



BY TONY DUNGY

Valuable Lessons from my Sons

Coach Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts gave the following speech at the 2006 Athletes in Action NFL Super Bowl breakfast in Detroit.

I'm going to illustrate three things I've learned about the Lord, and I'm going to use my boys as illustrations. I'm going to start with my middle son, Eric. He's 14 years old, and if you watch a lot of football, you've probably seen him on the sidelines of Colts games. He looks more like me than my other two boys do. As a matter of fact, he looks so much like me, when I look at him I see myself at 14, and I see a lot of the same things. Eric is very, very competitive — ultracompetitive. He is focused on sports to where it's almost a problem. He's superemotional to where it's almost scary.

Now, those of you who see me now would say, "Wait a minute, that doesn't sound a lot like you." But it was me at 14. I grew up not too far from here in Jackson, Mich., and there are some people in this room who knew me when I was 14 years old. So when I look at Eric now at 14, and I look at myself, that's one of the things I know about God.

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I know how powerful His Spirit is; I know that He can change people; and I know that He'll do that if we allow Him to, and I really believe He's going to do that with Eric as he grows.

The second way I've seen God's hand at work is through our youngest son, Jordan. He's 5 years old. Jordan was born with a very rare neurological condition. It's called congenital insensitivity to pain. There are only two or three cases in the whole United States. It's a little more prevalent in other countries, but there have only been about three diagnosed in the United States. Basically what happens, he is missing the conductors that allow the nerve signals to go from his body to his brain. And that sounds like it's good at the beginning, but I promise you it's not.

We've learned a lot about pain in the last five years since we've had Jordan, and we've learned that some hurts are really necessary for kids. Pain is necessary, really, for kids to find

out the difference between what's good and what's harmful.

Jordan loves cookies. But in his mind, if they're good out on the plate they're even better in the oven. So he will go right in the oven, if my wife's not looking when she's baking them, reach in, take the rack out, take the pan out, burn his hands, eat the cookie that's too hot, burn his tongue and never feel it. And he doesn't know that's bad for him.

When we go to the park, he'll go on the slide. All kids know it's fun to go up the slide and slide down, and he has fun doing that, too. To him, it's just as much fun jumping off from the top. He has no fear of anything, so we constantly have to watch him.

We've also learned that pain actually helps the body heal — something I didn't know until talking with the doctors, that you get an injury, your brain senses there is pain, and it sends the right healing agents naturally to that spot because it senses something is wrong. Without that

sensation of feeling something is wrong, Jordan's body doesn't send those healing agents. Consequently, he's got cuts from June and July that haven't healed yet.

So that's what we've seen and, really, why does the Lord allow pain in your life? Why do bad things happen to good people? If God is a God of love, why does He allow these hurtful things to happen?

Well, we've learned that a lot of times, because of that pain, that little temporary pain, you learn what's harmful; you learn to fear the right things. Pain sometimes lets us know we've got a condition that needs to be healed, and pain inside sometimes lets us know that spiritually we're not quite right and we need to be healed. And God will send that healing agent right to the spot. Sometimes pain is the only thing that will turn us, as kids, back to the Father.

But I think the most important lesson I've learned about the Lord, I learned from my oldest son, James. James would have been 19, but he died right before Christmas.

James was a Christian, and he was, by far, the most sensitive, the most compassionate, of all our boys — very, very compassionate, very sensitive. As most teenage boys today, James was getting a lot of messages from the world that maybe that's not the way to be, and you've all seen them on TV, in the movies, the music they listen to, the magazines that they are able to read, and you get those conflicting signals and mixed signals.

And he was struggling very much with how you should respond to the world, and he ended up taking his life right before Christmas, and it was

tough. It was very, very painful. But as painful as it was, there were some good things that came out of it.

When I was at the funeral, I talked about one of my biggest regrets. James was home for Thanksgiving and was leaving, going back to school and going back to work, just the normal process. You don't think about it. I said, "Hey, I'll see you later." My daughter took him to the airport. We just exchanged, "See you later," and that was the last time I saw him.

I talked to him on the phone a lot but never saw him again, and I shared at the funeral that my biggest regret was that I didn't give him a big hug the very last time I saw him.

I met a guy the next day after the funeral. He said, "You know, I was there, I heard you talking, I took off work today. I called my son, and I said, 'I'm going to take you to the movies, and we're

going to spend some time and go to dinner.'"

That was a real, real blessing to me. I've gotten a lot of letters like that from people who have heard what I said and have told me, "Hey, you brought me a little closer to my son," or "a little closer to my daughter," and that is a tremendous blessing.

We were able to donate some of James' organs to Organ Donors Program. We got a letter back about two weeks ago that two people had received his corneas and now can see. That has been a tremendous blessing.

I had the privilege of talking to a young man who is James' age who was going through some struggles; he didn't know if he could make it, and we talked for about a week. His voice just didn't sound good, but every day it sounded a little bit better and better. About 10 days later he called me back and asked me how I was doing, and I could just feel

in his voice he was doing better, and he was going to make it, and that was a tremendous blessing.

I got a letter from a girl in our church who had grown up with James, and she said, "You know, we've been going to the same church in Tampa for all these years. I sat there in church every Sunday but never really knowing if there was a God or not. I came to the funeral because I knew James. When I saw what happened at the funeral, and your family and the celebration and how it was handled, that was the first time I realized there has to be a God, and I accepted Christ into my life, and my life's been different since that day."

And that was an awesome blessing. **tpe**

TONY DUNGY is head coach of the Indianapolis Colts. Printed with permission of Tony Dungy.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



Tony Dungy (with wife Lauren and CBS announcer Jim Nantz) accepts the Lombardi Trophy for his team's Super Bowl win in February.