

SPECIAL GIFTS FROM HAVING

SAM

Having a son with autism has put the plan of salvation in a new light for me.

By David Gee

Every individual with a disability has a unique story. Every family who supports such an individual has a different experience. But one commonality we all share is a lifetime of looking for meaning. Here are a few of the lessons one family has learned in caring for a son with severe autism.

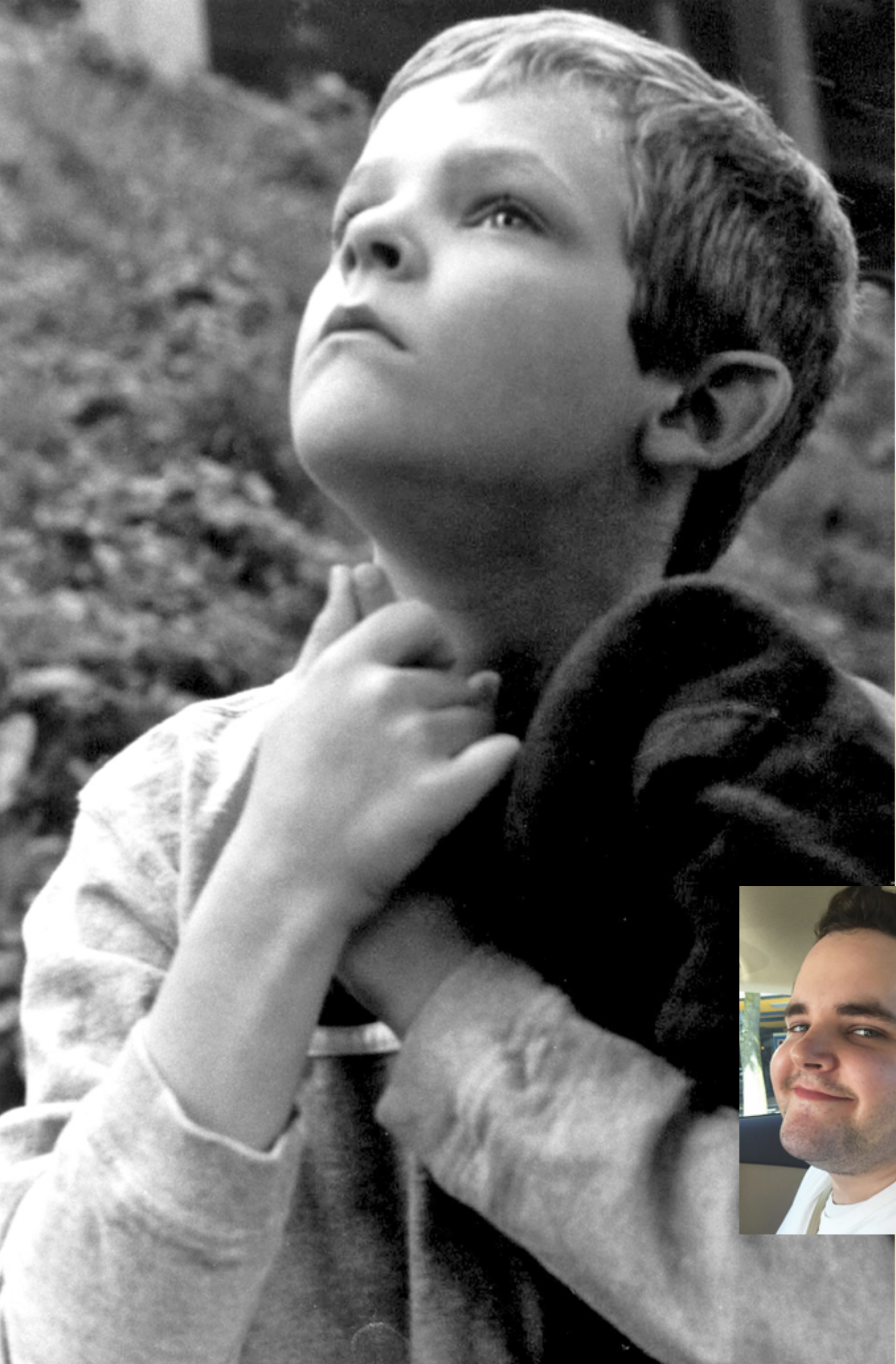
When our son Sam was born, my wife, Megan, and I were over the moon. We were married later in life, and it took us nearly five years to have our first child, Anna. Then 15 months after Anna's birth, we had a beautiful, dark-haired baby boy named Sam. We were beyond pleased with our two precious little children.

Our hopes were high for our bright and active little boy. Sam began to grow quickly. He learned to walk on his first birthday. I remember he was holding the string of a red helium balloon when he surprised us all by taking his first steps. We joked that it was as if the balloon were holding him aloft. He also learned to talk around the same time.

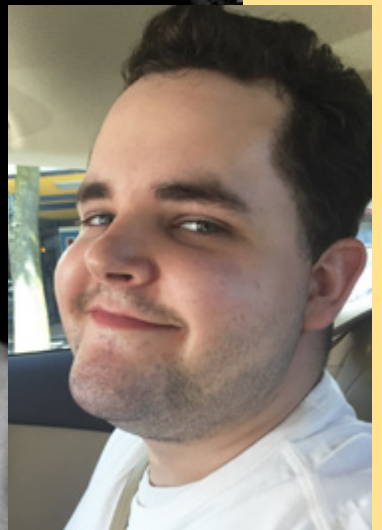
However, in the months leading up to Sammy's second birthday, things changed. He stopped talking. He withdrew from the things that nursery-age kids usually enjoy. After taking him to doctors and specialists, we were told that Sam had autism. We immediately went into overdrive to learn all we could and to help Sammy learn how to talk and associate with his world. Sam, who is now 23, can understand most of the things we ask him to do, but he has limited cognitive ability and even more limited expressive communication.



Sam as a newborn being held by his father.



Sam
as he
looks
today.





Sam as a
little boy.

As the years have gone by, one of the most challenging conversations I have repeatedly had is the one that starts with my telling someone I have a son with autism and receiving the response, “That must be so hard for you” or “I’m so sorry.” Because the issue is so complicated, I often say nothing. At times, it *has* been hard. But if I could, I would express to everyone the gratitude I feel for the chance to be Sam’s dad. Because Heavenly Father has given me this opportunity, I have received priceless gifts of greater understanding about Heavenly Father’s plan, the Savior’s Atonement, and the growth that comes from challenging experiences.

Gift 1: Heavenly Father Has a Loving Plan

One gift I’ve received through associating with Sam is a sure knowledge that my Father in Heaven lives and that He loves me and all of His children. I also know that “all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things” (2 Nephi 2:24).

Likewise, I know that Father in Heaven loves Sam even more than I am able to love him. I had a memorable experience in which I first understood this concept. Shortly after Sam’s autism diagnosis, Megan and I attended the temple. I was struggling with the situation. I sat in the temple chapel and opened the scriptures to 3 Nephi 17, the account of the Savior’s interaction with the Nephite children:

“He took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them.

“And when he had done this he wept again;

“And he spake unto the multitude, and said unto them: Behold your little ones.

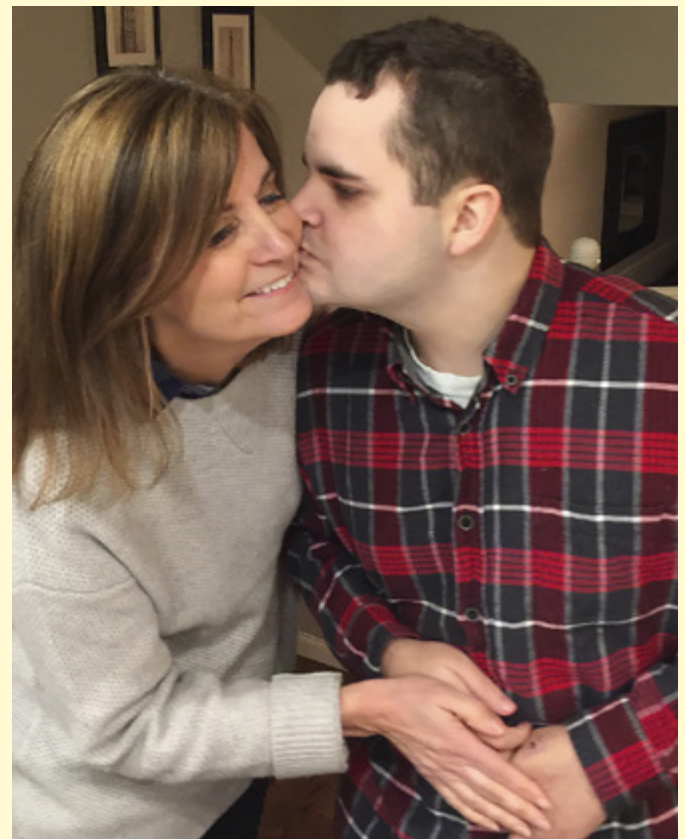
“And as they looked to behold they cast their eyes towards heaven, and they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones about, and they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them” (verses 21–24).

I read these words with tears in my eyes and love in my heart for my young son. In that moment, I knew that in the end, everything would be OK. I knew that the same

God who loves little children enough to send angels to minister to them also loved Sam enough to watch over him throughout his life. Heavenly Father is in charge, and He loves my son. I return often to this experience in my times of doubt. When things get hard, it is for me a font of living water to which I go for renewal and assurance that God has a loving plan for us.

Gift 2: The Savior’s Atonement Is for Everyone

Our life on earth plays an essential part in God’s plan for us to become like Him. Mortality is a time to learn and grow through trial and testing as we prepare to return to the presence of Heavenly Father. The Atonement of Jesus Christ is essential to our progress. He redeems us from sin when we repent, and He enables us to become more than we are. For some who suffer from severe disabilities, there may be no need for repentance. Yet even if accountability may be limited, every one of us has a God-given ability to





grow, though it too may be limited for some of His children in mortality.

Prophets ancient and modern have taught that little children and those without the law are redeemed from the foundation of the world through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. This doctrine is taught in the closing chapters of the Book of Mormon:

“All little children are alive in Christ, and also all they that are without the law. For the power of redemption cometh on all them that have no law; wherefore, he that is not condemned, or he that is under no condemnation, cannot repent; and unto such baptism availeth nothing” (Moroni 8:22).

I’ve also been blessed to learn that Sam has the promise of the Savior’s grace in fulfilling his mission on earth as he experiences what personal growth is possible with the limitations he has.

President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught: “Every quarter of an inch of physical and mental improvement is worth striving for. The Prophet Joseph Smith said that ‘all the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement.’”¹

We’ve watched Sam learn and grow. Sometimes he surprises us with things we didn’t know he knew. Although his verbal skills are limited, he has a wealth of knowledge that he shows if we give him the right opportunities.

Most parents soon learn that providing learning experiences for their children requires some prayer, pondering, and planning. We’ve found that knowing what Sam is interested in and building a learning environment around that is important. Sam loves colors. It has motivated him to learn

Above: Sam with his family. Pictured from left are David (Sam’s father), Anna, Eli, Sam, Megan (Sam’s mother), and Sophie.

Left: Sam and his mother.



HEAVENLY FATHER'S LOVE

"To all of you who have challenges, concerns, disappointments, or heartaches with a dear one, know this: with infinite love and everlasting compassion, God our Heavenly Father loves your afflicted one, and He loves you!"

Elder Ronald A. Rasband of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Special Lessons," *Ensign*, May 2012, 80.

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how to spell. Though he rarely speaks, he will always spell a color for you. And we're always surprised at how well he remembers movie characters.

It brings us peace to know that his abilities will continue to develop here as well as in the eternities because of the Atonement.

Gift 3: Sam Helps Us to Grow

In our life with Sam there have been a few "great things" (D&C 29:48) required of my wife and me, and I know there will be more. However, as with all that is required by the Father, much, much more is given when we try to give what is asked of us.

As Sam's family, we have been blessed greatly in our personal quests for perfection. Our family has had to earnestly and prayerfully seek the Lord's guidance to help us address Sam's special needs. Along the way, we have seen the hand of God in our lives and have drawn closer to Him. I am more patient and understanding because of Sam. Our other three children have cultivated kindness. While growing up, our son Eli loved spending time



with Sam. Eli would say his life goal involved eating lots of pizza and living in a house somewhere with Sam and their dog, Mae.

Sam doesn't just bless our immediate family; he blesses the lives of many others too. When we moved to Washington State, USA, several years ago, Megan and our children lived with my parents for almost a year while we waited for our house in North Carolina to sell. I remember expressing concern to my mom that Sam was getting into some of her valuable things and apologizing for the intrusion. She stopped me short and gently scolded me. "David, Sam belongs to me too," she said. My mom was right. I have seen how association with Sam blesses his aunts and uncles, who love him as their own. Sam's cousin Tucker declares Sam to be his best friend. Another cousin, David, who could easily bench-press me, devoted a high school senior essay to how Sam has contributed to and influenced his life.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught: "Most of us experience some measure of what the scriptures call 'the furnace of affliction' (Isa. 48:10; 1 Ne. 20:10). Some are submerged in service to a disadvantaged family member. . . . Still others struggle with personal impairments. . . . Through the justice and mercy of a loving Father in Heaven, the refinement and sanctification possible through such experiences can help us achieve what God desires us to become."²

Caring for Sam is at times challenging, but the Lord recognizes the sacrifices we make for Sam out of love and uses them to refine us, because "all these things shall give [us] experience, and shall be for [our] good" (D&C 122:7).

Sam with
his father.



We See the Works of God

Caring for Sam has taught me countless things about our Father in Heaven’s plan—both in general and for me as an individual. I’ve learned that Heavenly Father loves my son and that my son has an important place in the Lord’s plan. The Lord knows Sam, and He knows our family. He knows specifically what experiences each of us needs to have in order to progress and return to His presence. As we go through these experiences, we are witnesses of countless tender mercies and recipients of personal blessings.

I am reminded of the man in the Bible who was blind from birth. When Jesus was asked the reason for the man’s blindness, Jesus responded, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3). The manifestation of God’s power in the man’s life blessed him and those around him. I testify that our family has seen the works of God in Sam’s life and in ours.

And I know that someday after we have learned all we can in this mortal life, “the soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, . . . all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame” (Alma 40:23).

Because of this great gift of resurrection given to all mankind, I know that I will reunite with Sam, “breathtakingly perfect in body and mind.”³ I imagine at that time and ever after he will share with me in perfect prose his side of the story. And knowing Sam, he will laugh merrily as we review the many goofy things we have done to help him during his mortal life to learn and to talk with us. Until that day, I will continue to trust in the Lord’s plan for my son and for me, and I will be grateful for the lessons I learn along the journey. ■

The author lives in Washington, USA.

NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer, “The Moving of the Water,” *Ensign*, May 1991, 9; for the quotation from Joseph Smith, see *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 210.
2. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 33–34.
3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like a Broken Vessel,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2013, 42.