

GOD'S GRACE *By Brock Rexus*

Adrienne, my wife, and I were lukewarm Christians, producing little fruit. Our lives were chaotic, with both of us working and staying on top of kindergarten and preschool activities. That changed in October 2006 when we took our youngest son, Treffen, for his 10-month checkup. Upon hearing a small heart murmur the doctor advised further testing.

Treffen had a hole in his heart big enough to require surgery. When he failed to overcome a cold a week later, we took him to a pediatrician. Alarmed by his struggle to breathe, she immediately sent us to the emergency room. Treffen was in heart failure – and had been his whole life. He had an atrioventricular canal defect (ACV) complete – multiple holes in the septum that divides the heart – and only one valve instead of two. Normally this type of congenital defect would be found in utero and repaired shortly after birth. Furthermore, Treffen's heart was huge, even

in comparison to other AVC defect babies. It could be too late for surgery if the arteries leading to the lungs had already grown too big and hard in an attempt to resist the unnatural blood flow they were getting from the heart.

Thankfully, tests showed his arteries were healthy enough to tolerate the surgery, although his lungs were in pretty bad shape. So, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving Treffen underwent his first open heart surgery. Escorted down a sterile, winding hallway, we gave our baby a big hug and kissed him goodbye before handing him over to a nurse. I caught an innocent, playful look in his eyes as we struggled to turn away. He had no idea what was about to happen.

They would cut through Treffen's sternum, disconnect his heart, and pump all of the blood out of his body into a machine to oxygenate it before returning it to his body – all while trying to rebuild his heart. The surgeon had difficulty creating a functioning mitral valve, but thought his "fix" might buy a couple of years. Relieved, family members flew home.

Sadly, the heart did not function well enough to let the lungs heal. Unable to sleep, Adrienne succumbed to

monitor watching, startling at each little alarm, noticing the helplessness in Treffen's eyes when he would briefly come out of sedation. Another surgery was scheduled. Because of his failing lungs and the stress of back-to-back open-heart surgeries, the risks were greater.

Our parents flew back. After more than six hours of surgery, the surgeon excitedly showed us the "before" and "after" X-rays. Within hours Treffen's heart had shrunk significantly and his lungs improved dramatically. A few days later they inserted a pacemaker and took Treffen off the ventilator. He was doing so well I convinced Adrienne to attend a church staff party and spend a night in her own bed. It sounded like Treffen might even be home for Christmas.

Instead, the next morning we learned the leak was back – worse than ever. Treffen was scheduled for emergency surgery. The risks were high for a third open heart surgery in as many weeks. For the first time since we entered the hospital, the staff let Adrienne

hold Treffen. She rocked him all night.

I knew God had a plan but sometimes kids, even babies, die. I didn't know if tomorrow we would have our little boy. Amazingly, instead of asking God why, I praised Him. Just before surgery we whispered in Treffen's ear one last time.

Seeing our son wheeled back from surgery "alive" was miraculous in itself; but, the real miracle happened during surgery. They were now forced to insert an artificial mitral valve in Treffen, but they don't make them small enough for babies. Treffen's defect had gone undiagnosed so long, however, his heart had grown large enough to accommodate the valve, and, instead of being able to put in only the smallest of valves (17mm), they were able to give him the equivalent of a 21mm valve. He shouldn't have to have another surgery until he's between 70 to 90 pounds. The surgeon hopes that surgery will be his last.

The cardiologist shakes his head in disbelief at how well Treffen is doing. He says Treffen's body has an abnormally high ability to compensate, a fact he calls the "body's reserve." We call it "Gods' grace."



Risks were high for Treffen's third open heart surgery in as many months.



Treffen Rexus (on right) poses with his parents and brothers, Liam and Meier. The Rexus family attends Highlands Church in Phoenix, Arizona, where Brock serves as media director. Treffen was listed several times in the Women's Ministries weekly prayer e-newsletter, *In Touch*.

