

Living With Cerebral Palsy

Psalm 27:1 “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid.” I remember learning this Psalm for Sunday School merit work as a seven-year-old little girl and its first verse is my favorite text. What a comfort to be taught the Scriptures and to be able to recall many wonderful texts which have been a source of encouragement as I live with Cerebral Palsy (CP).

Some adults, young people and children have special needs because of how God directed their development in their mother’s womb. In some instances, God worked in such a way that he caused some babies to suffer a significant injury shortly before, during or shortly after birth. Other fellow believers may have suffered injuries or illnesses as a child, young person or adult through which their heavenly Father is pleased to give them special needs until he brings them to their heavenly home.

On March 31, 1972, my life’s journey as a special member of the body of Christ began. In his infinite wisdom, my heavenly Father’s hand created me with an abnormally short umbilical cord which wrapped around my neck and cut off my oxygen supply at birth. It was his will to use the doctor’s hands to preserve my life on this Good Friday morning. As a result of this lack of oxygen, my brain was significantly injured. My heavenly Father had determined that all the muscles of my body would be affected to one degree or another by my brain injury. In faith, trusting his wisdom, my parents brought me, their firstborn, home and lovingly cared for and instructed me to the best of their ability. Over time, they learned that my brain injury was called Cerebral Palsy and it was God’s will for me to be afflicted with this disability for my entire life upon earth,

For the first ten years of my life, it was God’s will for me to receive therapy and my education through the public school system. Home visits by therapists and nurses and regular group therapy sessions helped my parents carefully teach their tiny infant skills that “normal” babies learn easily on their own. Then my mother had to put her little toddler on a bus and entrust her care to bus drivers, teachers, aides, physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists on a daily basis. Soon this toddler was a little girl, learning the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, and also working hard to learn how to control her muscles to the best of her ability to use a wheelchair, walk with a walker, speak as clearly as possible and do her schoolwork on a typewriter with a special guard placed over the keys to keep her hands and fingers from striking too many keys at once.

Mainstreaming from a special education classroom to a regular classroom was just beginning when my parents mainstreamed me to Hope Protestant Reformed Christian School. Teaching a special needs child in a regular classroom setting was a brand new concept for our Protestant Reformed Christian schools. Even in the public school setting, special needs students were just starting to mingle with, and join the regular education students for various activities in the classroom. My classroom teacher was unable to teach me as much as she felt I could handle because of the various special needs of the rest of the students in her classroom. When the Lord led my parents to discuss with my teacher the possibility of mainstreaming me to Hope School, she was very supportive and in fact had been prepared to talk to my parents about exploring this possibility.

I had attended Sunday School since Pre-Kindergarten and catechism since kindergarten with the children at Hope Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan who were my age. I advanced through each year of Sunday School and Catechism with the same class of kids but when I was mainstreamed, I was enrolled in Hope School's 4th grade class when I was 10½. The 4th grade class at Hope School was a small class of 19 students and my knowledge and skills were at the 4th grade level. Thanks be to God for the faithful labors of Miss Winifred Koole who was my first teacher at Hope School! Being the first special needs student to be mainstreamed to Hope School was a blessed experience for me, my parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives, teachers, fellow students and all my fellow saints.

Beginning in sixth grade, I spent many late nights and Saturdays, at my typewriter and later at my computer, finishing assignments. I worked hard and spent hours in my bedroom finishing assignments, reviewing material for tests and final exams. My studies were far from easy for me, but after six years of hard work, I was able to graduate from 9th grade with 13 classmates. My class was smaller than when I was first enrolled in Hope School because we lost students when Heritage Christian School in Hudsonville, Michigan opened.

After graduating from Hope Protestant Reformed Christian School, by God's grace I was enrolled in Covenant Christian High School. Because my ninth grade year had been a more difficult year for me mentally and emotionally due to the increased complexity of the workload, my sophomore year was carefully planned for me. I was enrolled in five courses and two study halls each of my three years at Covenant. Since science classes were difficult for me, I was exempted from Biology and would fulfill my science requirement by taking Earth Space Science during my senior year. Eating my lunch during 4th hour study hall my sophomore and junior years enabled me to fellowship with the student body and watch intramurals during lunch break.

As I look back over my nine years of Christian education, I am so thankful for the fellowship I enjoyed with the students and teachers. I would not have been able to experience such fellowship if I had remained in the public school system. What a blessing that we fellow saints can, for the most part, learn and grow up together from infancy until we graduate from high school. This fellowship has indeed made my experience as a member of the body of Christ joyful. I had felt the love of Christ through the care and concern of my fellow saints through my entire life. Many have also seen Christ's love and compassion as they have observed me working hard at learning and just living my life even outside the Christian school setting. For example, a fellow member of my congregation recently remarked that he remembered how the young people who knew me at the young people's conventions I attended would encourage the young people who weren't from the Grand Rapids area to listen while I spoke during discussion groups or wait patiently for me when I participated in an activity.

What a blessing to have had Christian School teachers who assisted my parents in teaching me how to use my talents to the best of my ability. My graduation from Covenant Christian High School was a momentous event for me, my parents, my classmates, family and all my fellow saints who knew and loved me. It indeed was a time for us to celebrate the completion of many years of hard work, of nine years of Protestant Reformed Christian education in which God had indeed given me much grace through the patience and assistance of my loving parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers and classmates to serve him by completing the work he had given me to do.

After graduation, my heavenly Father led me to continue my education and study accounting at Davenport College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Just before I started college, I began to use a power wheelchair which helped me get around campus and my community independently. No more did I have close friends available to help me during the day as I had in junior high and high school. With the help of Student Services at the college, I was able to get all the assistance I needed during the day. A second cousin attended Davenport College and her class schedule allowed her to help me get acclimated to campus, assist me during my free time, bring my computer (which was attached to a desk on wheels) to most of my classes my first term of college. I started college as a full time student, but I soon realized it was the Lord's will for me to be a part time student. I had to make time to travel by GO!BUS (a door-to-door public transportation service for the disabled) and depending on their schedule I could spend a lot of time waiting for my ride and traveling between home and school. This cut into my study time.

After three years at Davenport College, I received an Associate Degree. Then I waited on the Lord for his will concerning a job. During this time, I volunteered doing data entry at Davenport College's Placement Department, and helped my dad's auto body

shop business with their Accounts Payable. It took over a year of waiting on the Lord before I started volunteering at Hope Network. Eventually, I became an employee of Hope Network. Last February, I began my 15th year of employment at Hope Network. I have had positions in Billing and Accounts Payable. The majority of the time I have been responsible for data entry of the daily pay data of many of the special needs people we provide paid work to in our sheltered workshops or in various companies in the community.

As I reflect on my life, I am also thankful for the many good gifts that I have been able to use as I serve the Lord in every aspect of my life in this world as a child of God. Even the actions and laws of the world have been used by God to provide for my daily needs. I have in mind the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Yes, it is a law written by ungodly men, but it is one of God's gifts to his people. When you go about your daily activities in the community, look at all the ramps, elevators, spacious restrooms, lower sinks and drinking fountains, wide aisles, wheelchair accessible store counters, more merchandise and exhibits at the eye level of a person using a wheelchair, special seating for those using mobility aids such as wheelchairs, walkers, crutches and canes. Think about the kindness shown to you and your loved ones by the medical community. These conveniences make life easier for the person with special needs in the church and in the community.

Throughout the thirty-nine years of my life, the Lord has been with me and my family, upholding us in the joys and sorrows his loving hand has sent us. My family, church family and other fellow believers have been such a blessing to me. Truly, I have experienced the blessedness of the communion of saints. It means so much to me when a family member or other fellow believer will take the time to stop and engage or try to engage in a conversation with me. In a crowded church narthex, or busy family gathering, it can take more effort to understand my speech; but with some patience and careful listening, most of the time I can be understood. I am so thankful for the group of adults and young adults in the Grand Rapids area who take the time to organize activities for those who have special needs to fellowship with one another and for others who are interested in being close friends.

Parents and young people, please help the young children in your family feel comfortable around special needs people. Answer your family's questions truthfully. If you have questions, do some research so you and your family are made more aware of the possible needs of the brother or sister in Christ who holds a very special place in the church. Take time to discuss with your family how each of God's children is uniquely created in his image and has a special place in Christ's church. Point out that God makes no mistakes and there really are no "accidents" because he determines and directs each life according to his will. I feel that it is alright to ask questions. That is

how we learn about the life struggles of our fellow saints and how our heavenly Father bestows boundless grace upon them to be content.

I am thankful God has blessed me with this grace each day to live my life. I need his grace and strength to awake early and to take about two hours to prepare for the day with my mother's assistance. I need grace to use the GO!BUS to go to and from my job. I need his grace to carry me through when I am weaker and more tired. I need grace to remain patient throughout each day because each task and activity is more difficult and takes more energy for me to do than it would for a "normal" person. I am so thankful that God's grace is sufficient for my every need.

Clinging to his promises, I know that he will continue to give me the grace to trust him to provide for all my needs as he leads me down my life's path. This path will lead me one day to my eternal home where he will make my soul and body perfect. All my sins, my physical limitations and all my struggles will be for ever gone! Sing with me Psalter 203 stanzas 2 and 4:

*Thy counsel through my earthly way
Shall guide me and control,
And then to glory afterward
Thou wilt receive my soul.*

*Tho' flesh and heart should faint and fail,
The Lord will ever be
The strength and portion of my heart,
My God eternally.*