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## Lon Solomon: From burden to blessing

**Q&A** | Serving a special needs child changed a pastor for the better

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Joshua Yospy/The Washington Post/Getty Images  
**Lon Solomon**

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus who freely chose to come to earth to serve and save all who believe in Him. We often don't appreciate the importance of serving others until we have no choice but to do so. That's the experience of Lon Solomon, senior pastor at McLean Bible Church in Virginia for 34 years. He and his wife Brenda have three sons, seven grandchildren, and one daughter, Jill, whose birth and life led to the founding of Jill's House.

**Did the problems with Jill begin at her birth in 1992?** Everything at first seemed to be great, but then she started having seizures, and more seizures, six, eight, 10 a day. On our first Thanksgiving with her she had 19 grand mals before the turkey came out of the oven. We spent the whole weekend in the hospital.

**What was the cause?** We now know it's Dravet syndrome, a chromosomal aberration that leads to massive seizures and mental retardation, but doctors then did not know. Jill lost the ability to speak. No medicine worked. We didn't sleep through the night for years because she'd have seizures in the middle of the night. A hard time, and hard for our boys, because we couldn't keep up with their schedules and still try to keep Jill alive.

**How did this experience affect you?** I never had that kind of suffering in my family growing up. If I saw a disabled child on the street, I'd cross to the other side. I was a pretty shallow person, and this was a very painful, very difficult, don't-want-to-go-through-it-again, growth experience that I thank God for. I think I'm a better husband, better father, better pastor. I never used to cry, but now when parents tell me a story of their child, or even an aging loved one, I get it. God broke me down so I became more usable to Him.

**The Bible repeatedly gives us such stories.** God always broke down people before He used them: Moses, 40 years in the wilderness. David, seven years hiding in caves. Ruth and Naomi, losing their husbands. God has to break us before He can use us to the fullest.

**This suffering gospel seems the opposite of the prosperity gospel we often hear.** I don't buy into the prosperity gospel at all. God's general plan is to provide all kinds of benefits for His children, but Paul says in Philippians 1:29 we're privileged to share in the sufferings of Christ, because we learn things through suffering that we cannot learn through success. I never saw anybody get humble through success.

**At one point you viewed this whole experience with Jill as a curse, but now you see it as a privilege.** I regarded Jill as an imposition. I don't even know how the change happened—no epiphany moment—but when she was 8, 9, 10, I began to think, “Lord, I'm looking at this all wrong. You don't say in the Bible that serving other people leads to greatness, You say it is greatness.” Most of us get to serve an infant for a short period of time, and then they grow up, but most of us don't get to serve someone like an infant for 22 years. I change her diapers.

**When she went through—began having her period—can we talk about that?** We can. I mean, I changed her pads and stuff. You talk about an experience—I was like, “What in the world is this? Holy smokes, Brenda! Come here!” Now I do it and I don't even think about it. It's just part of serving my daughter, and I consider it a real privilege to serve her.

**In that sense the experience was helpful to you and Brenda, and helpful to the church. But what about Jill?** Yes—how's this fair to her? Those of us who believe in Jesus understand there's another side to the grave, and that God doesn't settle all accounts here. If He did, it would be very depressing. Jill's been willing to live this life that God gave her—she doesn't know she's disabled, people feed, dress, bathe, ride her around. God forgive us for judging other people's reality and seeing Jill as living a bad life, but there are limitations, and I believe God will settle up with Jill on the other side of eternity.

**‘Lord ... You don't say in the Bible that serving other people leads to greatness, You say it is greatness.’**

**Suffering with Jill went on and on and on.** Yes, but once Dravet sufferers get through puberty, they get better. Nobody knows why. We had 16 straight years of difficulty, but then Jill's seizures started diminishing. Today at 22 she can go a month without a seizure, and can communicate a little with us. We have a Velcro board in the house and pictures for “Walk,” “Eat,” “Go for a van ride,” “Get the mail”—she gets the mail every day—“Separate the silverware,” “Go to Target.”

**How did Jill's House start?** Jill was about 3 and we had a meeting with parents in our situation—almost all moms, because a lot of dads fly the coop in these situations. I could see in their

faces that they were tired, discouraged, hopeless. They needed a break. I said to Brenda, “Somebody needs to help these people!” She turned and said, “If you care so much about these people, then why doesn’t McLean Bible Church do something to help?”

**So the church did.** We started Access Ministry, a Sunday ministry to allow people with children with disabilities to come to church, and then Breakout and Breakaway, Saturday ministries to give people a break. Brenda’s long-term dream was to establish Jill’s House, which would provide overnight respite for a family: You could drop your child off after school, the child would spend the night, and you’d get a complete night free during the week to spend with the other children, to sleep, to go out with your husband or your wife.

**It took 14 years for that to happen?** The county, the neighbors, the zoning—but God had it built, and it opened its doors in 2010. Six or eight Jill’s Houses exist around the country. Our goal is to see a place like this in every community in America. The kids love coming to the indoor pool and all kinds of activities, because these children never get to do these things. It’s hard to take a child with a wheelchair to a pool by yourself.

**Has it become a blessing to the whole city?** Ninety percent of the families who use it have no relation to McLean Bible Church. We have Muslim, Jewish, atheist families, and we’re hoping to break down that wall of suspicion. They ask, “Why are you guys doing this for us? We don’t come to your church.” We’ve had the privilege of leading so many of these parents and children to Christ.

—For the story of how Lon Solomon himself came to Christ, please see “[From nominal Judaism to the drug culture to Christ](http://www.worldmag.com/2014/12/from_nominal_judaism_to_the_drug_culture_to_christ) [[http://www.worldmag.com/2014/12/from\\_nominal\\_judaism\\_to\\_the\\_drug\\_culture\\_to\\_christ](http://www.worldmag.com/2014/12/from_nominal_judaism_to_the_drug_culture_to_christ)].” For information about other respite care centers, see “[We were exhausted](http://www.worldmag.com/2012/11/we_were_exhausted) [[http://www.worldmag.com/2012/11/we\\_were\\_exhausted](http://www.worldmag.com/2012/11/we_were_exhausted)],” WORLD, Dec. 1, 2012.