

## COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A CHILD

By: Sandra Harrison

My topic of coping with the death of a Child is one that I wish no one would need. But as long as there is life, there is death. This is the way that I coped with the loss of my child. We're all different and we handle things in different ways and in our own time.

Psalms 50:15 states, "*And call upon Me in the day of trouble, I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me.*" Hopefully my story will give honor to God and encouragement to you.

My story began in February 1992, when my four month old daughter Rachel began to run a fever that wouldn't go away. At first it was attributed to her 4 month shots, then a virus, next an ear infection and even after several rounds of antibiotics the fever did not go away.

After two days in Decatur General receiving IV drugs, her fever did not diminish. We were sent to Children's Hospital in Birmingham. My husband and I, along with my mother, took her there. I was terrified of this unknown territory we were entering, but I knew that God was with us. Andy and I both had been raised in the Church and we believed He would be with us no matter how complicated our life would be.

Once at Children's Hospital, Rachel began a battery of tests that included nuclear medicine, cat-scans, x-rays, metabolism checks, bone marrow aspirates, spinal taps and others. She was tested for every disease that could cause a fever. It was comforting to us knowing that some of the best doctors in the country were trying to find the source of her illness. It took several weeks for Rachel to be tested and while we waited for the results, God showed us in many ways that we weren't alone. Cards lined a wall of her room, phone calls and visits from family and friends helped to keep us going.

After almost four weeks of testing, Rachel was diagnosed with FEL Syndrome. It's a very rare disease, but fatal. The only treatment was chemotherapy but eventually

the patient would become immune to the 'chemo and death would follow. We were devastated. It seemed that all of our hopes and dreams for our child were vaporizing right before us. Through all of this however, we held strong to each other and our faith in God. We constantly prayed to God for strength and guidance for ourselves and for our child to be made well. We requested others to pray for us as well.

Weekly chemotherapy treatments gave us six extra months with Rachel. During that time, we were able to function almost normally. We took trips to the Gulf and the 'Smokes and just enjoyed family time. We were able to take her to Church and she was able to go to Bible class. She was the only one in there but she enjoyed it.

After six months, Rachel became immune to her 'chem. Although another type of chemotherapy was tried, three weeks after her first birthday, Rachel died. As she passed from this life into the glory of God, I held her and Andy held the two of us. Andy and I both agree that when it happened, we both felt a great amount of comfort, love and the knowledge that everything would be all right. You see, God knows just what we needed at that time. Remember, He had a Son who died on the cross for us. He understood what we were feeling. I'm sure everyone remembers the Oklahoma City bombing and so many killed. At one of the television memorial services, the preacher said he had been asked, "Where was God when this happened?" The preacher replied, "God's was the first heart to break when that bomb went off." Those words rang so true to me. They pictured how I thought God felt for me when Rachel died.

In coping with Rachel's death, I think the key thing was that when she was diagnosed, I did the hardest thing but also the easiest thing I could do. I remember it was as if it were yesterday. Crying my heart out, I went to God in prayer and said, "You wanted my burdens and you have to take this one. I don't want it and I can't handle it alone. There's no way I can make it through this without you." And I don't take it back.

So often we will give God the burden in our life just to turn around and say, "I think I can handle this after all." But we can't. A friend once said that, "It's amazing what God can do in my life when I don't interfere." Once I gave my burden to God, I began to experience peace. The situation has not changed, my daughter was still gravely ill but God was with me constantly.

He carried me when I did not have the strength to stand-alone. As in the poem, "Footprints in the Sand", I know that I can look back and see the one set of prints where He carried me at this time in my life. After Rachel's passing, more than ever before, my husband and I drew strength from each other and from God. We had known from the start that this could draw us closer together, make us stronger, or it could tear us apart.

We were determined to stay together. After her death, we had to learn to be a couple again - learn really to try to live a *normal* life again. Once again, God used our family and friends to help us continue. My sister would not let me stay alone until I was ready - so I followed her around everywhere.

A dear and wonderful lady, Lynne Weatherford, surprised us with a special portrait of Rachel. The portrait showed Rachel - safe in the arms of Jesus. Lynne herself has a son with MD, so her gift was incredible and such a comfort to us. Each day I am reminded that my child was no longer sick, weak or in pain but now safe in the arms of our Lord. How could I wish her back? I could not. A beautiful new rocking chair was donated to our Church nursery in memory of Rachel. On the first anniversary of her death, friends brought us a magnolia tree to plant in her memory.

Also, I learned that it was okay to cry when I wanted to, but I could also laugh. Tears and laughter often go hand in hand and I consider them great gifts from God. At first there were many more tears than there was laughter. But as time progressed, tears turned to gentle smiles when I remembered Rachel. It was not that I missed her any less, just that I had come to accept her death and that she was in a much better place.

Spending time in God's word was both help and a comfort. When reading Job, I thought of how he never gave up. He continued to praise God through his many trials.

David was another example. He was a man after God's own heart, yet in the illness of his and Bath Sheba's child, you can see his suffering. But when the child died, his whole attitude changed. In II Samuel 12:22-23, David tells his servants why. "When the child was a live, I fasted and wept; for I said, Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me, that the child may live. But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." I have the peace of knowing my child is with the Lord and so I try to live my life that I may be with her again when my time on earth is done.

My story really does not end with Rachel's death. A line from a popular movie says, "When God closes a door, He opens a window." Advised by doctors that any other children we had would probably have this disease, we decided that we would not try to have any more biological children. We knew that we had love to give and Rachel had just given us a taste of that.

We decided to pursue adoption. Again, we requested prayers from all we knew that God would bless us in this endeavor. On February 28, 1995, God answered our

prayers and our daughter, Alyssa Faith, made her entrance into the world. Once placed in our arms, it did not matter if she was our biological child or not, she was OURS. Alyssa was not a substitute for Rachel but our precious daughter in her own right.

From the time that Alyssa was 3½ years old, we actively sought to adopt another child. Our son Daniel Andrew was born on September 21, 2000 and completed our family. This was, however, after at least four different birth mothers had changed their minds. Through it all, we gave God the glory and He gave us the strength we needed.

When I look back, I do not know why life happened as it did. While watching Alyssa and Daniel on day, it struck me that had Rachel lived, they would not be in our lives. Alyssa once said that she wished “Cissy Rachel” were alive so she could play with her. Andy and I looked at each other and told her that if “Cissy Rachel” were alive, we would not have her or Daniel. Alyssa did not like that at all! My mother has told me that she sometimes talk to Rachel, to let her know that we still love her. She has told Rachel that God knew that there was a girl and a boy who were going to need her Mommy and Daddy to take care of them. I believe Rachel knows that.

Now I see, that perhaps I went through what I did so that I can help others. Maybe I can help those who have lost a child or those who are considering adoption. At first, talking with others who have lost a child was too hard. It brought back to many painful memories. Now that time has past and I have grown, I hope if the need arises that I can be of help. In addition, I am more than happy to talk with someone who has questions about adoption.

I want to leave you with this poem that was read at Rachel’s funeral and sums up so many thoughts and feelings about the loss of a child.

