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*Equipping Christians to live by truth—
veritas—from God.*



*Finding God
in Our
Suffering*

A Powerful Message by
Joni Eareckson Tada

DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



Joni Eareckson Tada

Joni Eareckson Tada is the founder and chief executive officer of Joni and Friends. She has been in a wheelchair since a diving accident in 1967 left her a 17-year-old quadriplegic, unable to use not only her hands, but also her feet and legs. After two years of rehabilitation, Joni reentered the community with new skills and a fresh determination to help others in similar situations.

Mrs. Tada wrote of her experiences in her international bestselling biography, *Joni*, which was also made into a full-length feature film. Having been catapulted onto the national stage, Joni founded Joni and Friends in 1979 to accelerate Christian ministry in the disability community throughout the world. In 2007, a permanent headquarters for the ministry was established with the Joni and Friends International Disability Center, which administers programs that are affecting the lives of thousands of families around the globe who are affected by disability.

Mrs. Tada is a popular conference speaker both in the United States and overseas. She is also a widely published author and has received numerous awards and honors. She and her husband, Ken, have been married since 1982. Mr. Tada retired from 32 years of teaching in 2004 and ministers alongside Joni as they travel across the country and around the world.

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VERITAS



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Finding God in Our Suffering

*A*fter more than 40 years in a wheelchair, Mrs. Tada brought an incredible depth of personal experience and biblical wisdom to her Dallas Seminary chapel service message on the subject of suffering and God's plan for His people. Mrs. Tada also became a living illustration of the challenges of those who suffer when she had to pause in the middle of her message to be repositioned in her wheelchair so she could regain her breath. We believe you will also benefit greatly from her insights on a problem that all of us deal with in one form or another—the reality of pain and suffering.

One day Greg Barshaw, an elder at my church in southern California, received a phone call. It was from a pastor down the road who wanted to talk to Greg about a family with a severely disabled son who had been coming to his church.

This pastor said, “Greg, I was wondering if your church would want to take on this family and embrace them in a special way. Their little boy has multiple disabilities, and I think your church could best meet their needs and minister to this family.”

Greg was more than willing to help this family—but when he pressed this pastor further, he realized that there were more issues underlying this situation than just what met the eye.

Finally, the pastor on the other end of the phone said, “Well, to be honest, I am afraid that one day this boy’s father is going to walk into my study, clench his fists, and ask me to tell him why God has cursed him with this son.”

God’s ‘Scary’ Sovereignty

By now, of course, my church’s elder realized that this pastor had a tough time with the theology of suffering. I can understand his fear. God’s sovereignty is often a scary thing. Sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night with chronic pain, and you think to yourself, *Who is this God?*

I mean, does He say, “Into each life a little rain must fall,” and then aim a hose at the earth to see who gets the wettest?

That’s what I thought when I was first injured by taking that deep dive into shallow waters. My 17-year-old mind reasoned that if God had anything to do with this at all, He must have been caught off guard. Perhaps He was off somewhere listening to the prayers of more obedient saints. I didn’t know where God was, but I knew He wasn’t on that raft with me when I took that dive that dramatically changed my life.

Instead, I figured that it was probably Satan who came sneaking up behind me, while God had His back turned, and gave me a shove with his foot off the raft and into that shallow water. Then God turned around, and when He saw what had happened to me, it was a surprise to Him.

Then I imagined God had to go get His WD-40 and glue and come back to try and figure out how He was going to fix me up for my good. All in all, I figured God had been caught off guard while Satan threw a monkey wrench into God's plans for my life.

A Bigger View

This may have been the view of an injured 17-year-old girl, lying on a frame, frustrated and frightened. But a view like that made God as helpless and as much of a hostage of my handicap as I was. I realized that God had to be bigger than that. I had enough sense to know that the Bible probably contained answers for me. I had no idea where to look though.

After I got out of the hospital, a young man named Steve knocked on my door. He was a sophomore from the local high school where I graduated. He knew I had some tough questions about God; he didn't have all the answers, but he was willing to help me in a Bible study and assist me in tackling those tough questions about why this had happened to me.

The first thing I did was ask him, "Steve, how could this be God's will?" Just a year earlier, I had prayed that God would draw me closer to Him. How could my accident possibly be an answer to that prayer? If this was the way God treated His

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believers, how could we ever trust Him again?

It was a good question more than 40 years ago when I broke my neck, and it's still a good question today.

Perhaps you are asking that very question right now. If so, welcome to the real-life class called "A Theology of Suffering and Disability in the Church." I am not going to skate on the surface. My questions are gut-wrenching. Think of the times when suffering has ripped into your sanity, leaving you numb and bleeding. Can this be God's will for you?

My friend Steve said a very wise thing to me: "Joni, think of Jesus Christ. He is the best man who ever lived, and if we can find answers for His life, they should be able to work for your life. Do you think it was God's will for Jesus to suffer as He did? Well, I want you to look at all the awful things that happened to Jesus on that cross. It was the devil who inspired it. How can any of that be God's will? Injustice? Murder?"

Think of the times when suffering has ripped into your sanity, leaving you numb and bleeding. Can this be God's will for you?

Steve had me there. I could not conceive of those things being part of God's will. Then Steve flipped to Acts 4:28 and read the verse to me about the fact that those who crucified Jesus were doing what God's power and will had decided beforehand would happen. The world's worst murder suddenly becomes the world's only salvation. The devil slit his own throat when he instigated the crucifixion.

It's not that God made those people do those awful things. The sin was already in their hearts. God permits all sorts of things that He doesn't approve of. He just let out the rope so they might fulfill their evil plans.

Perhaps the devil thought that he was going to stop God's Son dead in His tracks. No more of this talk about redemption! But God's motive was to abort that devilish scheme and throw open the floodgates of heaven. God always aborts devilish schemes to serve His own and accomplish His purposes.

Steve told me that God permits what He hates to accomplish that which He loves. Heaven and hell can end up participating in the exact same event, but for different reasons.

A Strange Comfort

The Bible says in Ephesians 1:11 that God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” I found strange comfort in that thought. God redeems our suffering. That's the only reason that I can sit up in front of you and smile, because I know God redeems our suffering. The God of life is the only One who can conquer death by embracing it. Death no longer has a victory, and neither does suffering.

God's Word speaks to me so powerfully. It tells me that I am no longer alone in my hardship. My disability is not a flip of the coin; it's not a fluke of fate. My suffering can be redeemed. It's all for my salvation.

God will often permit suffering. He will permit that broken home . . . that broken neck. Suffering, then, becomes like a sheepdog snapping at our heels, driving us to the cross because we have nowhere else to go. This is how suffering aids us. Nobody is naturally drawn to the cross. Our flesh is not inclined to go there.

This may be the most important reason that every church needs a disability ministry for its congregation. When you leave from Dallas Seminary, you are going to encounter people with disabilities. They, like few others, are driven to the cross by the overwhelming conviction that there's no place else to go.

God's Audiovisual Aids

People with disabilities are God's best audiovisual aids to the rest of the church. People who suffer great conflict always have something to say to those who are facing lesser conflict. Let me give you an example.

I have a friend, Carla, whom I met on one of the retreats our ministry holds for families with disabilities. This year we will hold 22 retreats serving all people.

At this particular retreat, I was glancing over the registration cards of the people who would be attending when I came across Carla's card. The list of her disabilities was incredible: She had lost both of her legs, was legally blind, suffered a

heart attack, had a kidney transplant, and had lost three fingers. I thought I'd better meet this woman because I couldn't believe she would be strong enough to make it to the retreat.

When I wheeled up to Carla, I told her I was so glad that she was there. She said, "Well, I thought I had better come before I lost any more body parts!" She had not lost her sense of humor through all of this.

The God of life is the only One who can conquer death by embracing it. Death no longer has a victory, and neither does suffering.

Carla had a great time at our retreat. It's five days of fun, inspiration, Bible studies, wheelchair square dancing, disco, and other events. Carla wrote me a thank-you note and had it tied to her plastic foot. The note read, "Dear Joni, since all of me cannot be with all of you all of the time, part of me will have to do." I laughed again.

Carla teaches me how to handle my own problems. I look at that brave woman, and I learn something about God from observing her. What I learn is that the greatest good that

suffering can work for a believer is to increase his or her capacity for God. Carla is a good example of how we can embrace our sufferings, knowing that God’s power will always show up best in our weakness. The church needs to see this lived out before our eyes.

Changing Our Thinking

Ministering to people with disabilities is less about helping those “poor souls” and more about their blessing us. It’s more about changing people’s thinking in the church about what weakness is designed to do in the life of a believer. Perhaps, people like Carla in our congregations should remind us how suffering works in the life of a believer.

God’s Word tells me that I am no longer alone in my hardship. My suffering can be redeemed.



This is why the weaker members of Christ’s body are indispensable. I think Carla would make a good pancreas in the body of Christ! I think we are going to need more “kidney guys” and “liver ladies” in our churches.

So let me encourage you to set God’s people an example by doing what is good. For those facing greater conflict, showcase the Lord’s ability to those who need to be sustained. We ought to be rejoicing in our weaknesses, as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12, for then we can boast that Christ’s power is made manifest in us. That is how suffering is redeemed. That’s the word that we need to get out.

Redeeming Our Suffering

If the cross can be redeemed from a symbol of torture to a symbol of hope and life because of what Jesus did on the cross, then a wheelchair can be redeemed from a symbol of confinement to that which represents a close fellowship with the Lord.

People in some congregations might look at a person like Carla and think, *I could never do that. I could never handle suffering like hers.* Those people may need to read 1 Peter 2:21, where the apostle says of suffering, “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” I wish Carla were here, but she is in heaven today. Her disabilities overtook her, but I know she is rejoicing in heaven.

God’s Joy

God’s joy is real, but He shares it on His terms, and those terms call for us to suffer as His precious Son suffered.

Disability as a ministry is not a soft/sweet ministry to pity people. Rather, disability ministry is an in-your-face vehicle to showcase these valuable lessons I have been sharing from God’s Word.

Maybe when my accident happened, the devil’s motive was to shipwreck the faith of that 17-year-old girl or use her to make a mockery out of God’s goodness. But remember, God is in the business of aborting devilish schemes. God’s motive in my accident was to abort that devilish scheme and turn a rebel teenager into a woman who can reflect some of Him.

After 40 years in a wheelchair, I can say that my own suffering has lifted me up out of my spiritual slumber. I am loyal to my God. There are more important things in my life than walking and using my hands. Most of all, my disability has shown me that Jesus saves and sanctifies

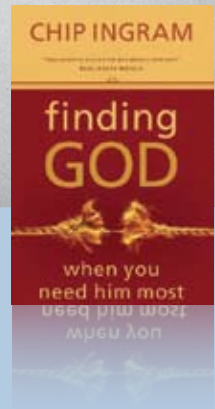
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Let a Gifted Bible Teacher and Dallas Seminary Graduate Show You How You Can Find God When You Need Him Most

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Ingram's candid discussion, personal stories, and solid guidance will allow you to move from "knowing about God" to profoundly experiencing His presence and power in your life. Whether you are struggling with a rocky relationship, an unexpected crisis, depression, or injustice, *Finding God When You Need Him Most* will remind you that the Lord is faithful to hear your heart's cry and will be there for you, time and again.



This book will not only help you deal with some of life's most troublesome questions and dilemmas, but it would be a great help for a friend who is struggling. We would be delighted to send you a copy of this powerful resource, so be sure and request your copy today by returning the enclosed reply slip.

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What to Do When Life Doesn't Make Sense



Dr. Mark L. Bailey

It was a real privilege for us to welcome back to our campus Joni Eareckson Tada and to have her address our students in the chapel service.

During her address, she referred to a new course that we're offering this fall titled Theology of Suffering, Disability, and the Church. About this course, Joni said, "I am so excited about this. With autism on the rise and Alzheimer's disease ravaging lives, never in church history have there been so many problems confronting the church as it relates to disability."

I couldn't agree more. The issue of suffering will always be with us, touching us and the lives of those whom we love. One of the great treatises on suffering is found in the book of 1 Peter, which Joni referenced during her chapel talk. I have spent a lot of time in 1 and 2 Peter in a couple of men's Bible studies that I teach. Allow me to share a few life-orienting thoughts.

First, all suffering is temporary when viewed from the vantage point of God and eternity. What a great reminder from the Lord when we find ourselves in the thick of difficult times.

Second, God uses suffering and disability purposely. Such experiences not

only test our faith and mature our character, but they also refine our relationships. For 17 years, we watched my wife Barbby's father suffer and ultimately succumb to Parkinson's disease. That experience taught us much about unconditional love, especially when he was no longer able to respond to us.

Third, Peter says that our sufferings help us identify with the sufferings of Christ. Responding like He responded to injustice and undeserved suffering is very refining.

Fourth, Peter reminds us that there is more suffering in the world than just ours. Many have given their lives for the faith, and the fact that I can write this and you can read it lets us know that we have not yet suffered as much as our brothers and sisters around the world.

Our desire for our faculty, staff, and students is that we learn what it means to share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings as a part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

And thank you for partnering with us to help prepare our future leaders to minister to those who suffer throughout the body of Christ.

Dr. Mark L. Bailey, *President*
Dallas Theological Seminary