

Just Keep Going

Spiritual Encouragement from the Mom of a Troubled Teen



Sarah H. Nielsen

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Acknowledgments

On summer evenings, I would lace up my walking shoes, grab my music and headphones, my reflector wrist band and tissues, and set out in the darkness of the neighborhood to pray, cry, mourn and beg God for help, as I watched one of our three sons spiral down through his teenage years in a distress that I could never have imagined. At night, no one would see my tears or hear me groan, struggling for words that could accurately express the fear in my heart and the desperation I felt for God to intervene. The promises of God which I heard in the songs those nights brought me peace.

I asked God to provide as a companion another mom in the same situation to pray with, share the pain and divide the grief. I did not find her. He did give me good books, a counselor, encouraging friends and my mother, who was wise enough to love her grandson for what she knew was inside him. He gave me a strong husband to do the hard and scary parenting, and who reminded me of the good when I only saw the bad. Still, I never had another mom in my same place with whom to talk or pray. As a result, I experienced and understood God's love and care for me in a way I never had before. For that, of course, I am tremendously thankful.

I hope that this book will be a friend to you. I hope that it will be a place you can go to remember that you are not doing this alone. I pray that God will give you what you need, when you need it. I know how much He wants to do so, and that He can. I am confident that He will.

Thank you loyal, patient brothers John and Peter. Thank you Mom, Ted, René, Andrea, Cindy, Susie, Pam, Mary, Elizabeth, Sandy, Betsy, Jill, Courtney, Caitie, Jane, Ian, Toby, Tracy, Annie, Nate, Drew, Ryan, Craig, Gary, Becky, Burnie, Suzy, my Moms in Touch group, Epikos Church, Mugisha Dianne and many others. All of you asked questions, listened, cared, encouraged, offered wisdom and prayed what accumulated into a vast mountain range of prayers for Ted.

Thank you to all the people whose names I don't know who prayed for Ted. One day both of us will thank you face to face.

Thank you to my husband Bush, the greatest encourager this side of heaven. Our little Teddy was accurate when he used to whisper in your

ear before going to sleep, “you're the best dad.” You are also the best editor.

Thank you Ted, for the freedom to publish this book. Cherished son, welcome back.

God, thank You.

Introduction

I wrote this book based on ten years of journal entries chronicling the heartache of watching our son, Ted, slip away from our family and walk into the welcoming arms of what turned out to be drug and alcohol addiction. In the margins of my spiral notebooks filled with writings from my morning times with God, I would occasionally put an asterisk next to a revelation or discovery that God gave in that moment to encourage me. My times in God's Word adjusted my thinking, comforted me and equipped me to continue trusting God, one day at a time. With the not-so-gentle prodding of my husband, I expanded on those entries, in order to pass on what I had learned to other mothers who were suffering as I was. I know you are out there.

For a while, I put the book aside as our ten-year struggle with Ted intensified and I resolved to pay as much attention as possible to homeschooling our youngest son in his eighth grade year.

On my 52nd birthday, September 30, 2008, I retrieved Ted from a week in an alcohol and drug detox hospital unit and checked him into what turned into six months in residential treatment. Less than an hour later that day, I led the first meeting of a church Bible Study with ten women I had never met. Life goes on.

And so your life goes on. You zombie out of bed with this child on your mind, go to work or stay home and manage other children, all the while leaking tears from eye and heart. Alone in the privacy of your car, you whisper or maybe shout to God or into the air, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do."

As mothers, we advocate for our children. We kiss boo-boos, cheer them on from the bleachers and encourage them at the kitchen table. We celebrate their victories and console them on their failures. We defend them, brag about them to our own mothers, and occasionally deliver a school assignment forgotten on the bedroom floor. When their spirits leave their connection to ours to pursue a substance, person, lifestyle or seduction, we may eventually find that there is nothing we can do to fix this situation. We learn to pray.

Perhaps you are walking a very lonely path, as I did. Maybe this book will help your peripheral vision to see that God Himself is walking that path next to you, in front of you, behind you, with His hand on your shoulder saying, “This is the way, walk in it.”

Sarah Nielsen

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Day 1. First Responder

“But as for me, I would seek God, and I would place my cause before God, who does great and unsearchable things, wonders without number. ...He sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety.”

Job 5:8-9, 11

The above verse is found on a water-stained Bible verse-of-the-day page that, for three years, has been perched on the windowsill above my kitchen sink. It is a one-item to-do list: go first to God. Don't make a phone call. Don't write an email. Don't corner your husband. Apprehend Jesus. He is flexed for the tackle.

I'm not sure what this might look like for you. For me, those alarming times might find me kneeling over the seat cushion of my living room chair with a box of Kleenex by my side. I might be flinging myself face down on my bed to tell God how mad, hurt, scared, embarrassed or freaked out I am. Sometimes, it means that I grab my headphones and CD player and run out the door to be alone with Him. I pretend to mouth the words of songs as I walk by neighbors, but really I am telling God, “I'm afraid, I'm afraid, I'm afraid.” God keeps up with me and I can almost hear Him saying between my breaths, “I know. I'm right here. Talk to Me.”

When I let Jesus be my first responder, I am calm enough afterward to call a friend, but by then I usually already have what I need. The adrenaline drains and my heart slows down. I regain some perspective and my head clears. He gives me the necessary courage to take any next steps, or the peace to let it be. I can make the conscious choice to go to God first, or I can avoid Him and stay needy. Who else can simultaneously talk me down and do crisis management on the tsunami in my head? Only He understands the truth of the circumstance and the people involved.

Our loved ones can encourage us, but they can't really *do* much. At times I have offered up information which they were better off not knowing. I imagine our patient God, watching me frantically grab the

phone for my husband and best friends while He waits for the help line to shorten. Have you noticed how often you can't get through to the friend? "Thus says the Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it, the Lord is His name, 'Call to Me, and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.'^{cc1}

We have a sweet example in the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel, Chapter 1. She couldn't get pregnant and her husband's mean other wife wouldn't let her forget it. Finally, she broke down sobbing. In her explanation to a man observing and judging her, she cried that -- if he must know -- she wasn't drunk; she was telling God her problems. When she was done crying she got up, ate something -- Oreos? -- probably washed her face, re-applied her base make-up and put on a brave countenance, as we women are prone to do. Eventually she got the baby she craved, but in the meantime God was more than willing to listen to her issues while answering her prayer.

Fifteenth century author Baltasar Gracián wrote, "The wise does at once what the fool does at last." Go to Him, call on Him, sob to Him, yell to Him, and even argue with Him. He can take it. Try all other means first to help yourself if you must -- I have. Then reach out for real help and take the extended hand of God.

Thank You, Lord that You are available whenever I need to talk, cry, question or explode. Thank You that, when I leave the calmness of Your presence, I can also leave my cause with You, knowing that You will do the great, the miraculous, the marvelous or just simply the helpful.

Lord, I pray that You would remind me to go to You first. No stoic bucking up, no detours for me. You can take brute honesty and a whole lot of uninterrupted sobbing. You're the Father; I'm the child. I'm rolling my wheelbarrow of heartache and confusion over to You. I can hardly believe that You want it, but You do.

Day 2. Whose Child Is This Anyway?

“Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”

1 Thessalonians 5:24

Do you ever think that you are the wrong parent for your teen? Do you suspect that God got interrupted by a phone call and lost track of where He was when He put you together? When we were in the car or at the dinner table, just the two of us, neither my son Ted nor I could think of anything to say or ask in the thick tension of our relationship. When we were arguing and he told me I made him crazy, I would think (and sometimes say) “oh, yeah, I know exactly how you feel.” Later I would tell God, “Somebody was switched at birth because I am not the right mom for this kid. What I do bugs him. He bristles at what I say. Everything I am seems to be nails on his chalkboard.”

The irony is that Ted and I are very much alike. We are like the positive end of a battery up against the positive end of another battery. The truth that it was God who made me his mom makes me cling to the above verse. I am right for the job; in fact, I am perfect for the job. I need to let God do the job through me. I think it means that difficult interactions between our children and us require a lightning flash prayer to God for help. We ask before we speak or act; we listen and we think it through. I have opted for silence in situations where I felt explosive but was unsure of the right words. I asked and waited -- sometimes not in that order -- for the right words from a proper perspective. My wise friend Cindy told me a very long time ago that you can almost always come back to a person and add more: “You know, I was thinking about what you said...” You can't, however, take back what you have already let out.

God put this little person, this child, in my arms umpteen years ago. Back then, we both felt that we were made for each other, and we were. Some things in the last decade have tempted me to think otherwise, but my first instincts were right. We are the right mothers for our children. If you can't see it, just choose to believe it. God knows we are not fully equipped in our humanness to do or be it all, so He says He will. He is

faithful to what He has given you, to what He has called you, and He will do it.

My just-like-me son is in his second year of college now. On my 50th birthday he wrote this: "I love you so much. I couldn't ask for a more wonderful mom." I don't tell you that to brag or make you feel bad that your own teen went out the door this morning with a grunt or worse. I have had many of those mornings. However, things can change. This teenage statue of icy granite, planted in a messy bedroom with the door closed, can transform into flesh and blood. Anything is possible when you get God involved.

Thank You, Lord, that I am the parent of this child. You chose me to be his parent because it is in Your plan. Therefore, I will not question Your decision that I am right where I should be. Having said that, Lord, thank You for the promise "Faithful is He that calls you, and He will do it," because so often I can't.

Lord, I pray that I will allow You to raise this child with me. I am your choice for the task but I am inadequate. You don't call the equipped, You equip the called. Show me how to do this work.

Day 3. Truth – Get Some

“Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline and understanding.”

Proverbs 23:23

The feeling is like a punch in the stomach and a sudden twist to the heart -- discovering pieces of paper, computer screens, items in the car or backpack, bits of uncovered information I wish I didn't have to know. Phone calls from school and the mother of our son's friend left me stunned with upsetting information about our son's doings. I paced my kitchen, clenching my hands and wiping my tear-wetted face. Similarly, another mom told me that, after taking yet another call from the principal about her son's infractions, she screamed words of frustration in her empty house until she fell on her bed, hoarse and exhausted.

These are times when we are allowed to see truth. It is not welcome, but it is necessary. Have you felt like I have -- possibly in a time of relative calm -- that there was trouble in the air? I took a walk one afternoon and said to God, “I know there is something going on that I need to know, Lord. I feel it. I wasn't ready to know it yesterday but I think I can handle it today. Show me some truth.”

These are prayers that are not dissimilar to those in which we ask for patience. The words stick in my throat, but I know I need to say them. I want what is necessary but I want it to happen gently. This is not always possible. Truth allows us to understand more of what we are dealing with in our child's world. If the truth is bad, God will be in the middle of it, giving wisdom and direction. Sometimes the truth turns out to be much less awful than we had imagined. Sometimes, though, it is worse.

Although I have been guilty of denial, I have tried to learn that my assumptions can be just plain wrong. If I say “my child would NEVER” do something, or that “my child ALWAYS” does something else, I exhibit naiveté about human nature and the ability that each of us has to cross a boundary.

I have told my children how I consistently pray that they will be caught in the things they do wrong. They marvel at how it comes to pass that, while others move under the radar, they are discovered. It is better, I believe, to reveal issues as they happen than after they accumulate or escalate, although this is not always how life unfolds.

I don't like praying for truth. It is scary, but I guess I would rather know my leg is broken and get it set than to walk on it and make it worse. Asking for truth is like asking for a blinding spotlight in a sleepy darkness but, if we expect to live in reality, turn on the lights. God will walk with us.

Thank You, Lord, that You entrust me with the truth I am capable of knowing. I can handle what You show me because, if I press into You, I will find the strength. Thank You for monitoring when and how I know truth according to Your love and tender care for me.

Lord, I pray for maturity and courage to deal wisely with what comes my way. As I am able to know it, show truth to me and give me calm and wisdom in my next steps. Infuse me with discernment, maturity, understanding and, as always, love.