

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 6 AUGUST 2017



Image: Courtesy of Joni and Friends

On July 30, 1967, a teenage girl went with her sister to a beach on the Chesapeake Bay and suffered a diving accident that rendered her quadriplegic. Today, Joni Eareckson Tada leads an international ministry, advocates for those with disabilities, and is a sought-after speaker, best-selling author, and radio host. Last weekend marked the 50-year anniversary of the accident, and Christianity Today connected with Joni to discuss how God has worked in and through her life over the past five decades.

After 50 Years in a Wheelchair, I Still Walk with Jesus

Joni Eareckson Tada interviewed by Kelli N Trujillo

At the time of your diving accident, you were just 17 years old. If you could speak to the young woman you were at that age, what would you most want to say?

As a young girl I was so distracted, enamoured, fascinated, infatuated. The world was before me and I had so many options. If I could go back, I'd take myself by the shoulders and shake them and say, "Look at me, Joni, listen: Love Jesus more, obey him more. Follow him more closely – not at a distance. Don't second guess the Holy Spirit's whispers and convictions in your heart. Don't make your own decisions without checking in with God – follow him much more closely."

How do you feel as you reflect over the past 50 years?

Just the other day I was reading 1 Peter 5:10, where Peter says, "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace...will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you." Honestly, I'm amazed

that the last 50 years feel like only "a little while." Maybe God does that when we finally do love Jesus more, when we finally do follow him more closely. Maybe he erases all the horror, all the despair, all the depression of the past when we learn how to trust God. He pushes into the background all the terrible times of anguish, and he brings forward the highlights – the moments of hope, peace, and growth. As I look back over 50 years, I just see God at work. That's pretty exciting.

Throughout your journey with quadriplegia, you've interacted with people who link suffering to sin or who've taught that having "enough faith" leads to miraculous healing. What appeal did this sort of "faith healing" initially have for you as a young woman?

When I was first injured, I just wanted out of my wheelchair. I wanted to walk again, I wanted to have hands that worked. So I followed every scriptural injunction: I was anointed with oil, I went to the elders, I confessed sin. I would call my friends up on the telephone and insist, "Hey, the next time you're going to see me, I'm going to be on my feet. Have faith with me, believe with me."

I remember going to [faith healer] Kathryn Kuhlman's services. The one that sticks in my mind was the first one I went to. The place was packed. There were several thousand people and I was sitting in the wheelchair section. I was watching Kuhlman preach, testimonies were shared, and music was offered up from the platform. Then the spotlight centred on the corner of the ballroom where healings were happening and my heart started pumping. The spotlight switched to another corner, and I was getting more excited, thinking that maybe the spotlight will come and hit the wheelchair section. But it never did.

In fact, the ushers came early to escort those of us in wheelchairs out of the event so as not to create a traffic jam. I remember sitting there in the line of people waiting at the elevator and all of us were quiet. I looked up and down that line and I thought, *Something's wrong with this picture. Why is it that the people who needed healing most obviously were the ones that the spotlight missed?* I realized I was getting it wrong – the Bible must have something else to say about this.

How has your view of healing changed?

One of the first things I read about healing that really helped was from Mark 1. Jesus has been healing all day long. Finally, everybody goes away and night falls. The crowds come back early the next morning and Simon Peter goes looking for Jesus because he's not to be found – he's somewhere praying. When they find him, Simon says, "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus' reply to Peter is so amazing. He doesn't say, "Oh, quick, let me go back down the hill and help all these sick people." Instead he says to Peter, "Let us go

somewhere else – to the nearby villages – where I must preach there also. For this is why I have come.”

I read those words, “This is why I have come,” and I began to see Jesus’ priorities of healing differently. The same man who healed withered hands and blind eyes is also the one who said, “If that hand causes you to sin, cut it off, or if that eye leads you astray, gouge it out.” God is interested in a *deeper* healing.

There really are more important things in life than walking. There are more important things in life than having the use of your hands. And that is having a heart that’s free of the grip of sin and pride and self-centeredness. I’m not saying I’ve arrived – I’ve got a long way to go – but I’m on my way, and that’s a very good feeling.

Do you counsel those who are suffering due to disease or disability to pray for physical healing?

Yes, I think it’s so important to. In fact, the Book of James tells us to. We *should* follow every one of those scriptural injunctions I mentioned a moment ago. God may well miraculously heal, and if he does, it’s not only to the benefit of that person but it’s to God’s glory. It’s a sneak preview of the day when the eyes of everyone who is blind will be opened, and the ears of all those who are deaf will be unstopped, and the tongues of all those who can’t speak will shout for joy, and all lame people will leap like deer. However, I think those kind of miraculous healings are often the exception rather than the rule.

In addition to quadriplegia, you’ve endured stage-three breast cancer and currently suffer from severe chronic pain. In your experience, how can Christians walk in the tension between accepting suffering that may come into our lives and seeking healing or relief from God?

I memorized a quote from William Law many, many years ago. He said, “Receive every inward and outward trouble, every disappointment, every trial, every uneasiness, every darkness and desolation with both your hands, as a blessed opportunity...of dying to self, and entering into a fuller fellowship with your Saviour. Look at no outward or inward trouble in any other view; reject every other thought about it; and you will find that the day of your distress will become the blessed day of your (spiritual) prosperity.” That’s huge in the life of the believer who suffers: You can take pain as an opportunity to die to yourself and live to Jesus – and you don’t have to break your neck to do it.

You’ve vocally opposed assisted suicide laws, including in your home state of California, noting that laws of this kind expose “a fundamental fear of pain and disability.” How do you see this fear impact the way we as a culture respond to those with debilitating illness, chronic suffering, or disability?

People have a fear of pain. People have a fear of dying. Fear is what has driven the legalization of euthanasia – but fear should never ever be the foundation for social policy. It should not be society’s role to help people end their lives.

Most people, when they are at the end stages of life, are afraid of pain, they’re afraid of abandonment, they’re afraid of isolation, they don’t want to be a burden to their families. But all these issues can be addressed. They are problems that have solutions – like better pain management, better support services, better family counselling. Let’s pour resources into making it easier for people to *live* and not to die.

Compassion is often a motivating factor for those who favour physician-assisted suicide...In your view, how should Christians *rightly* understand and express compassion toward those who are suffering?

The first thing Christians ought to do before they even work on compassion is get a biblical view on *suffering*. Most Christians would rather escape, avoid it, drug it, medicate it, divorce it, institutionalize it – do anything but live with it.

We need to embrace the God who is found in suffering. He is the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. He’s the Lord who was impaled on a cross. We’d rather Jesus be mild-mannered and mild-tempered, and we’d rather listen to him preach about lilies in a field of flowers. We don’t want to go down that hard path of Calvary. But once we do, I think *then* we can gain compassion. Because *compassion* means “with suffering.” Christian compassion means suffering with the sufferings of Christ.

I know this: Compassion is *not* three grams of *phenobarbital* in the veins of someone who feels like ending their life. Compassion is journeying alongside that person who is despairing and ascribing positive meaning to their pain, bringing them up out of social isolation, journeying with them, and helping them resolve their issues.

One aspect of your ministry, *Joni and Friends*, is equipping churches to develop disability ministries. What gifts do those with disabilities bring to the church?

If our churches are looking for God’s power to show up in our congregations, 2 Corinthians 12 tells us that God’s power shows up best in weakness. People with disabilities bring to the church a great audio-visual aid of how to deal with hardship. They show the church how God’s power can be released through weakness, and we all need examples of that. We need to see people who are smiling and persevering and enduring through their hardships.



Kelli B Trujillo is the mother of three children and lives with her husband in Indianapolis. She is a graduate of Valparaiso University with honours in both English Literature and

Humanities. She is an award-winning writer and the author of a dozen Christian books.

Excerpt from an article that first appeared on ChristianityToday.com on 28 July 2017. Used by permission of Christianity Today, Carol Stream, IL 60188.