and reading books. She did all those things.

**Shannon:** One thing we do have captured on video, which is one of my most prized possessions, is the last time she really said “Mommy.” It was really incredible. She hadn’t said it for months, then all of a sudden she said it. I grabbed the video camera and just kept saying it to her over and over again. Then all of a sudden she turned her head, looked at me and I got it! “Mommy.” Yes! I got a “Mommy” on tape. “Good girl, Wavey! Good girl.” We got one for the camera. We can always remember November 20, 2009. I got a “Mommy.” Good girl, baby girl.

**David:** To continue their story, both children have since died—Waverly in 2015 and Oliver last year. Both funerals were held here. Some of you might be thinking, “I came to church to feel good, to get away from the heaviness of this world.” I just want to encourage you that church is not some fake place where we pretend like everything is perfect in the world. That would not be real. Church is a community that comes together before God where we hear from Him, finding in Him life, joy and peace that transcends the hurts and heaviness of this world.

So what does God say about Waverly and Oliver? What does God say about young children who die, and about children or adults with intellectual disabilities that limit their capacity to understand God and His love in the gospel?

### **Truth #1: We are all fearfully and wonderfully made by Jesus Himself.**

Colossians 1 talks about Jesus as the image of the invisible God and the firstborn of all creation. That can be confusing, but it basically means He’s supreme over all creation. For by Him, by Jesus, all things were created in heaven or on earth, visible and invisible. That pretty much covers it. It’s everything, including you and me and every person in the world.

The Bible teaches this from the beginning, from the very first chapter, in Genesis 1:27. God created man and woman in His image, in His likeness. Psalm 139 says, *“You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”*

My family and I are in the process of adoption right now, hoping to bring a little one, Lord willing, into our home soon. We don’t know whether that child will be a boy or girl. We don’t know gender, we don’t know the name. We got kind of tired of calling this child “It” or “That one.” So we decided to name this child for now, and the name we gave him or her is “Wonderfully Made.” So now we pray for Wonderfully Made all the time.

Now, millions of people don’t believe this is true. Millions of people believe we are an evolutionary product of time. Millions believe we are single-celled organism run amok, cosmic accidents with no real rhyme or reason. Richard Dawkins, avowed atheist from Oxford, writes:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect, if there is at the bottom no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is and we dance to its music.

What an empty worldview! What are you going to say to Matt and Shannon McNeil? “Sorry. Waverly and Oliver were just dancing to the music of their DNA and in the end, they just didn’t get lucky.” No. Over and against this atheistic view of life, the Bible says in Colossians 1, Psalm 8 and a host of other verses, that Waverly and Oliver are the crowning glory of creation through Christ. Even with all their struggles in their short lives, Waverly and Oliver experienced that they were created by Jesus in the image of God Himself. He knit them together and they were no accident. They were not the result of random processes. Even if their bodies didn’t function normally, they were beautiful. They were wonderfully made.

By the way, so are you. There’s not one person I’m speaking to right now who is not fearfully and wonderfully made by Jesus Himself. You may not always feel beautiful, significant or wonderful, but the King of all creation says you are. Colossians 1:16 says, *“By him all things were created...through him and for him.”*

## **Truth #2: Though the plan of our lives is different, the purpose of our lives is the same.**

We were all created by Jesus for Jesus. Isaiah 43:7 says we were created by God, for God. God tells Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:5 that before he was born, he was set apart for a great purpose. We exist for Jesus.

This truth encompasses each one of us, including Waverly and Oliver. Part of their purpose was fulfilled on earth and the rest, as we're about to see, will be fulfilled in heaven. No one can even begin to estimate the magnitude of how they fulfill that purpose in either place. We have no idea all that God in His infinite wisdom set in motion in the life and death of those two precious kids. They were created to glorify God. They did for a number of years and they are today in ways we cannot fathom.

See this bedrock truth of the Bible: Absolutely nothing in the universe exists for its own sake. Everything exists to make greatness of Jesus more fully known. You were created for the glory of Jesus and just because someone can't walk, talk, think or act like you do does not mean they were created for any lesser purpose. Though the plan of our lives is different, the purpose of our lives is the same.

You say, "Well, how can you believe in a God Who creates people with such challenging needs in this world?" That's a good question and one we'll come back to later, but before we get there, we need to remember that when we ask this question, we are asking it from a very limited perspective, because this world is not all there is.

### **Truth #3: The hope of Jesus guarantees that this fallen world is not the final word.**

Let's broaden out from Waverly and Oliver's stories and so many other stories like theirs, and let's see the bigger story. From the beginning of the bigger story, God created a perfect world with no sin, no evil and no suffering. There were no natural disasters—no hurricanes or tornadoes or tsunamis. There were no moral disasters—wars, murders, trafficking. There was no cancer, no tumors, no sickness, no disease, no pain.

But we turned away from God—Adam and Even in the beginning and every single one of us since then. We have all sinned against God and are separated from God. We now live in a fallen world. Now, to be clear, the Bible does not teach that if someone has a special need or cancer or is hit by a hurricane it happened because of sin in that person's life or a parent's life or anything along those lines. No, the Bible teaches that all of these things are ultimately the result of sin in a fallen world.

But here's the good news of the Bible and the best news in the whole world. Colossians 1:19 says that in Jesus, "*...all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*" That means God has not left us alone in this fallen world. God has come to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus is no mere man—He is God in the flesh. Why did He come? Verse 20 says He came "*to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven...*" Jesus came to reconcile this fallen world to God. How did He do that? The end of verse 20 says it was by "*...making peace by the blood of his cross.*"

Jesus, God in the flesh, came to live a life of no sin, then even though He had no sin to pay any price for, He chose to suffer and die on a cross for sinners—for your sin and my sin. He did this, verse 21,

so that we who were once alienated from God can now be reconciled to God. This is the greatest news in all the world! No matter who you are or what you have done, you can be reconciled to God. The hope of the gospel, verse 23, is that through Jesus, God will one day reconcile all things to Himself. Through Jesus, sin has been conquered, death has been defeated, He is alive and one day He's coming back to usher in a new creation where there will be no more sin, no more sorrow and no more special needs.

This is the hope of Jesus that this fallen world is not the final word. People say, "I look at stories of suffering and that's why I don't believe in God. How can you believe in God?" I say, "How can I not? Do you think your atheistic worldview is better or truer? That for Waverly and Oliver and thousands of other kids like them that the final word for them is that they didn't get lucky and that's too bad?"

In a world full of evil and injustice—did you hear Dawkins?—there's no justice and there will be no justice. In the end, there will be no purpose—just blind, pitiless indifference. No, no, no. That is not true—and we all know it's not true. We all have a longing in us for this world, with all of its evil and suffering, to not be the final word. Why do we have that longing? Because God has put that longing in us, then one day His justice and mercy will reign. Ladies and gentlemen, sin and suffering will not have the last word. Jesus will have the last word.

But, you say, that's our question. So what does the Bible teach about children and adults with intellectual disabilities who cannot comprehend what it means to have faith in Jesus? If people cannot come to God apart from faith in Jesus—which we looked at last week—what happens to them? We always need to be careful to let God's Word and not our circumstances, thoughts or feelings dictate what we believe. With that said, I want to give you three reasons, based on God's Word, why I am confident that young children, as well as people who cannot intellectually comprehend the gospel, are safe in the arms of Jesus forever.

The first reason is based on God's character revealed in His Word: His goodness, justice and mercy, particularly when it comes to children and people with special needs. Genesis 18:25 makes it clear that everything God does is good and just and right. That obviously doesn't mean that everyone goes to heaven, because the Bible clearly teaches we have sin that separates us from God—all the things we looked at last week. We'll come back to this in a moment, but suffice it to say at this point that God cares about children deeply—see Matthew 18—as well as people with special needs. We see all over the Gospels that Jesus delights in showing His goodness to them. God guarantees to show His justice ultimately.

That leads to a second reason why I believe they are with God in heaven is because the Bible expresses confidence that believers will see young children after death. After losing his own young son, David worships God and says in 2 Samuel 12:23, "*Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.*" Then David comforts his wife with this hope. So the Bible itself expresses

confidence and a comfort that parents who themselves are trusting in God's salvation will be with their children again.

The final reason—and I would say the most important and clearest reason—is because of how God judges people and how young children are judged differently than others. At this point some people start talking about an “age of accountability” —a certain age when a child becomes accountable before God for his or her sin. That's not what I'm talking about. In the exact chapters we looked at last week—Romans 1-3—we saw that God holds people accountable for judgment before Him based on a couple of criteria.

First, it's based on their understanding of right and wrong, and their willful and disobedience transgression against God. Romans 2:14-16 talks about how we have a moral law written on our hearts, so that all people everywhere know good and evil, right and wrong. As we talked about, we sin in disobedience against God. However, look at Deuteronomy 1:34-39, and you see the Bible talking about little ones—your children—who do not yet know good from bad. If you look at that instance in the Old Testament, the children in Deuteronomy were not judged for the disobedience of older Israelites in their day. As a result, even though God had cursed the Israelites because of their disobedience, the children were able to enter into the Promised Land. So we see a distinction there.

Then think back to the second criteria that affects our judgment before God that we saw last week in Romans 1:18-21. We saw that God has revealed His glory to all people through creation. We stand before Him, the Bible says, with no excuse, because all of us have rejected His glory. However, a child, or someone with an intellectual disability, is unable to know and reject God's glory, because they don't have the capacity to recognize and reject God's revelation in that way. That would separate them from us. They are not “without excuse” (Romans 1:20) in the same way.

So judgment is based on the capacity to understand right and wrong, willful transgression against God's law written on our hearts and the capacity to understand and reject God. For those who don't have these capacities, they will not be judged in the same way we are judged.

Now, that doesn't mean that people in this situation stand innocent before God. The Bible is clear that we all have a sinful nature. Like we saw last week, no one is innocent (Romans 3). None of us learns to sin. All of us express the sinful nature inherent in us. As a result, anyone who is saved from God's judgment is saved because of God's grace through Jesus. That's what Colossians 1 is teaching. We can only be reconciled to God through the work of Jesus on the cross.

So putting all these truths together, we realize God's Word teaches that when young children and people with severe intellectual disabilities die, they stand before God with a different measure of accountability, yet they still need the grace and righteousness of Jesus. Based upon the goodness, mercy and justice of God, we are confident that God through Jesus welcomes them into His arms for eternity.

This leads us to say with the confidence and comfort of David that Waverly and Oliver and so many like them are safe in the presence of God. And in the end, Jesus gets all glory for bringing them safely to Him.

All of that brings us back to our last point that the hope of Jesus guarantees this fallen world is not the final word. In other words, Waverly's story is not over. Oliver's story is not over. And your child who died too young? His or her story is not over either.

But what about here on this earth? For the McNeils and others who are left with the pain of loss, or even the day to day to day challenges of living with special needs or caring for a child with special needs, Colossians speaks to this as well.

#### **Truth #4: The glory of Jesus spreads through His joy and strength in the middle of suffering.**

We left off with Colossians 1:23, so let's pick up there again. The next verse says, "*Now I rejoice in my sufferings...*" I rejoice in my sufferings? What a phrase.

*<sup>24</sup> Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, <sup>25</sup> of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup> the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. <sup>27</sup> To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. <sup>28</sup> Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup> For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*

There's so much the Bible is teaching here. See this truth we've been talking about for weeks now, that Jesus died for you so that He might live in you. As a Christian, Christ is in you, the hope of glory. The picture here is that His glory in you spreads through the joy and strength He provides in the middle of suffering. Verse 24, with Christ in him, Paul says, "I rejoice in suffering..." Verse 29, Paul is struggling with all the energy and strength of Christ powerfully working in him. So in suffering, the glory of Jesus is spreading through the joy and strength He gives.

Let's think about what this means practically and why this is so important. If you and I profess faith in Jesus and everything always goes well for us, then the world will not take much notice of that. The world will see us just like everybody else. "You have all the prosperity and stuff of this world, then you tack on Jesus on Sundays—that's nice for you." But things take a decidedly different turn when things are not going well for you, when you and your family are struggling with a special need, when life is really hard and you're exhausted every single day. Yet in the middle of that struggle, in the middle of that suffering, you say, "I have a supernatural joy, a supernatural strength that is other-worldly"—that's when this world sits up and takes notice.

There's a great hymn written by a woman years ago named Annie Johnson Flint. It says about God:

He gives more grace as our burdens grow greater,  
He sends more strength as our labors increase,  
To added afflictions He adds His mercy,  
To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,  
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources  
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,  
His power no boundary known unto men;  
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus  
He gives, and gives, and gives again.

That hymn was not written by a woman who had it all in this world. It was written by a woman who was orphaned very early in life and crippled with rheumatoid arthritis. She spent most of her life in bed with eight pillows cushioning her body from head to toe, because her body was covered with sores all those years. She lost control of her internal organs, then cancer sapped away her life. She was still able to write, "He gives more grace when the burdens grow greater and His glory shines in the middle of suffering."

I just want to speak a word to those with special needs and those who care for children with special needs. Your heart's desire is to take the gospel to people who have never heard it—the unreached we talked about last week—but you can't go spread the gospel in that way because of those needs. I just want to encourage you, even as you pray and give for the gospel to go to the unreached, you are spreading the gospel with your testimony to the joy and strength of Jesus in ways far beyond what most will ever do. I just want to encourage you that the glory of Jesus is shining through you among the nations.

I want to show you this second video. It's actually from the Austin Stone Community Church where a friend of mine is pastor in Texas. I want you to hear a story of the glory of Jesus through the glory and strength He provides, in this instance in the middle of cerebral palsy. Let me introduce you to Roger.

**Roger:** I have cerebral palsy. Living with cerebral palsy is definitely not easy. A lot of people don't understand cerebral palsy and they'll treat me different. A lot of people are either afraid of me or very uncomfortable to be around me. That hurts me because I want to be everybody's friend and I can't help the fact that I have CP. Some of the struggles that I face with CP are that I've got to do stuff that a

normal person will never have to do, like crawl around on the carpet every day. Sometimes it wears on my body. I use a computer by a device that is called a head pointer. I peck on the keys just like a chicken. I get around town in my electric wheelchair that allows me freedom to get around on my own.

The hardest thing is loneliness. I am my own greatest enemy when I am left to my loneliness. But Jesus means everything to me. Without Jesus, I know I would have committed suicide by now, because life is not worth it without Jesus. Hard times come every day. Most of the time I try to knock them down, because the gospel has changed my life in a great way that I will never fully know here. Worship is my life. God has created me to worship. Jesus paid the ultimate price and if I don't totally worship Him, it's like I don't appreciate Him dying for me. That is so powerful. One day I will be in eternity with God.

### **Truth #5: The gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to trust Him with humility and share Him with urgency.**

Let me start with the end of this point—the gospel of Jesus compels us to share Jesus with urgency. We've talked about young children and people who lack the intellectual capacity to understand the gospel, but I want to encourage you not to assume that just because someone has an intellectual disability they cannot understand the gospel. Roger's life is a powerful reminder to us that there is capacity in so many people, even some you might not expect, to understand and believe the gospel in ways you haven't even begun to understand and believe.

So share Jesus with urgency—and not just with people who have disabilities. They're not the only ones who need the gospel. Your co-worker at the office needs the gospel. Your neighbor next door needs the gospel. This fallen world is not the final word. The final word belongs to Jesus. We are surrounded by people who have the capacity to receive or reject Him, who will be accountable for receiving Him. So share Him now. We should all be sharing Jesus or inviting people to come here and hear about Jesus every single week—with urgency. We're not just going through a church game, something we just do on Sundays and then move on. There's so much more at stake here. People all around us need the gospel. And so do you.

The gospel of Jesus compels us to trust Jesus with humility. There may be some here who have, up to this point in life, chosen not to believe in God or Jesus. It may be in part because of suffering you see in the world. You think, as we've said a few times today, "I could never believe in a God Who..."

Who what? Who would dare to disagree with you? Who would dare to do things you cannot understand with your finite mind? Let me ask would you have thought to rescue sinful people in a fallen world by sending your son to take on human flesh? Would you have thought to enter creation in the form of a baby born in a feeding trough? Would you have thought to allow your creation to torture your son

and nail him to a cross so that the very people who tortured him could have a way to be reconciled to you?

I want to urge you today to lay aside your pride and trust in Jesus with humility. These truths today are not just for children or for those with special needs. They are for you. You were fearfully and wonderfully made by Jesus Himself. You were created by Him and for Him, but you have sinned against Him. Do not be so quick to look with pity on someone with a special need. What is worse—Roger’s cerebral palsy that drives him to Jesus, or your unbridled ambition for position and possessions in this world that is right now driving you away from Jesus? What is worse—having Downs Syndrome in a way that leads you to humbly trust in Jesus, or having perfect health that is leading you right now to pridefully ignore Jesus on a day-by-day basis in your life?

The good news of the Bible is that although you have sinned against God, Jesus has made a way for you to be forgiven of all your sins and be reconciled to God for all eternity. Based on all we have seen today, I am confident that if Waverly, Oliver or any other child or adult with severe intellectual disabilities who has died could speak from where they are, they would urge you right now to trust in Jesus with humility with all your heart, to trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins with the capacity you have. If Roger were here right now, I am confident he would urge you to trust in Jesus, but not as a mere matter of religious formality. He would urge you to trust in Jesus as your life and to confess that faith in Jesus publicly for all to hear and see.

That leads to our last video. I’m going to let it speak for itself. I wish everyone in this church could have seen first-hand the day when Marisa put on this shirt and was baptized in this room. So for those who were not able to see it live, I invite you to watch.

**Church leader:** Welcome, Marisa, to the baptism pool. She has asked that I read her testimony for her.

**Marisa’s testimony:** At one point in my life I hated going to church, because it prevented me from spending quality time with my dad, and I was usually shoved into a corner. This changed when my mom and I found McLean Bible Church. Soon after we started attending I met Diane Anderson, the director of Access at the time. She was waiting at the front door for another family, but she came to me and said, “Can you come with me?” So I asked my mom if I could go with her to help in Access that day.

Then Diane said, “You really don’t need to be in here and invited me to go to junior high to participate with the rest of the kids my age. I was 13 years old. When MBC started to offer winter camp at Rockbridge, I went because the church made sure I had someone to go with me to help with my physical needs. That camp was life changing for me. It was the first time I came into a body of believers and felt

accepted. It was like they actually wanted me there with them, having fun, praying, worshiping and hanging out together.

Will Gaskin, who was the junior high pastor at the time, gave a talk that first night, asking us, “Do you know where you will go if you were to die tonight?” For some reason, the way he asked it really hit me. I’d always believed in a higher power, but this was the first time I was offered a relationship with Jesus that was deeply personal. That night I officially and knowingly gave my life to Jesus.

Even though I had been born again, coming back from camp did not mean life got easier. Being in a wheelchair had alienated me from my classmates before and sharing with them my love for Jesus alienated me even more. They believed I couldn’t mentally understand salvation. I really didn’t have friends in school, but I had a community of believers at church who loved me and helped me become more like Christ.

I’m being baptized today because I want to obey the commandment Jesus gave to the disciples in Matthew 28:19: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” I know God is with me, even to the end of the age.

**Church leader:** Marisa, based on that profession of your faith, it is our privilege to baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Burying you in the likeness of His death and raising you to the newness of life!

**David:** Will you bow your heads and close your eyes, because I want to ask every single person in this room right now before God, “Have you humbly trusted in Jesus to reconcile you to God?” Put aside earthly needs in your mind. The greatest need in every one of our lives is to be reconciled to God. Have you humbly trusted in Jesus? Not just gone through some kind of Christian motion, but have you trusted in Jesus as your life? If not, today is the day to do that. God has brought you here and I want to give you an opportunity to do that right now. Right where you’re sitting, say in your heart to God, “Dear God, I know I have sinned against You and need to be reconciled to You. Today I’m humbling myself before You and putting my trust in Jesus. Please save me from my sins and reconcile me to a right relationship with You, today and forever.”

With our heads still bowed, if you just prayed that to God, would you as a picture of that just raise your hand right where you are before God? Amen. All across this room.

God, You see these hands. You see these hearts, trusting in You for reconciliation. I pray over them the truth of Romans 10, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. God, You reconcile all who humbly trust in Jesus. I pray that You would give them

courage to celebrate life in Jesus today through baptism, not as some effort to earn Your favor, but as a first step of trusting in You and celebrating Your grace.

Lord God, we praise You for Your grace toward us in Jesus. We praise You for the way You've created us—fearfully and wonderfully made. We praise You that though we have sinned against You, You have sought us out. You've come to us. You've given us a hope that transcends the hurt and heaviness of this world. We pray that even now, in just a moment, You would give us courage to respond in obedience to what You are leading us to do. For some or many to be baptized today, and for those who have been baptized, to recommit our lives to sharing Jesus with urgency. Please don't let us keep this hope to ourselves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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