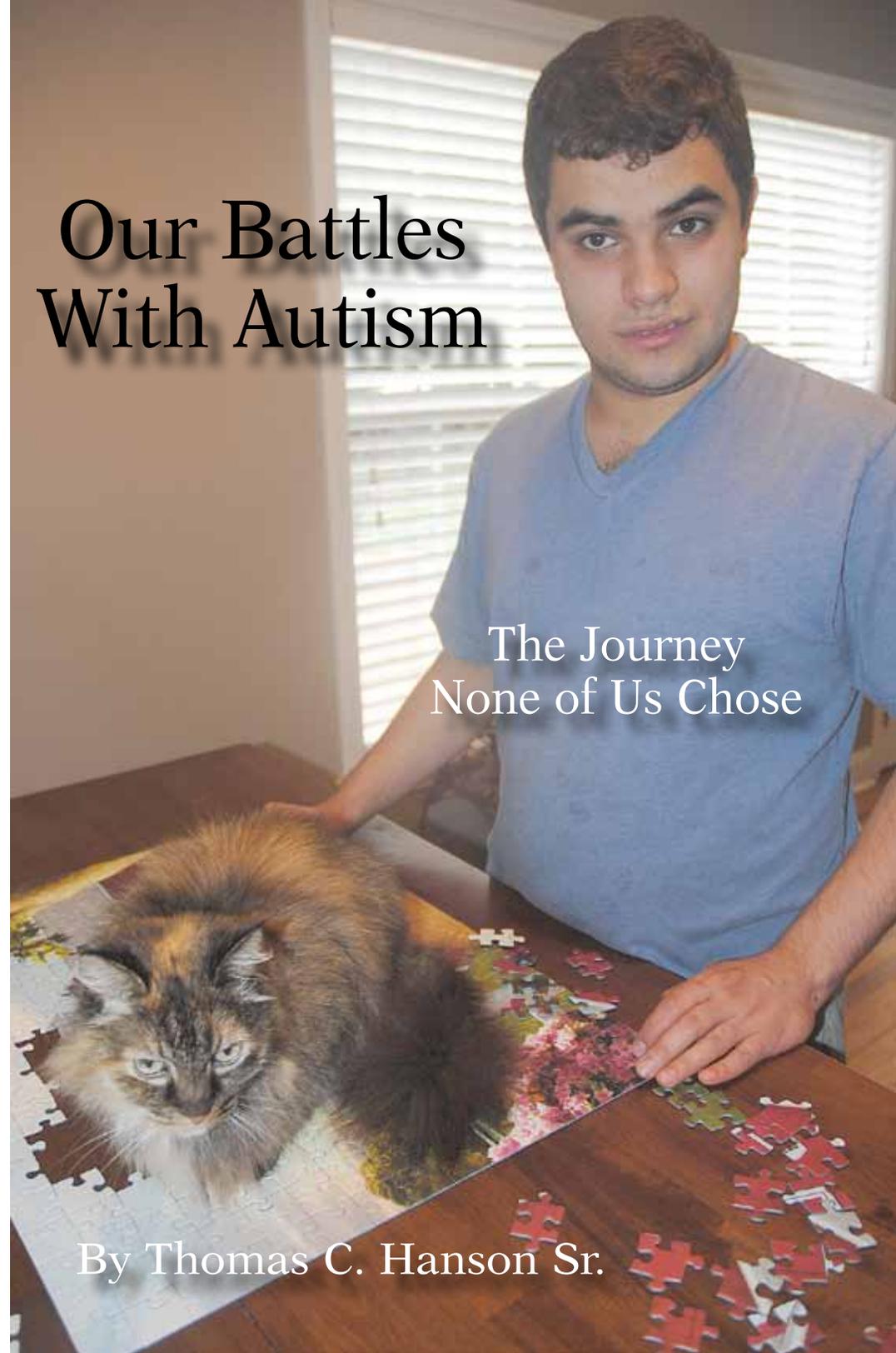


Our Battles With Autism

The Journey
None of Us Chose

By Thomas C. Hanson Sr.



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This book is dedicated to my mother, Betty Sue Hanson, who has helped us in our battles with autism.



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We are more tired than you can comprehend.

Our Battles with Autism: the journey none of us chose

I wish we could write a book that would show you how to bring your loved one out of autism. That is my desire for my wife Tina and our son, Tom Jr., now 23 (who descended into autism at age three and a half), and it is our desire for you.

Your child has been diagnosed with autism — for which there is no known cure.

We heard those words in the summer of 1997 as our son, Tom Jr., then four years old, was diagnosed with autism, and our world came crashing down around us.

We were living in the Los Angeles area at the time. I was editor of a church denominational publication and was working on a master's degree in biblical studies at Azusa Pacific University. We had prayer requests before class, and I had to write mine out because I could not say the words "no known cure" without getting choked up.

Christian friends rallied around us as this horrible tragedy struck. I don't know how non-Christians

go through trials like this. Our faith in Christ gets us through each day.

As editor of an international denominational publication, our autism story received worldwide attention, and we received encouragement the world over. At home, people would call us whenever they saw something on television about autism.

Throughout our now 18 year battle with autism I have longed for the day when our son would be healed, he would write a book about what it is like to be autistic, and we would hit the speaking circuit, sharing our faith everywhere we go. As various pastors have prayed for Tom Jr.'s healing throughout these years, I have laid my hands on Tom Jr., hoping for his healing, and ready to spread the word that Jesus had healed him.

To this date that has not happened, and now our prayer is that God would be glorified while Tom Jr. is autistic and that God would be glorified in his healing — for his sake and ours — because as much as my wife and I suffer, Tom Jr. suffers more, and he cannot tell us what is happening.

As Christians we know that our trials are limited to this life. I am comforted by the hymn Stand Up Stand Up for Jesus, with the words,

Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
the strife will not be long;
this day the noise of battle,
the next the victor's song.

The Lord gave us three and a half wonderful years before Tommy descended into his own world, into autism (from the Greek word autos, meaning “the self”), and we are deeply thankful for them. It is hard to imagine the time when we knew nothing about autism.

Isaiah 35:6 tells us of the day when “the lame man [will] leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute [shall] sing for joy” (English Standard Version).

One day the tongues of the autistic will be loosed and will praise Jesus Christ for all eternity, and all their compulsive behaviors will cease.

Jesus referred to this scripture in Matthew 11:5 when John the Baptist, who was languishing in prison as his life was not turning out as he had expected, sent his disciples to ask Jesus “if he was the Messiah or if they were to look for someone else.” Jesus sent John’s disciples back to John with proofs of his Messiahship, but John remained in prison and later was beheaded. Yet Jesus said: “Among those born of women none is greater than John” (Luke 7:28).

One of our favorite scriptures is Rev. 21:3-4: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the

former things have passed away.’ ”

One day, autism will be no more.

In 2011, I attended a women’s conference as a journalist and heard former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin speak about faith and hope. Her love for her son Trig, with Down Syndrome, inspires me greatly. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (ESV). Thankfully the arena was dark because tears streamed down my face as I heard her speak and I realized, I have faith, but no hope.

We have no lives. We just exist. We are thankful to make it through each day. Some people post on Facebook trips or activities that are far beyond what we can even imagine to do. As one television actor who portrayed a father of an autistic child said, “I am more tired than you can comprehend.”

When out in public, I do not make eye contact with others when Tom Jr.’s behavior seems bizarre. I don’t want to give dirty looks to or say something rash to busybodies with disgusted looks on their faces.

In our journey with autism, we have been helped by more people than we can even remember. One of the first was Bermie Dizon, a pastor friend in Southern California who said, “Tommy is your ministry,” and Lenna Fox Smith, a Christian friend in Greenville, South Carolina, who said, “The Holy Spirit is working in Tommy.”

One dear Christian sister, Victoria Feazell, baby-sat Tommy one afternoon and noticed some strange behavior, and had the faith and courage to tell us, “I don’t know how to tell you this, but you have a problem.” During that horrible summer of 1997, we saw our son regress from age-appropriate development and descend into his own world. Some wonderful teen swimming instructors at Monrovia High School noticed that he had forgotten most of what he had learned the previous summer.

Victoria’s comments and Tom Jr.’s major regression set us off on a journey that led to his diagnosis of autism on Aug. 31, 1997, the same day that Princess Diana was killed in a car wreck. We remember because a neighbor came over to tell us about the wreck after we had returned from the doctor who made the official diagnosis.

The early days and years of autism were devastating. Now, we are just numb. One night, early on, Tom Jr. and I were lying in bed, and he said, “Dad, I’m scared.” It was the most coherent and heartfelt comment I ever heard from my son, and it was also the last. To this day, as Tom Jr. is 23, I have never had a real conversation with my son. Can you imagine if you never had a voice to explain or defend yourself?

On my 50th birthday, our daughter Elizabeth and Tom Jr. went to the McDonalds in Duarte, California (families of autistic children have exciting lives). Tom Jr. had major diarrhea (next to) not in the toilet. It was so bad I couldn’t tell the staff, and

I cleaned it up myself. Autism has many strange behaviors – one of which is spreading feces around a restroom. I cannot tell how many restrooms I have cleaned.

Early on, he would occasionally tear off his clothes in public. His is not a happy world, and neither is ours.

Did God cause Tom Jr. to be autistic? We don't think so. Our God is God our healer (Yahweh Rapha), not our God who makes people sick. Is it within God's will that Tom Jr. is autistic? Yes, of course. Romans 8:28 tells us: "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." We know that "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:20-21).

We do not believe sin was involved in our son's autism, and are greatly inspired by the healing of the man born blind. As Jesus "passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:1-3).

Someone told me that God is cruel to have done

this. Yet, neither the man born blind nor his parents were bitter against God. They had suffered a lifetime never hoping that his blindness would ever be taken away. They rejoiced at his healing. They were not angry about the years they all suffered, not knowing that he would be healed.

We pray that God will be glorified while Tom Jr. is autistic, and that God would be glorified in his healing.

We can relate to the father of the demon-possessed boy in Mark 9:17-18 (though Tom Jr. is not demon-possessed). "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." This sounds painfully similar to some autistic meltdowns.

Our situation seems so similar to the demoniac in Luke 8:26-33: " Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. When Jesus had stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.' For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time it had seized him. He was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would

break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert.)

“Jesus then asked him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Legion,’ for many demons had entered him. And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. Now a large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned.”

We took Tom Jr. to several ministers who had healing ministries. He was not healed, and according to one of these ministers, the reason could have been that we had not forgiven someone, or had unconfessed sin in our lives. Obviously we need to confess sin and repent, and forgive others from the heart, but if our healing depends on our righteousness, we and our loved ones have no hope.

All who sought healing from Christ during his earthly ministry were healed. The Gospels do not contain any accounts of Jesus denying healing to anyone who approached him. He did not tell anyone they needed to learn from this trial of sickness, repent of an unconfessed sin or to forgive someone and then they would be healed. We have as much faith as those Christ healed.

The days of Jesus earthly ministry were the days of many, many miracles. These miracles showed that Jesus was the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus told the disciples of John the Baptist, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard:

the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them” (Luke 7:22).

What is autism like?

We flew back to Evansville, Indiana, for Christmas at Grandma’s house a few months after Tom Jr.’s diagnosis, and woke him up on Christmas day, but he showed no interest in seeing his presents. At home he would walk by a television without even noticing what was on. We have lived through 18 years of autistic meltdowns – in private and in public, and no real conversations with our son. Progress, when it occurs, is painfully slow.

Autistic people have strange behaviors. We must have the only young man who is obsessed with doing laundry, taking out the trash and making beds. We can get up from bed in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, and by the time we get back, Tom Jr. has made the bed. Tom Jr. is far more helpful than I was when I was growing up.

We did not get to experience our son learning how to play football, basketball and baseball and all the other wonderful things about a boy growing up. As parents of an autistic son, we have some strange desires. We would rejoice if when we corrected our son, he would tell us: “Dad, that is the stupidest thing I have ever heard. No way am I going to do that.” We would say, “Thank you Lord! Our son is talking.” Next time your child is disrespectful to

you, give him a one-time break.

Sometimes our journey can be humorous. Sometimes we hide junk food or other items from him, and forget where the hiding place is. Frequently, Tommy knows the hiding place, finds the forbidden item, and brings it to us, or puts the item there in the first place.

In one of those glorious pre-autism moments, when my mom arrived at Los Angeles International Airport, I had Tom Jr. in my arms, and he asked her, "What is your name?" She replied, "Grandma," and asked what his name was. He replied "Booey," our nickname for him at the time.

I take Tom Jr. to Furman University to swim in an indoor pool. Had he not become autistic, he would be completing his college career at this time. Despite having lost the ability to do different swimming strokes, he is a much better swimmer than I am. How often I wish he could enjoy talking to the cute college girls we see there, but he appears to have no interest.

I tried to take him for bike rides on the Swamp Rabbit Trail. We would be passed by Tour de France wannabes yelling "On the left, on the left," which is totally meaningless to Tom Jr. I just cried. Even a bike ride is a challenge. Nothing is simple in autism.

However, we don't have to go far to see others in

worse shape than us. I pity those who do not know Christ and go through similar trials. How can you get through the trials of life without knowing him? We know that autism is temporary.

We are comforted and strengthened by regular, weekly fellowship in church, and pity those who do not make use of these fellowship opportunities. We are told in Hebrews 10:24-25: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." In many churches, members are encouraged to greet one another at the start of the worship service. How many people have encouraged us with a smile and a handshake, and how many people have we encouraged by showing we have made it through another week.

Our trips to the Publix supermarket in our neighborhood is always a joyful experience for us. Employees love Tom Jr., greet him by name and treat him, and us, royally. We have even joked about leaving Tom Jr. to Publix after we die because they treat us so well. All parents of disabled children worry about who will take care of their children when they are gone.

Costco is a fun experience for Tom Jr. and for us. He always insists on getting a box in our cart in which to carry our groceries, and the Costco employees are often way ahead of him, telling him

they have a box for him.

My sister, Jane Hanson, a Manhattan attorney, has encouraged us greatly in our battles with autism, and is paying for someone to teach Tom Jr. how to read.

We hope that when others see us, they see that through Christ we are making it through this trial. It takes super human (God-given) patience to make it through this trial. We have learned to care about others, but often we seem to be in a black hole (an object in space so dense that its escape velocity exceeds the speed of light) of self concern.

Ancestry means a lot to me

It is a major desire of mine that my Hanson family name continues. Tom Jr. is our only son. I am the only son of my late father, Samuel Carleton Hanson Jr. (1926-1994), now in heaven, and he was the only son of his father, Samuel Carleton Hanson Sr. (1893-1964). He was the youngest son of his father Samuel Conrad Hanson (1850-1909). By the grace of God, my lineage has not died out.

I am the proud descendant of my Revolutionary War Patriot ancestor Private John Hanson of Virginia (1760-1818). His father was born in Londonderry, Ireland, in 1725. Raymond Hanson wrote of his departure for America: “ ‘Tis a long way from Londonderry, Ireland, and a lengthy time

span, beginning in 1725. This is the tale of an English soldier who left the Redcoats in Ireland when assigned to aid in the execution of a fellow soldier, listened intently to his conscience and made the decision to leave Europe. But not without consultation with his young lady friend, a member of the nobility in Ireland who agreed to his decision and at the same time agreed to become his wife without benefit of getting permission from her parents, members of the Irish Landed Gentry.”

Autism is devastating on many fronts, especially emotionally and financially. It knocks one parent out of the work force to take care of the child, and we live in a two income society. It splits 90 percent of marriages. A Christian brother with a child with a different disability said it is rare to see two parents seeking help for their child. Our hopes have been dashed several times over the years as we tried the latest supposed cure. Who is going to take care of our disabled child when we are gone – what all parents of disabled children worry about. It is our prayer.

To others who battle autism or any other disability, we wish the following: “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Colossians 1:11-12).

About the Author

Thomas C. Hanson Sr., M.A., M.A.R.

Thomas C. Hanson was born in Evansville, Indiana, March 18, 1955. After his freshman year at Purdue University, he transferred to a small (now-defunct) college in Texas, and got interested in journalism. After a brief stint in Alabama doing community brochures for various cities in the Southeast, he moved to California and became the editor of a denominational publication. He earned master's degrees in journalism from Cal State Fullerton and Biblical Studies from Azusa Pacific University. Now, he has 42 years of print media experience, and (sadly), 19 years of experience dealing with autism.

Tom and his wife, Tina, and two children, Elizabeth, and Tom Jr., who is autistic. In 2006 the family moved to Greenville, South Carolina.



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