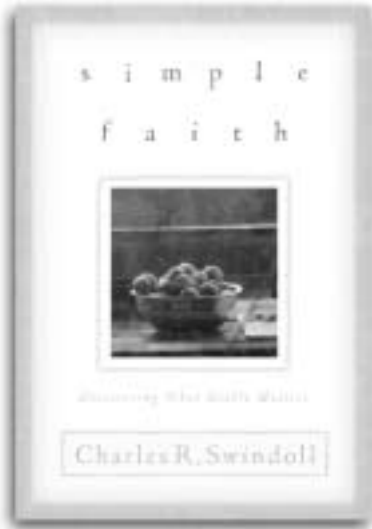


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VERITAS

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



Joni Eareckson Tada is the founder and president of Joni and Friends, an organization accelerating Christian ministry in

the disabled community. She is the author of more than 30 books, the topics of which range from disability outreach to the nature of heaven. Joni's role as a disability advocate led to her presidential appointment on the National Council on Disability for three-and-a-half years. She is a highly sought-after conference speaker both in the U.S. and around the world. Joni holds several honorary degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary, Columbia International University, and Gordon College. *Joni and Friends*, a daily five-minute radio program, is heard over 850 broadcast outlets worldwide. Through 11 area ministry offices, Joni and Friends teams provide church training and education to promote inclusion of people with disabilities. Joni is currently the honorary cochair of the Presidential Prayer Team. For further information on Joni and Friends, call 818-707-5664 or visit www.joniandfriends.org.

Joni gave this address on April 11, 2003, at Dallas Seminary's Chafer Chapel.

Receiving God's Grace

Joni Eareckson Tada

It was on a breezy April day not too long ago that we watched the news as a bomb ripped through the face of a federal office building in downtown Oklahoma City. We were stunned, shocked, and bewildered.

As I watched those live pictures, a telephone call came for me. It was a friend, a pastor in Oklahoma City, inviting me to be a part of the Christian counseling team he was heading up to minister to the families of the bombing victims. So I quickly got on a plane and flew to Oklahoma City.

Upon arrival, I had to go to the American Red Cross center to be cleared and credentialed. And I will never forget wheeling into that low, flat, red-brick building. There were people setting up chairs and tables, stacking forms, and putting out doughnuts and coffee. And across the large room was a tall, officious-looking woman in a white lab coat.

(continued on page 2)

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When she saw me wheel through the door, she quickly turned around with her clipboard, put down her glasses, and said, “Oh, my, are we glad to see *you* here!”

That sparked my curiosity, and I said, “Why?”

She responded, “When people walk up to you in your wheelchair and see you handle your personal crisis with that smile of yours, it speaks volumes to them. It assures them that they can handle their crisis too. We *need* people like you in here. Please, help us go out and find more individuals like you who can assist us.”

“Oh, my, are we glad to see *you* here!”

Immediately, I got this picture in my mind. Wouldn't it be great, on any given Sunday morning, to see people with white canes, wheelchairs, or walkers come through the doors of our sanctuaries? And wouldn't it be something if we all turned around in our seats in our congregations and exclaimed, “Oh, my, are we glad to see *you* here! We *need* people like you here in our church”? Wouldn't that be something?

The woman in the American Red Cross white lab coat had caught the drift of 1 Corinthians 12:22–23, which says, “Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts [of the body] that we think are less honorable we treat with

special honor.”

A friend of mine named Charlene had surgery recently. Afterward she had to be in bed for quite some time, catheterized, using bedpans and needing to be fed, toileted, and given bed baths.

After she got out of the hospital, Charlene said, “Joni, I do *not* know how you handle being a quadriplegic. I could never, ever live as a quadriplegic.” I burst out laughing because Charlene is both blind and deaf.

Now you can probably relate to that. You may think you could never live without the use of your hands or your legs. “My eyes? Oh, I could never be blind. Deaf? No way.” But people do it all the time. People live without the use of their hands or their legs or their eyes or their ears all the time.

In Luke 14, Jesus says, “Go out, find the disabled, the lame, and the blind and bring them in and you will be blessed.” Now I realize in that passage of Scripture that Jesus is talking about taking the gospel to the Gentiles, to those beyond the Jewish community. But I think we can infer from that passage that, yes, God would want us to go out and reach the disabled and the lame and the blind. And guess what? As we do, we *will* be blessed.

How is it that we will be blessed? I'm thinking of my friend Carla, a woman with multiple disabilities. She has had both legs amputated,

several fingers removed, a kidney transplant, a heart attack, and countless angioplasties, and she is legally blind and has severe edema.

Carla attended one of our family retreats. And when I saw her name on the registration form and read about her complicated disabilities, I was amazed that she was able to make it.

So I wheeled up to her on the first day of the retreat and I said, “Carla, I can't believe you made it here!” To which she replied, “Well, Joni, I thought I'd better come before I lost any more body parts.” This woman has obviously not lost her sense of humor.

I will never forget sitting behind Carla at that family retreat and watching her sing, “I surrender all, I surrender all.” As I listened to her sing, I thought to myself, “Here is a woman who is offering God a sacrifice of praise.” Hebrews 13:15 says, “Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise.”

Carla really *has* surrendered all. And if God ever (and of course He wouldn't) had a doubt about her confidence in Him, all He would have to do is look down and see her—legless, with only half a kidney, suffering, legally blind—and hear *her* say, “I surrender all” to know she means it. That is what it means to offer a sacrifice of praise.

That is what God wants to see in our churches on any given Sunday morning. He wants to see our pews

salted and peppered with people who use white canes, wheelchairs, and walkers. Because when *they* sing a hymn like “I Surrender All” or “All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name” or “Amazing Grace,” you'd better believe that it must pump the heart of God.

Weakness Is Absolutely Essential

Maybe this is why the weaker members are indispensable, because it is God's way of pulling together into the body weaker members who can present to Him those sacrifices of praise. The wattle on God's glory goes sky-high when He sees His people set their faces like flint and offer Him praise out of sacrifice.

But there's another way the congregation will be blessed. And it has to do with 2 Corinthians 12:9, which says that God's power is made perfect in weakness. When I think of people through whom His power shows up best, I think of my friend John.

Multiple sclerosis has disabled John so severely that he can barely breathe. In fact, he has a ventilator. I was in church with him some time ago, and we were singing the

The wattle on God's glory goes sky-high when He sees His people set their faces like flint and offer Him praise out of sacrifice.

beautiful old hymn, “Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew.” And as I watched him take his breath in between the puffs and sips of his ventilator, I thought, “Here is a man who understands the power of God.”

And I have an inkling that when the choir member sitting in church that Sunday morning who was going through tough times, whose back was aching—when she looked down and watched John in between the puffs and sips of his

ventilator sing that hymn, you’d better believe her problems looked a little more endurable.

She was probably reminded of what the apostle Paul wanted to remind us of in 2 Corinthians 1, “My brothers, I don’t want you to be uninformed about the hardships we endured. We were facing overwhelming

pressure. We were facing trials far beyond our ability to endure. We even had in our hearts the sting of death.”

I’m sure you have felt that way. You’ve gotten up in the morning and probably thought to yourself at times, “I can’t make it. I can’t do this.” And maybe you’ve even felt in your heart the sting of death. “Oh, God, I would rather die than face what I’ve got to go through.”

I feel like that about 75 percent of the time. I don’t want you to think that because I’ve been in this wheelchair for 36 years, a quadriplegic, that I’ve got it figured out. I’m no veteran; I’m no expert. There are so many times I wake up—in fact, this morning was one of them—and I have to be given a bed bath, somebody’s got to do my exercises, somebody has to pour the bran down my throat, somebody has to brush my hair and blow my nose. And I’m thinking to myself, “Oh, God, I am so tired. I just don’t know that I can face another day of quadriplegia.”

But whenever I feel that way, I go to the Lord Jesus, who has the strength that I lack. I have no smile, so I say to Him early in the morning, “Lord, can I please borrow Your smile today, because I lack one?” And what do you know? Blessed are those who come to Him in empty-handed spiritual poverty, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I can live and do all things through Christ, who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13), and for that I am deeply grateful.

How to Avoid Being Opposed by God

We are all richer when we recognize our lack. We are all stronger when we recognize our weakness. And *maybe* the really handicapped ones are the ones of whom James 4:6 speaks, “God opposes the proud.”

Who are the proud? Those who are veterans,

We are all richer when we recognize our lack. We are all stronger when we recognize our weakness.

professionals at this walk of faith, who have God figured out, who don’t need Him desperately.

When their alarm clock goes off, they throw back the covers, jump out of

bed, gulp down breakfast, give God a speedy 10-minute tip-of-the-hat quiet time, and then rush out the door on automatic cruise control.

If that’s you, know this: God opposes the proud, but He gives grace upon grace to the humble.

And who are the humble?

People like Carla, people like Charlene, people like John, huffing and puffing on his ventilator, knowing that every morning when he wakes up he needs God desperately.

My friend John is my visual aid of that powerful truth found in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “[God’s] power is made perfect in weakness.” And God wants him, and millions like him with disabilities, in our churches so that they might be visual aids of these same truths.

Yes, we should all give special honor to the weaker parts. And if we begin to think that those folks are different from us, let us remember 1 Corinthians 1:26–29, “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were

wise by human standards . . . not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong . . . so that no one may boast before him.”

You know what boasting means. “God, I can do this. I can live life on automatic cruise control. I really don’t need Your smile today. Mine’s doing fine, thank You.”

“So that no one may boast before him.” It is the only way to live; it is the Christian way to live. And it is the biblical way to live—to desperately need God. He is drawn to the weak; He is near to the afflicted. Psalm 10:17 says, “You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry.” Psalm 34:2 says, “My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.”

What is the Emily Post picture-perfect church? I would say that it looks a little untidy, a little messy. I think the Emily Post picture-perfect church is an anatomy chart—one where you can see the eyes and the hands and the ears, but you also see the liver and the kidneys and the pancreas. All of it is on display—sinews and joints, muscles and tendons—working together and supporting one another. The weaker praying for the stronger, the stronger serving the weaker.

A Fistful of Communion Crackers!

I saw a great illustration of this on the last day of one of our family retreats, as we were celebrating communion. I was sitting in the back, behind Naomi and Gary, their daughter Tiffany, and their autistic 16-year-old son Teddy, who was a bundle of nerves. All week long, it took *two* volunteers to direct and manage his fun and play activities.

But his volunteers were not with him on that particular morning. And as the ushers began coming down the aisles with shiny silver plates filled with crunched-up crackers, I noticed Teddy eyeing the shiny silver. Now Gary and Naomi were looking the other way, but because I was sitting behind Teddy, I could see that he was getting more excited and more agitated as that plate got closer. Finally, as the usher passed that silver plate down our row, Teddy reached out, and before his mother and father could stop him, he grabbed a fistful of crackers. Clattering to the floor went the silver plate.

His mother and father were mortified. And Teddy was so excited; he had a bunch of smashed crackers in his hand.

How many of us, as the communion plate is passed by, fastidiously lift our little pinkie finger and delicately reach into the plate, careful not to touch anybody else's

cracker? We aim for one tiny little cracker so as not to contaminate anybody else's.

Don't we tend to live the Christian life like that? We're so careful; we're so fastidious. We don't want to encroach on anybody's comfort zone or, for that matter, have anyone encroach on ours. And if somebody else has a need, we think that other Christians who are more gifted, more talented, and better trained can meet those needs.

We live such separate, distinct lives from one another. And I think the best way that the body of Christ will be blessed, and the reason that the weaker members are indeed indispensable, is because God is looking for a body to look like a bunch of smashed crackers. And so He places among us families affected by disability so that we will follow the lead of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 20:28, where He said, "[I] did not come to be served, but to serve."

God is looking for churches that will give special honor to the weak, that will see people with disabilities as indispensable. And if a woman in an American Red Cross white lab coat can catch God's drift, then we should too. ■

God is looking for churches that will give special honor to the weak, that will see people with disabilities as indispensable.

Are You Willing to Be Blessed?

There are few people who within their lifetimes rise to what we would call "heroine" status, among believers especially. Yet Joni Eareckson Tada, by her life and her gifts to the church, has made a tremendous impact.

I know this firsthand.

My father-in-law suffers from Parkinson's disease. Joni has had a direct ministry to my family through her words of encouragement and counsel. I also appreciate her taking the time to come to Dallas Seminary to speak words of life-changing wisdom to the ministers who will flow from this place.

For many, their lives and ministries have been marked already by her life, her writings, her speaking, and her encouragement.

But the message we heard, printed in this edition of *Veritas*, was not only an encouragement to our students and all who heard her—it was a challenge.

Do we desire the blessing of God? Then we must humble ourselves. Ready to serve and love in the most difficult, messy situations. Ready to allow ourselves to be served by others when we cannot help ourselves.

"God gives grace to the humble," Joni reminds us.

I admit, that divine principle is an intimidating thought.

But it's also part of the dying to our self that is part of becoming a true disciple of Jesus Christ. He humbly accepted the punishment of the Cross for each of us.

At Dallas Seminary, we are striving not just to make sure our students get their theology right. Yes, that's crucial. But beyond that, we strive to mentor each student to see the humble, sacrificial life of Christ formed in them so that they can minister to others.

That will encourage people to listen to our gospel. With humility, our students will walk the walk and make a dramatic impact with a supernatural power not their own.

Thank you for your financial support in this monumental effort to so equip the leaders of God's people. Your giving is itself a form of humility. When you give out of love for others, you are separating yourself from possessions that you humbly sacrifice to Him.

That's grace on your part. And may God give you the grace He has promised to the humble.



Mark Bailey