

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 13 AUGUST 2017



We feature this article from *Tabletalk* magazine (2006) as a further tribute to the recent 50th Anniversary of *Joni Eareckson Tada* being in a wheelchair (July 30, 1967).

Turning Evil on Its Head

Joni Eareckson Tada

Ask my husband; I am no theologian. I've never read Calvin's Institutes all the way through, nor do I know Greek or Hebrew. But years ago, when I snapped my neck under the weight of a dive into shallow water, permanent and total paralysis smashed me up against the study of God.

Up until then, I was content to wade ankle-deep in the things of God, but when a severed spinal cord left my body limp and useless, I was hoisted into a dark, bottomless ocean. In the wee, sleepless hours of my early injury, I wrestled against my Reformed upbringing – no longer were my questions academic, and this was no casual question-and-answer session in a living room Bible study.

Lying in bed paralyzed, I fought off claustrophobia with hard-hitting questions. "Let me get this straight, God. When bad things happen, who's behind them, You or the Devil? Are you permitting this or ordaining it? I'm still a young Christian; if You're so loving, why treat Your children so mean?"

That was over thirty-eight years ago. Not once in those years has God been mean. What's more, He has satisfied my questions with an intimacy, softness, and sweetness of fellowship with the Saviour that I wouldn't trade for anything – not even walking. I still leave the Hebrew and Greek to the experts, but years of study have convinced me that God knows what He's about.

I want you to know I'm Reformed to the roots – Reformed Episcopalian growing up, and a PCA (Presbyterian Church in America) church member now.

The fact that my crazy life is nestled safely under God's overarching decrees is, to me, the best of comforts. But God has showed me that when accidents happen, it's okay to call them accidents. Even the Bible does. When babies die, when whole populations starve, when young girls break their necks, God weeps for His world, "for He does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men" (Lamentations 3:33). My spinal cord injury was a terrible accident.

But the Bible insists on another truth simultaneously. When all these things happen, when famines and crib deaths occur, when snake bites and gas station robberies and pistol-whippings happen, God has not taken His hands off the wheel for a nanosecond. Psalm 103:19 is pithy and powerful: "His kingdom rules over all." He considers these awful – and often evil – things tragedies and He takes no delight in misery, but He is determined to steer them and use suffering for His own ends.

And those ends are happy. God is heaven-bent on inviting me to share in His joy, peace, and power. But there's a catch. God only shares His joy on His terms, and those terms call for us, in some measure, to suffer as His beloved Son did while on earth. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

Those steps lead us into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings where we become "like him in his death"; that is, we daily take up our cross and die to the sins He died for on His cross (Luke 9:23; Philippians 3:10).

When suffering sandblasts us to the core, the true stuff of which we are made is revealed. Suffering lobbs a hand-grenade into our self-centeredness, blasting our soul bare – but then, we can be better bonded to the Saviour. Our

afflictions have helped make us holy. And we are never more like Christ – never more filled with His joy, peace, and power – than when sin is uprooted from our lives.

Does this mean God delights in my spinal cord injury? Was He rubbing His hands in glee when I took that dive off the raft into shallow water? Of course not. He may work "all things" together for my good, but that does not mean a spinal cord injury is, in itself, good (Romans 8:28).

God permits all sorts of things He doesn't approve of. In fact, in a world of evil and wickedness, He allows others to do what He would never do: He didn't steal Job's camels or entice the Sabeans or Chaldeans to wreak havoc, yet He was able to erect a "fence" around Satan's fury to bring ultimate good out of the Devil's wickedness. My friend and mentor Steve Estes once

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told me, "Satan may power the ship of evil, but God steers it to serve His own ends and purposes."

So I could ask, "Was my diving accident God's fault?" and be assured that although He is sovereign, no, it was not His fault. Was it an assault from the Devil? Yes, it possibly was. Or I may press further, "Is it the consequence of living in a fallen, wicked world, and not the direct assault of either the Devil or God?" and learn that this scenario may be the most likely. Whichever the schematic, I have the comfort and confidence that the entire matter was under God's overarching decrees.

Besides, how God allowed for my accident to happen is not the point. The point is, my suffering has taught me to "be done with sin," putting behind me the peevishness, small-minded, self-focused "Joni" to mature into the "Joni" He has destined me to be, honed and polished by years of quadriplegia (1 Peter 4:1).

I'm not saying it's easy. Actually, it's getting harder. These thin, tired bones are beginning to bend under the weight of decades of paralysis. But I have to remember that the core of God's plan is to rescue me from sin, even up to my dying breath.

My pain and discomfort are not His ultimate focus – He cares about these things, but they are merely symptoms of the real problem. God cares most not about making my life happy, healthy, and free of trouble, but about teaching me to hate my transgressions and to keep growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus.

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God lets me continue to feel much of sin's sting through suffering while I'm heading for heaven – and this constantly reminds me of what I am being delivered from, exposing sin for the poison it is.

In short, one form of evil – suffering – is turned on its head to defeat another form of evil – our sin – all to the praise of God's wisdom and glory! Is the cost too great? The price of pain too high? Not when you consider that "this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

I'm convinced my response to my wheelchair has a direct bearing on my capacity for joy, worship, and service in heaven. Of all the things I may waste here on earth, I do not want to waste my quadriplegia! Earth provides my one chance to give my Saviour a "sacrifice of praise," demonstrating to the heavenlies that Jesus Christ is supremely worthy of my loyalty and love (Hebrews 13:15).

One day God will close the curtain on evil and, with it, all suffering and sorrow. Until then, I'll keep remembering something else Steve Estes once told me as he rested his hand on my wheelchair: "God permits

what He hates to accomplish what He loves." I can smile knowing God is accomplishing what He loves in my life – Christ in me, the hope of glory.



Joni Eareckson Tada is married to Ken. They serve together in "Joni and Friends" joniandfriends.org an international ministry that reaches families affected by disability with the gospel of Christ.

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Joni's DVD, Books, and Booklets

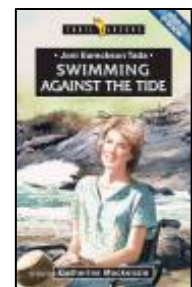
These selections are **available on the Bookstall** at St David's on Sunday or at the Church Office through the week. For further resources see koorong.com.



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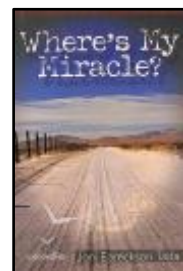


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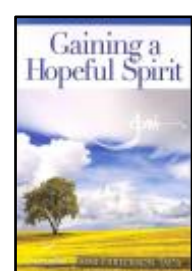


Children's book of Joni's story \$10

(We have one copy of this for the church library for people to borrow and one copy available for sale.)



Booklet \$6



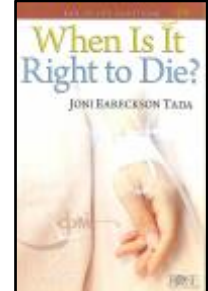
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