

What People with Intellectual Disabilities Need More than Anything Else

By Steve Burchett



Over fifteen years ago, I was in our unfinished basement painting the concrete floor. The door at the top of the steps opened and my wife came down the stairs with a look I'll never forget that said, "Our lives are going to be different now." The diagnosis was in. Our baby girl had a genetic disorder (Williams Syndrome) in which chromosome seven lacks over twenty genes that would normally be there. The result? Intellectual, physical, and learning disabilities. (The term "disability" captures a wide range of

situations, but for this article I will focus primarily on intellectual disabilities — what used to be called "mental retardation.")

Early on in my daughter's diagnosis, we were helped by ministry leaders who were further down the disability road. My wife and I soon were affirming biblical ideas like, "A good and sovereign God creates people with disabilities for his glory (Exodus 4:10-11; Psalm 139:13-16; John 9:1-3)," and "People with disabilities have dignity and value as God's image-bearers (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6; James 3:9). We agreed with statements like, "Sadness is an appropriate reaction to disability," recognizing that suffering, broken relationships, disabilities, and death are part of the curse that God decreed. Nevertheless, we embraced the sovereignty and goodness of God in disability, and found rest in the truth that God has purposes in it. We have often wondered how people without this confidence in the Lord are able to endure the pain that comes with disability.

Greatest Need

I think often about my daughter's need for salvation. I am convinced of this idea: **people with disabilities need the Savior far more than anything else, including healing**. Everyone, even those with severe disabilities, is born "in Adam," not "in Christ" (First Corinthians 15:22). Let me quickly add that we can be optimistic that God will save those who are born without the mental capacity to express faith because Scripture indicates that God extends special grace to those in this type of state (cf. Deuteronomy 1:39). However, even these people will not enjoy salvation and an eternity with the Lord because they are innocent — they are not — but because God is gracious. But in my daughter's case, and in many others with intellectual disabilities, cognitive awareness exists. Therefore, though those in this camp might be "different" in certain ways, they are just like everyone else in that their most fundamental need is a Savior!

Think about the story of the paralytic being lowered through the roof by his good friends so that Jesus would heal him. What did Jesus do first to the man, before he healed him? "And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'My son, your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:5). That's the priority, not physical healing! I absolutely want my daughter one day *not* to have Williams Syndrome. But she does not get a free pass to glory because of her disabilities. The pathway for her to a glorified body is through faith in Jesus.

Proclaiming the Savior

Parents, then, need to tell their children with intellectual disabilities the good news. One of the difficulties of parenting our daughter has been when she has "acted out" and my wife and I have had to discern, "Was that action rooted in her disability? Or was that her sin nature acting out? Or was it both?" We've done our best, with God's help, to evaluate these conundrums, but have refused to "blame the disability" too often. We've been more patient with our daughter than with our other children regarding poor behavior, but ultimately and consistently have talked with her about her rebellious heart and her need for Jesus.

But what about others, specifically other believers? I have observed over the past decade and a half that the majority of people in churches have not thought very deeply about the issues related to God and humanity and disability. I get it. It took God gifting me a disabled daughter to cause me to think more about this subject. My wife and I have seen this as an opportunity to teach people. One particular issue that has become critical is educating people that helping someone like our daughter is not just about being more patient or understanding so that "you get along better with her and she feels loved." There's nothing wrong with that, but the aim must be much higher — being patient with her and seeking to understand her peculiarities and serving her and inviting her into your life and even sometimes enduring her failures so that you might gain her respect and then might be able to talk with her about the gospel.

One beautiful way I've seen this accomplished at this stage in my daughter's life is through a couple of her peers who know the Lord. One of these young ladies has taken her to the "beauty" store. Another friend had her over to watch a movie and to do her nails. Both young ladies are aiming not only to make Lilly feel loved, but to point her to the loving God who gave his Son for sinners like Lilly.

Valuable Member, Glorious Future

Once people with intellectual disabilities know the Lord, they become vital members of the body of Christ (First Corinthians 12:12f). They not only need the other members of the body, but the body needs their giftedness and contributions. A friend once told me that a young man with Down Syndrome was a member of his church. He said he sings to the Lord with uninhibited joy and is an example for the rest of the church. Can't you just picture that? What a gift to that church!

And then one day, that man and others like him will experience the resurrection of the dead and be given glorified bodies (First Corinthians 15). I sometimes find myself daydreaming about what my daughter will be like when she no longer experiences the effects of a syndrome. What a day that will be! But it will only happen if she turns from her sin and believes in Christ.

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