

# ACHING JOY



FOLLOWING GOD THROUGH THE  
LAND OF UNANSWERED PRAYER

*jason hague*

The best memoirs tell a story that is specific and individual and yet somehow transcends particularity. *Aching Joy* tells a story of one man's pain and growth in the years following his son's diagnosis with autism, and at the same time, this book invites me into reflection about my own experience with pain, denial, hope, and healing. As this father begins to let go of fear and open his heart up to trust, I, too, am invited to explore all the ways I have shut myself off from the ache, and the joy, of full life.

AMY JULIA BECKER, author of *White Picket Fences* and *A Good and Perfect Gift*

Honest, wise, beautiful. After I lost a dear friend, *Aching Joy* was precisely what I needed to read. Jason Hague's honesty about his own failings, doubts, and questions about God in a painful season of his family's life made me feel like I wasn't alone. His insights, wisdom, and sensitivity to God gave me hope. I cried multiple times reading this book. Highly recommended.

MATT MIKALATOS, author of *Good News for a Change* and *Sky Lantern*

Sometimes we beg God for an answer to prayer and don't receive it. Then what? Hague writes with raw honesty about his son's autism diagnosis—and the prayer requests denied. I don't know the source of your begging (mine was different from Hague's), but you'll grow through the universal wisdom found in this book, which helps readers see that God is still in the story—and that our circumstances don't get to decide our levels of joy. A new kind of joy—an aching joy—awaits.

SEPTEMBER VAUDREY, author of *Colors of Goodbye*

Jason accomplishes the extraordinary: He teaches and shares wisdom without condescension. He preaches without being preachy. With honesty and humility, he shares the unvarnished, unfiltered challenges that confront every special-needs parent and the wisdom that is earned through facing those challenges with honest personal and spiritual reflection. His love for his family drips from every page, and the wisdom he shares translates to anyone facing a critical life challenge. This is an important book and an important message. I'm honored to call him my friend.

JERRY TURNING, JR. (MR. BACON), blogger at *Bacon and Juice*  
*Boxes: Our Life with Autism*

Jason Hogue is a modern-day psalmist. His words ring with courage, honesty, transparency, and raw beauty. He shines a light in the darkness to remind us that every single emotion is safe before a sovereign God who is big enough to hold all the pieces.

TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD, author of *And Life Comes Back* and *You Can Do This*

When followers of Jesus face devastating pain, unanswered prayer, and dashed hopes, Jason Hague says Western Christianity offers two options: a pious, naive, praise-the-Lord-anyway optimism or a realistic, resigned, *Where are you, God?* despair. Through the raw story of his relationship with his son Jack, who wrestles with autism, Hague offers another path: courageously walking alongside a relentlessly

loving Father into a life of deep mystery—the mystery of fully embracing both the hopeful, redemptive dreams of victory and the disappointment of unexplained, bleeding-out defeat. In other words, a mysterious, powerful life of . . . aching joy.

J. KEVIN BUTCHER, author of *Choose and Choose Again*

My family's story and Jason's family's story are very similar, but the themes of *Aching Joy* are universal. We all wonder what God is up to in times of hardship, especially when it seems to go on for years. Jason's transparency is a gift that shows us how to live with both joy and longing. His courage to share his experiences gives me courage to keep holding on to God as I raise my son, who has Level 3 autism. Following Jason's example, I can rejoice in my hopes, be patient in my trials, and persevere in my prayers, as the apostle Paul instructs us.

SANDRA PEOPLES, MDiv, author of *Unexpected Blessings*

Jason Hague's book, *Aching Joy*, is for anyone whose dreams have at one time turned to rubble in "the Land of Unanswered Prayer," which is "just east of Acceptance and west of Breakthrough." It is *also* for parents of children who have special needs (or their friends), or anyone who walks alongside families with a loved one on the autism spectrum. The struggles Hague's son experiences trying to express his inner world, as well as the turmoil Hague describes in his

efforts to truly have a relationship with his son, ring with gritty honesty and give no easy answers. But there is beauty and redemption. As Hague moves through the graveyard of his hopes, while still believing—or trying to believe—in an almighty Father who can move mountains, he gains insights into “incarnational parenting” that are full of startling joy—and hope—for us all, whatever our journeys.

ELIZABETH BERG, MA, special education, and principal of James Irwin Charter Elementary School

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# Introduction

*The Night I Hit the Ground*

THERE'S A CLASSIC GAG in old cartoons where a character steps off a desert cliff but keeps on walking. He can go on like that forever as long as he doesn't realize he's treading on air. The audience is in on the joke, of course, long before the character is. Everyone knows that as soon as the poor soul looks down, it's all over. He will try to turn around. He will flail and claw and swim the empty space in an effort to grab the ledge, but gravity will snag his toe just before he succeeds. And then, with great fanfare, comes the crash.

I feel an unsettling familiarity when I watch this scene play out. I can relate to this character. This fall. It has happened to me. Indeed, it has happened to many of us, especially to those of us who are Christians, who think we know where our hearts ought to be in times of crisis and imagine ourselves there. We need the solid ground of settledness and security, so we invent it. We need emotional stability and firm faith, so we smile and tell ourselves God

will handle it. Those who know us and love us best can see it coming a mile away: We're about to crash.

My crash came one February night at a church conference. It was late—almost ten o'clock. The speaker was a bald, well-mannered Englishman whom I normally enjoyed, but not at this hour. Not when we still had to drive ninety minutes to get home.

When he called the worship band back onstage, I perked up. Maybe he was about to land the plane. But no, he wasn't sitting down. He was pacing. Something else was on his mind; something he hadn't been teaching on.

"If you are the parent of a special-needs child, I'd like you to come up and get prayer."

I grunted. Not that. Come on; that's not fair.

I scanned the area for an escape route, and I found one. I could take it without making the slightest disruption. The only obstacle between me and that back door was the team of church staff who had come with me to the conference.

But I didn't need prayer. I was fine. I mean, not fine fine, but at least I wasn't depressed like I had been. Years earlier, when my son Jack's regressive autism first set in, he had gone into a fog, and I had gone into one too. I had walked the common path of grief, starting with denial and lingering for years in depression. During that long season, I needed tons of prayer. But now I was okay; I had reached "acceptance." My personal malaise was over. My feet were on solid ground.

And yet our church staff were sitting behind me, the

ones who had held up my arms during those darker times. They would see me, and they would give me the collective stink eye if I walked out; it would have been their right. I owed them this.

A long line of young ministry students formed at the front of the stage, eager to pounce on any pitiful parent who dared come forward. This was a zealous bunch too. They would pray loud, sweaty prayers. I dragged myself forward, choosing a tall Canadian man in a brown, businesslike sweater. I had heard him talk earlier, and he seemed safe enough—the kind who might not yell too much when talking with the Almighty.

“My son Jack has severe autism,” I told him beneath the cover of ringing synthesizers. “He’s seven, and he can’t speak and . . . yeah . . .” I stopped there to brace myself for an explosion of fervent perspiration, but it never came. Instead, my Canadian closed his eyes and started to whisper. I had to lean in to hear. He sounded gentle and confident, a prince next to his Father’s throne.

And then it happened. He said the word *breakthrough*, and I crumbled into myself, weeping.

*Breakthrough*. That word—it was all I had asked for. Such a small request, it seemed, from the God who could hold galaxies in his fingertips and make seas stand with his breath. I hadn’t prayed for anything as big as that . . . just a little breakthrough. There was a wall between me and my son, and I wanted a hole punched through it.

For years, my wife and I had begged God to “fix” our

son's autism, and at first, we thought he would do it. We had both grown up in God-soaked environments. I was a minister's son in the Bible Belt, surrounded by missionaries who had seen miracles firsthand. Sara was a preacher's daughter in rural Minnesota, full of the faith and confidence that can only come from one who has eavesdropped on counseling sessions that morphed into exorcisms in her own living room. God had healed my mom from severe back problems and had healed Sara's mom from polio. Faith was in our blood.

We carried those stories into adulthood, more or less convinced that God was capable of anything. But thus far, he hadn't answered our most desperate prayer: Jack was still nonverbal. He had grown some, learning a few new skills here and there, but the developmental gap between him and his peers was widening, not shrinking. At age three, the diagnosis had read "moderate autism." At seven, it read "severe." The truth was settling in on me: Our prayers weren't working. Jack's condition was getting worse.

I wanted to get mad at God, but I didn't have the theological conviction to make it stick. Frankly, I wasn't sure what God's role was in Jack's condition. Certainly, I believed that all things—even hard things—"work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28). But did that mean he caused all the hard things in the first place? I didn't think so. In my mind, that was just how redemption worked: God made beauty from ashes, but the ashes themselves didn't necessarily flow from his hand.

Thus, it seemed to me I had two choices: I could either live in perpetual sadness or lower my level of hope. For ages I had embraced the first option, but it was costly. My personality had changed during my walk through depression, the fourth stage of grief. I had become distant and numb, and my family was suffering because of it. I had to pull out of that for the sake of us all. The only option left, then, was for me to lower my expectations and embrace my new normal in hopes that God might salvage something out of it. It was a weak embrace of Romans 8:28, but an embrace nonetheless.

From there, I resigned myself to minimizing disappointment. I started asking God for an easier, more realistic breakthrough. Jack would never converse, I decided, but he might at least learn to bathe himself with soap and shampoo.

And little by little, the new posture worked. Soon I found I had come to terms with Jack's condition. We were playing together and laughing together like never before. Even on bad days, when he might be in the middle of an epic meltdown, I could still feel peace. Joy, even. By lowering my expectations, I had found solid ground. My life was beginning to make sense again.

But all that ended the night my Canadian whispered "breakthrough." He exposed me with his prayer. I was grief stained and empty—again. It was a humiliating self-revelation. Had anything ever changed inside me? Had I ever really let go of any expectations? Despite my best efforts, I



was still a snotty mess craving “breakthrough” more than anything else in the world—and still not getting it.

But how could I help it? How could I be satisfied when my son was still distant from me? I missed him. Why hadn’t he emerged from that dim place? Where were the sunbursts of language? Where was that relationship he was made for? And, dear God, what would happen to him in the tomorrows?



My story is not your story, but we all share this kind of disorienting pain to some degree. The uncertainty of our everyday lives ought to be a given, but in the Western evangelical church, it is more like a shameful secret. We hunger for resolution and thirst for certainty. We crave the security that comes from airtight theological postulates. We sing the grateful anthems of the psalmists, all the while ignoring the laments they wrote before God rescued them. I fear we move through this hymnal too quickly, relating only to the victories and not the struggles. They were as real as ours.

And so I wonder whether it is harder sometimes for Christians like me to deal with the inevitable flooding. We grew up in Sunday school, see, so we know we are supposed to be “inside, outside, upside, downside happy all the time.” We’ve “got the joy, joy, joy, joy” down in our hearts. “Where?”

Somewhere down there. It’s there somewhere.

“You boys look so cute in your Sunday clothes! How

are you doing this morning?” the big-haired ladies would ask my brothers and me. And there was only one correct answer: “We’re doing fine.”

Fine. That’s what we call the ground where we think we ought to be standing—the ground of Fine. We imagine ourselves there, and we keep walking: Eyes up. Smile on. Don’t look down. Don’t admit your open wounds, your hanging doubts, your naked needs.

I am a pastor. I’m not supposed to have naked needs. I’m not supposed to look down. But I looked down and realized I had unfinished business with God. The reality of my condition rushed up at me like the hot desert sands. That fall broke me, and it continues to break me.

Today, I am still living in the country I fell into: the Land of Unanswered Prayer. It lies just east of Acceptance and west of Breakthrough. Maybe you’re here, too, living with lingering pains and troubles that refuse to resolve. Maybe there’s an illness. A death. A severed relationship. Whatever it is, it’s not going away, and you want to know why God hasn’t made it better. Your heart throbs—maybe with anger, maybe with hurt—but almost certainly with disappointment.

We now have to choose: We can either climb back up to the invisible path of forced smiles or stay on this parched earth and wallow in our broken states. We only have those two choices.

Or do we?

Of all the false binaries in our modern, angry world,

this one might be the most damaging. Why must we decide between happiness and sorrow, denial and despair, the joy and the aching? It is a wrong idea that exaggerates both the bright side and the dark: the bright side, full of sunshine, and the dark side, grim as death. The premise requires that we pledge allegiance between two extreme views of the world, two straw men that can offer nothing more than safe, intellectual predictability.

For some of us, this predictability is precisely what makes these options attractive. There is something safe in the formula of a tragic romance. To know life is hard and then we die—at least we can count on that. Or conversely, to convince ourselves there's nothing to be sad about, and everything is as it ought to be . . . that's a relief as well. Fatalism helps us all to sigh more deeply.

But the sighs of safety and predictability are such small prizes. What if there was a third way forward that offered more than mere predictability?

The way is out there. And it does, indeed, offer much more. In fact, there are treasures waiting to be found. God promised this through his prophet Isaiah: “I will give you treasures hidden in the darkness—secret riches. I will do this so you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, the one who calls you by name” (Isaiah 45:3, NLT).

This is a book about the treasures I found in my darkness, and the greatest of all was this: aching joy. The Lord taught me how to sigh in pain, how to weep in gladness, and how to trust during days of hope deferred. It was

not an easy road to walk. It still isn't easy, and it isn't safe. Rather, it is a confounding country full of myths and mirages. Here, faith resembles denial, settledness looks like surrender, and hope is the scariest creature of all.

But this book is also about you. If you are with me here in the Land of Unanswered Prayer, you know all about discouragement. But look up, friend. The path before us is paved with secret riches. To embrace it is to embrace the terrifying tension of God's inaugurated but unfinished Kingdom: the already and the not yet, the treasure in the field costing us everything but giving us even more. It is the place where I thank God for my son, who is enough, and in the next breath, I beg God for more.

The road ahead is dangerous but not barren. There is sustenance here, because Christ himself is here, and he goes before us. He walked this path already, this Man of Sorrows, and endured all that we must endure and more. But he did it all "for the joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2, NASB).

On this journey, we will follow his lead. He does not hover above us on the winds of false expectations. Rather, he stands next to us with his own humble scars, beckoning us forward.

If we come this way, our expectations may need recalibration. Our long-held daydreams may need to be released. Life won't look the way we thought it would, but he has prepared a path for us, complete with breath-stopping vistas; cool, crystal streams; and pleasures for the soul.

This is my story. This is our story. Come, journey with me.



PART I

# Embracing the Aching





CHAPTER I

# Our Precious Propaganda

IT ALL STARTED WITH DAYDREAMS. Maybe that was my problem. My glowing expectations of fatherhood created the perfect setup for my original disappointment with God.

Jack tried to escape his mother's womb on Super Bowl Sunday, 2006, and he almost succeeded. Sara's water broke in the second quarter of the Steelers versus Seahawks matchup, but she told me I could watch the rest of the game before we left for the delivery. Because our two daughters, Emily and Jenna, had both taken their own sweet time on their birthdays, she figured our new son would take at least a few more hours to get serious about



coming out. Still, her offer seemed like a trap. If I accepted it, the story would surely be told for years to come, and I doubted any woman would ever let me live it down.

We met the midwife at something called a “birthing center,” an old house that wanted very much to remind clients they were not in the hospital. Candles were already flickering their soft light, and Thomas Kinkade paintings were standing watch over the floral wallpaper. Sara settled down for a while on a hefty blue medicine ball while I massaged her back and tried not to think of the game. The Steelers were probably running away with it anyway.

After thirty minutes of bobbing and deep breathing, we moved into the expanded bathroom, where my wife soaked in a steaming tub smelling of lavender. The bath salts were supposed to help her body relax, but it was a hopeless endeavor from the start. How could she possibly relax? There was a prisoner inside her trying to dig his way out like Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption*.

The midwife left us alone for a while. We didn’t say much—I just rubbed Sara’s shoulders and smiled. Soon it would all be over. Tomorrow our new child would be here: my first son. Finally. He and I could christen our relationship by watching the Super Bowl on VHS, and it would be so suspenseful!

“The Steelers won the game,” the midwife said, reemerging without warning. I grunted.

But there was no time for sulking. The fullness of time had come, and I moved my tired wife, who was greater

than ever with child, to a regular guest room with a regular bed and lots of quilts that wouldn't be seen in a sterile hospital. There, she began to push.

We whispered our encouragements, the midwife and I, because anything above a whisper would drown out Sara's quiet moaning. I figured she had earned every one of those moans. I had seen this process twice already, and while it is undoubtedly sacred, it is anything but beautiful. No, childbirth is sheer pain and messy fire. And for the third time, Sara was doing it all without meds. It hurt just watching her. I thought I might need her epidural.

The boy gave us some drama near the end, spending so much time in the birth canal that we nearly called for the ambulance. But then in an instant, he was sucking air and sobbing like a champ, covered in that familiar wet clay all newborns wear. Our voices finally rose enough to celebrate at their regular volume—but not too much louder, for it was after midnight.

Nine pounds, seven ounces. We named him “Jackson” after my grandfather, and “Landry” after the legendary Dallas Cowboys coach. We would call him Jack, mostly because of Jack Bauer, the famed anti-terrorism agent on our favorite TV show, *24*.

My son's name and the time of his appearance both seemed preordained: He and I would be the all-American duo, playing catch in the backyard and shooting hoops after dark. There would be Star Wars viewings, paintball showdowns, and Narnia read-alouds. We would grow

together, arguing theology over hot coffee and eating Whataburger while watching *Seinfeld* reruns. Just me and my boy.

In hindsight, it is easy to label these visions as inherently selfish, and they might have been. They were mostly about me, after all. But then, throughout history, dads have always reveled in their sons' future exploits. Men don't want children for the general continuation of the human species. That's way too broad for most of us. No, we want to reproduce a certain kind of life. Our kind. Our family culture.

Of course, the fact that these desires are universal does not mean they are virtuous or even helpful, but they are at least inborn. I never had to conjure up my little movies. The reels were already in my head, waiting to project my expectations in dazzling high definition.

I have a theory about such expectations. If we would just get in the habit of acknowledging them, I think we'd be okay when hard times hit. If we could transfer our mental films to the real world—if we could write them down or speak them aloud—we might at least see them for what they are: subjective, childish daydreams. Then we could blush a little. After all, do we really think life is going to be pain free? Of course not. It never is.

But that's not what most of us do. Most of us embrace these visions in hushed solitude. We huddle in the glow of our invented fantasies and pray the projector stays on. Our expectations indoctrinate our minds like propaganda

films, seeping into our subconscious with their laughable utopian ideals. Then, when life's emergency alarms start blaring, we panic like those who have never gone through the fire drill.

Maybe you were like me, or maybe you had a better grip on reality. Whatever the case, as we begin this journey through the Land of Unanswered Prayer, we need to interrogate the expectations we started with. These are the perceived injustices that pushed us to pray with such desperation in the first place. Were we being realistic? Did we somehow think we would be exempt from hard times because of our standing with Christ?

My daydreams were probably brighter than most people's because I had it easy growing up. Mom and Dad told me daily that they loved me and weekly that they were proud of me. My teachers were personal cheerleaders, and my friends crossed oceans with me to tell people about Jesus. Indeed, my world was a positive Christian cocoon where people said things like "God loves you and wants to take you on an adventure." And I never doubted either part of that statement, because my soul had never been stepped on.

The fact is, I knew nothing of crisis. My friends had experienced all manner of pain, whereas I had somehow managed to dodge it at every turn. Familial rejection, extreme poverty, and death were all foreigners, and I didn't speak their language. By the time I was twenty-one, the only person I'd ever lost was my grandpa, and he was ninety-one years old. That was hardly a tragedy; he was just worn out.

Life was good, and I knew God was good. So naturally, I followed my parents' example by going into ministry. A few years after Sara and I were married, we joined a missions agency. My job was to work with the Bible school program. I helped train missionaries from around the globe in the most practical themes of Scripture—the nature of sin, the nature of salvation, and especially, the character of God:

The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate  
and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in  
lovingkindness and truth.

EXODUS 34:6, NASB

We majored on those words, God's self-description to Moses, and we followed the thread throughout the Old and New Testaments. I taught this theme with energy and passion, and to most people, I was pretty convincing.

Some of those faces, though . . . You know the ones—flat eyes dropping to notebooks, jaws shifting to the left, blank and unemotional stares—they represented the hold-outs. They were listening because they wanted to believe, but none of my fast-talking exegesis could erase the giant questions engraved on their souls:

*If God is really good, then why?*

*Why did my mom have to die in that accident?*

*Why didn't God protect me when my uncle would come to visit?*

*Why can't we have children?*

I kept an academic distance from those questions. In my mind, they were puzzles, not pains, and I knew that might be a problem someday. In fact, I was all too aware that crisis might find me eventually, and its teeth would be deadly. Would I be able to withstand the attack? And when it was over, would I still believe in the goodness of God?

Those nagging concerns started way back in high school, and they grew only more intense after I married Sara. She was so lovely and gracious and forgiving that I started to wonder if a shoe was going to drop. Then we produced two blond beauties who acted out fairy tales and could speak Elizabethan English. My girls were smart, charming, and thoroughly healthy.

The promise of health had become so prominent that I never realized how powerful it was. I don't think I'm alone here. I suspect this is the main reason we Westerners are so inept at dealing with pain. It is why our medications turn quickly into addictions. We are accustomed to a healthy, pain-free existence. Wellness has become the standard backdrop to our propagandist daydreams, where our families live cozy little lives and our children are perpetually whole.

Classic marriage vows promise a different fate. Phrases like "for better or for worse" and "in sickness and in health" remind us that our bodies are fragile and a life in comfort is never guaranteed. Maybe it would help to take a similar vow on the day our children are born. Not that it would make us love them any more, but we might at least take

seriously the possibilities that life won't give us unlimited games of H.O.R.S.E. in the driveway.

I believe our expectations need recalibrating, especially for those of us who follow Jesus in such wealthy nations. Too many preachers feed our anxious souls with soaring promises of prosperity and wholeness. They maintain that a God who is eternally good would want the best for his children.

Surely this must be true. God defined himself as good in the Old Testament, and in the New, John the Evangelist summed up what he saw as obvious: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). John, of all people, should know. He was, after all, himself "the disciple whom [Jesus] loved" (John 19:26).

But even John, who knew firsthand the generous affections of the Savior, had no illusions about trouble-free lives for saints. He saw Christ naked and penniless and hanging from a Roman tree. John knew the sting of good expectations gone bad, and he felt the hot tears of a grieving mother on his neck.

That wasn't all. Even when all those tears turned to laughter, John lived the rest of his days as a religious minority in a hostile empire. His own people had rejected him, and after years of faithfulness, the Romans dipped his body into scalding hot oil, expecting him to die. When he didn't, a rumor spread that he had obtained immortality. Can you imagine the burns he had to carry with him the rest of his life?

John lived out his final days in exile on the island prison

of Patmos, apart from his former companions. Tradition holds that every other original disciple met a martyr's death. John alone, with his throbbing patches of aged red skin, died of natural causes.<sup>1</sup> If John held to the same manic expectations that plague us in modern America, he gave us no indication of it. Rather, he assured us of a life of trouble. John's Gospel was the only one to quote this sobering assurance from Jesus:

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

JOHN 16:33, ESV

There are no illusions in this warning. Our world is filled with tribulation: sickness, poverty, famine, war, and death. This land is still broken in a thousand different ways. Jesus makes it clear that we will taste that brokenness. Period. That is just as true for suburban graphic designers as for AIDS orphans in Kolkata. There is no incantation to ward off trouble, no declaration or secret prayer that will shield us from tears and bloodstains. There is only the assurance that peace resides in Christ, so we must too.

When I first held my sticky newborn son that night, I wish I had understood this. Before I ever heard the word *autism*, I wish I had looked ahead with Jesus-style realism. I wish I had pondered what it means to walk through a broken world behind the one whose body was broken for



me. I wish I had switched off the projector now and then, because my daydreams were about to lie to me. To date, I have never shot baskets with my son. He doesn't watch Star Wars with me, and we don't converse about theology or action thrillers. As much as I would like to blame my disappointment on the general brokenness of our world, I can't do it. That wouldn't be fair. Some of my pain was self-inflicted. After all, I was the one who kept playing those movies in my head. It wasn't necessarily a sin, but it was a tactical mistake that stung for years.

If you are grappling with your own broken daydreams, can I encourage you to do something? Turn off the projector. You don't have to burn the footage. I tried that myself, and it backfired. I'll talk about that in a later chapter. But for now, just turn off the film. Stop watching it. It isn't helping you anymore.

Since the early days of my struggle, I have become convinced of this: Our expectations cannot grow in the shifting soils of circumstance. Only in the unchanging, eternal Christ can peace truly flourish. In him, our expectations become secondary to his. Our riches will rust and our health will forsake us, but he has sworn to do no such thing. Ever. In Christ alone, our visions are free to grow wild, for he himself is freedom, and his very name is Love.

## A Note to the Autism Community

I REALIZE HOW IMPORTANT language is to our community. In these pages, I have opted to use the term *autistic* instead of *with autism* most of the time, since that seems to be the preferred term among most self-advocates I have encountered.

In general, I have endeavored to share my journey as it actually happened, not how I wish it had happened. I wish I had possessed a better attitude toward Jack's autism early on. Unfortunately, my story was a messy one, and I opted to include the messiness in this book. I realize that by doing that, I run a risk of offending some in our community with certain terminology, as in my early desire for "healing." However, I decided the benefits of honesty outweighed the risks. If I can help other parents—especially dads—identify what they are feeling instead of telling them the way they ought to feel, they might, in the end, be better equipped to love their children the way they ought to. They might, in other words, become better fathers.

## ACHING JOY

Rest assured, my thoughts and feelings about the autism spectrum have morphed considerably over the years and will continue to morph, I'm sure. In the meantime, if I have stepped on any toes in these pages, I beg your patience, and I hope you will allow me some latitude.

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