



Joshua's Walls

BY CINDY GRITTON

My husband and I expected to raise a typical little boy, but the Lord sent us one who faced life in a different way.

When my husband, Greg, gave our son, Joshua, a name and a blessing, neither of us realized the significance of a simple phrase contained in it: “We bless you with all the blessings the Lord has in store for you, blessings the Lord has reserved just for you.”

His Words

Joshua arrived as a healthy and happy baby. At two months old, he amazed me, and I little imagined how his future would differ from my ideas of it. After all, one afternoon as I finished changing a diaper, he said, “Thank you.” Stunned, I stared at him while he smiled at me. “Who will ever believe me?” I thought. Then, a week later, we took Joshua to the doctor for a worsening cold.

The nurse had just weighed him when he said something. She paled, looked up at the doctor, and asked, “Did you hear that?”

Looking equally startled, the doctor nodded, “Yes.” “He said, ‘Thank you,’” the nurse said.

I smiled. A week later Greg heard him say it too, and we couldn’t help but think Joshua would talk early and easily. But the Lord knew otherwise, and I truly believe that the Lord blessed Joshua to express his thanks those few times before his verbal abilities became restricted by high-functioning autism.

For months I had tried telling Joshua about his soon-to-arrive sister, but each attempt was ignored. Then, although Joshua’s silent walls remained firmly in place, we had a moment of unhindered communication.

Prior to his diagnosis, Joshua seemed to develop normally. As he approached his second birthday, his enthusiastic vocabulary remained limited. I initially calmed Greg's concerns about Joshua by reminding him that boys usually talk later. But then one day I realized something. Words—*his* words—were gone. When had I last heard him say “mmm” when he saw the moon or a cat? Where was his lilting voice calling my name or his father's? Why, when he loved numbers so much, didn't he even attempt to say them? And why had our sweet little boy started banging his head in anger or frustration?



The Lord's Intervention

The signs were all too real, too overwhelming to avoid. But our pediatrician's own pregnancy had developed complications, and so I waited, unsure if I should take Joshua to the on-call doctor, who didn't know him. The Lord answered my prayers in His own way. On a plane trip home from visiting friends, I noticed that Joshua had developed a high fever. I had to take him in.

The on-call doctor discovered that he had an ear infection, and her manner was so kind that I decided to ask her advice on what I should do.

“You mean about his lack of speech?” she interrupted. Stunned, I replied, “Yes. And he's been banging his head.”

“Those are signs we watch for in autism,” she said. Her office provided me with the phone number for Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education, and I called. It was only later that I learned what a blessing this truly was: our regular pediatrician didn't know about this service, but the Lord knew who did.

Becoming a Big Brother

During this time, a new life was growing within me. And in my mind, the constant question remained—would this

new child travel the same road as Joshua? Would I hold this new baby in my arms and one day realize that the silent walls that had grown up around Joshua now also surrounded her? I turned to the Lord often and trusted that Heavenly Father would provide us with the answers needed to help this new child. The priesthood blessings I received during my pregnancy brought me the comfort of knowing that this new child would be healthy. I held onto this promise while still feeling that “healthy” didn't necessarily rule out autism.

Trying to prepare Joshua for big brotherhood now presented an interesting challenge. For months I had tried telling Joshua that a baby was in my tummy, but each attempt

was ignored. Then one day, as I held him on my lap, I tried one more time.

“Joshua, there’s a baby in Mommy’s tummy.”

His little face turned up to mine, and in one swift, intense look he conveyed his comprehension and thoughts, “Mom, you’re crazy!” I thought I would never stop laughing. Though Joshua’s silent walls remained firmly in place, I gratefully recognized this moment of unhindered communication.

“Where’s the baby?” became my new question in trying to engage Joshua. Quickly, his small fingers answered by pointing to my tummy. “Do you love the baby?” He smiled, kissed my tummy, and laughed. When his little sister, Annica, was born, he kissed her lovingly while watching me out of the corner of his eyes. My tears fell into his hair as I held him.

When Annica was a month old, we received the Early Intervention team’s official diagnosis for Joshua, now three, and learned that he met the requirements for high-functioning autism. Our faint sliver of hope that he was simply delayed faded away. Now the word *autism* became part of who our son was. And yet he was still Joshua; he really hadn’t changed—just our understanding of who he is had changed. We felt blessed that Joshua, unlike many autistic children, readily expressed emotion. Love seemed to flow from him, even if shared in brief acts of affection—swift, open-mouthed kisses, hugs that barely touched us, smiles when he was happy. His own little world existed, but he crossed into ours readily when he wanted to.

Still, at times, the pain of Joshua’s disability became almost overwhelming. Joshua found a way to express his enjoyment of music, bouncing up and down with the beat. But I cried at the thought that he might never sing or even hum. His earnest attempts to express his wants and thoughts

MANIFESTING THE WORKS OF GOD



“You parents and you families whose lives must be reordered because of a handicapped one, whose resources and time must be devoted to them, are special heroes. You are manifesting the works of God with every thought, with every gesture of tenderness and care you extend to the handicapped loved one. . . . You are living the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ in exceptional purity.”

President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “The Moving of the Water,” *Ensign*, May 1991, 9.



DETAIL FROM MASTER, I HAVE BROUGHT UNTO THEE MY SON, BY WALTER RANE, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF CHURCH HISTORY AND ART

often frustrated us both when I couldn’t interpret his pointing.

By the age of five, Joshua still hadn’t regained his speech beyond a few words. His two years in Early Intervention blessed him with wonderful teachers who helped him begin to understand social interactions and responsibilities, but words still remained elusive.

Receiving Inspiration

One November day, the pain became so great that I turned to the scriptures and searched for every instance of the Savior healing a “dumb” person. I read each passage, and then I read in Mark 9:17–29 of the father who brought his son to Jesus after the disciples failed to heal him. The father’s words echoed in my soul: “Have compassion on us, and help us.”

“Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

“And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears,

Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (vv. 22–24).

The Savior rebuked the evil spirit and delivered the son to his father whole. Then verses 28 and 29 caught my attention:

“And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out?

“And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.”

I had always loved this story but somehow had forgotten to apply it. We prayed for Joshua often, but we had never devoted a fast to his progress.

The next morning, as my mom and I talked on the phone about Joshua, she asked, “Cindy, have you ever fasted as a family for him?” I shared my experience of the day before, in awe of the Lord’s great love and guidance. We quickly decided to hold a family fast for Joshua the

next Sunday, and we began calling our relatives.

That Sunday after church, Greg and a man from our ward gave Joshua a priesthood blessing. He was blessed that he would learn to talk faster and that he would continue to progress cognitively. My fears for his speech disappeared. But I also knew that I would need to be patient.

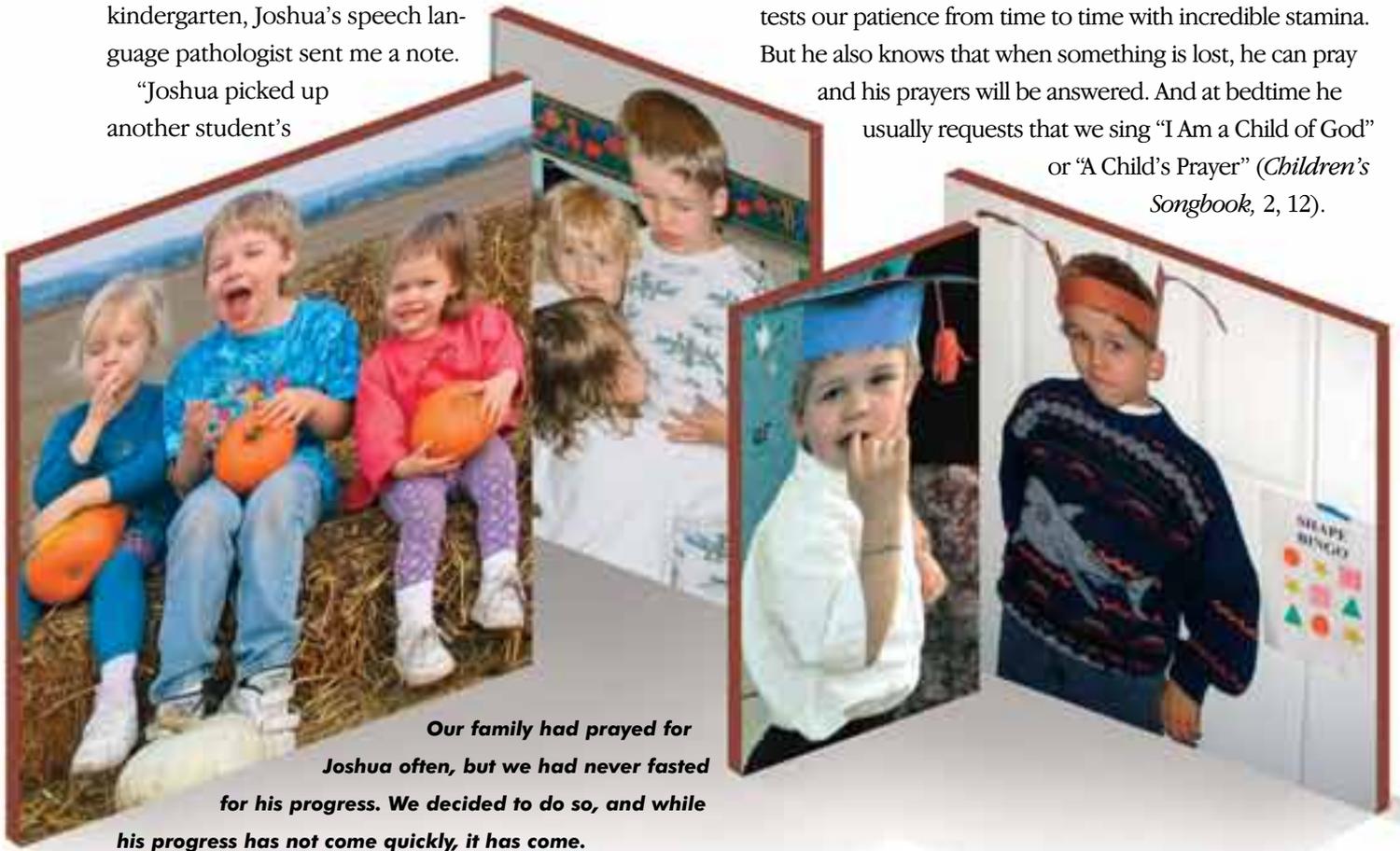
Progressing with Faith

Nine months later, with only two months to go before kindergarten, Joshua's speech language pathologist sent me a note.

"Joshua picked up another student's

on one end of the bleachers, Joshua wore his construction paper cap. He didn't sing all the words to each song; his eyes often fixated on something in his own mind. But then a tune would pull him back, and he would joyfully sing at the top of his voice. I could hardly contain my joy at seeing how the Lord had fulfilled His promise to our little boy.

Now Joshua is a rambunctious ten-year-old. He still receives speech therapy, struggles to fully understand social situations, finds school and church boring on occasion, and tests our patience from time to time with incredible stamina. But he also knows that when something is lost, he can pray and his prayers will be answered. And at bedtime he usually requests that we sing "I Am a Child of God" or "A Child's Prayer" (*Children's Songbook*, 2, 12).



Our family had prayed for Joshua often, but we had never fasted for his progress. We decided to do so, and while his progress has not come quickly, it has come.

B book today and pointed to each picture and said, "B!"

From that moment on, Joshua eagerly pointed out everything that started with *B* and even slowly regained his original words.

At the end of kindergarten, Joshua marched beside his aide to kindergarten graduation. At the start of that year, he hadn't been able to sing, but he could spell many words by pointing to letters, and he could say about 25 words. Now Greg and I videotaped him as he joined with about a hundred other kindergarten children in singing songs. Standing

When Joshua entered our lives, Greg and I expected to raise a little boy like others, but the Lord sent us one who needed to face life in a different way. Joshua of old found the walls of Jericho facing him, and those walls came down only by the power of the Lord (see Joshua 6:1–20). I know that one day, through the power of the Lord, all of our Joshua's walls will come down, though it may not be here on earth. I hope and pray that until then Greg and I will always receive the inspiration we need to help Joshua achieve his full potential. ■