

Season 2 | Episode #25

A Deeper Healing

Joni Eareckson Tada

I'm Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry podcast. Each week we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can welcome and include people impacted by disability in your community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts, so you don't miss any of our encouraging conversations. You can also find all of the helpful resources that we've talked about at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Well, 53 years ago today, Joni Eareckson Tada took a dive that redirected her plans for her life. She's sitting down with me on the anniversary of her accident to talk about healing and why God allows hardships to continue in our lives.

Joni, many consider you a spiritual giant, a woman of great faith, but I'm so curious to know, what life was like before your accident. I mean, who was the teenager Joni Eareckson and what did she think about God?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, if you were a teenager alongside me, I would've wanted to shoot basketballs with you or go on a hike or play a game of tennis. I was athletic and outgoing. But I took God way too casually, Crystal. I took grace for granted. God was my personal bellboy, and he existed to make me happy. I don't know. I just tucked him into the back pocket of my Levi jeans and if I had a prayer request, I went to him as though I were pulling all the right levers, you know, like a vending machine.

And out would come answers that would suit me, fulfill me, make my life happy, more meaningful, productive. To me, the abundant Christian life was all about me, me, me, me, me, and more of me. So, I dunno if you would've wanted to play tennis with me or go hiking with me. But God was just, even though I said I accepted Jesus as my savior, I just don't- well, no, I know. I was not really living for him.

Crystal Keating:

Well, life changed completely 53 years ago, and we know that, that diving accident completely changed your body and your spirit. So, what was your relationship with God like in the early years after your diving accident? Was it still all about you?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, if I took God casually before my accident, now I took him seriously.



Uh, very seriously. I was devastated about my injury. I knew I was going to be paralyzed for the rest of my life sitting in a wheelchair without use of my hands, my legs, and I knew if my life was ever to have a smile again, somehow, some way I was gonna have to reconnect with God on a more serious level.

Crystal, I think God used my diving accident to back me into a spiritual corner to get me seriously considering, really seriously considering his Lordship in my life. I had a lot of questions for God. I kept pushing the replay button on my dive off that raft, trying to imagine what was happening in the heavenlies.

I mean, did God take a hands-off approach and allow me to do something stupid of my own free will? Or did Satan go before God with Job's playbook in hand, asking for permission to shove me off that raft? I wondered about that. Was God reluctant? Did the devil then have to twist his arm until God cried uncle?

Or maybe I wondered, perhaps God himself was the one who pushed me off the raft while holding back protecting angels. And, and to my way of thinking, Crystal, if a smashed spinal cord with all its devastating results, if that was his good plan for so young a Christian, even though I was a bit of a disobedient Christian, did it bother him?

Did it grieve him even a little that, that here I was one of his children, but living life in a wheelchair? I wanted my friends to read the Bible when they would come to visit me, and I often asked them to read from John chapter 5. And our listeners can flip open their Bibles and, and get the words exact. But it talks about how Jesus that day meandered at the pool of Bethesda among a group of people with disabilities and encountered one paralyzed on a straw mat who had been there for 38 years. And Jesus said to him, do you want to get better? Do you want to get well? My heart leaped in recognition at that question, and I would imagine myself countless times lying there also beside that man paralyzed on his straw mat, you know, wanting to get better, wanting to get well, and so hoping desperately that Jesus would do in my life, what he did in the life of that man in John chapter five. Heal me, Jesus. That was my heart's desire.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely. Well, what good friends to come alongside of you and read you scripture. They were giving you hope and even a spiritual perspective of what you were going through. How did that impact you at the time? I have to say for a teenager, you had some deep questions for God. You're wondering what's happening in the Heavenlies?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Yeah. I was on the National Honors Society, and I had an academic recommendation to college. I was a smart kid and so I could put two and two together, and I knew that God was the answer to my deepest longings. My problem at that point was, I felt my longing would be only fulfilled if I could be on my feet.

Now my friends were just as enthusiastic about my potential miraculous healing as I was, of course. They read to me that, uh, well-known verse in James chapter 5 verse 16, where basically



they said to me, Joni, confess your sins and pray that you might be healed. And we're gonna stand with you because the earnest prayer of righteous people has great power and produces wonderful results.

And I believe that. And they did, too. So Crystal, when I got out of the hospital, first thing I did was I looked up every healing service offered at every church in the Baltimore area. And when I learned that Kathryn Kuhlman, who back when I was a teenager, was pretty much the Benny Hinn of her day. You know, the famous faith healer? I heard she was coming to Washington, DC to hold a big crusade, a healing crusade.

And I, my friends took me. I went with my sister and my friends. And I'll never forget Crystal, wheeling into that big ballroom in the Hilton hotel, packed with more than 2,000 people. And they wheeled me to the wheelchair section, and I'm waiting there with bated breath, looking forward to Kathryn Kuhlman waltzing on stage, which she did in a spotlight.

The crowd applauded. The music crescendoed. The spotlight started falling on people who it appeared seemed to be getting healed. Testimonies were read, scriptures were offered, and the spotlight kept moving from one person to the next. Hey, I'm healed, and, and I got so excited. But the spotlight went everywhere that night, except in the wheelchair section. I kept thinking, hey, Holy Spirit, come over here to where all the hard cases are, the people in wheelchairs, you know? But, neither the spotlight nor the Holy Spirit apparently made it to the wheelchair section. And before that Healing Crusade was over, ushers came to escort us all out early so as to not create a traffic jam by the elevator.

And I remember Crystal, sitting number 15 in a line of 35 people on crutches, in wheelchairs, on walkers, disappointed people, sitting there in the elevator listening to all the applause and the music and the happiness going on the other side of the wall. But there we were at the elevator just silent, depressed, discouraged because we had not gotten our healing. And I remember I went home after that and I said to my sister, Jay, if I can't be healed, then I don't want to get out of bed. And for two weeks, I asked her just in the morning, maybe feed me breakfast, but close the drapes, turn out the lights.

Leave me alone. I don't want to get up in my wheelchair. And I laid there in that dark depression for those two weeks wondering what in God's name is the Lord doing. Because I know I believed enough. I was calling my friends and saying, hey, when I get back from that crusade, watch for me. I'm gonna come running up your driveway.

But it didn't happen. It was like my fingers and my feet did not get the message that my heart and head were saying, "God has healed me."

Crystal Keating:

You had great faith. You had confessed your sins. You had actually spoken it out loud, the plans that you were gonna do when God was gonna heal you. And it's like that verse in Proverbs that says, hope deferred makes the heart absolutely sick.



Joni Eareckson Tada:

I was heartsick. That Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, we are told in scripture. So why isn't he the same now? Why isn't he healing me now, like he healed that man in John chapter five? So those were some dark, depressing moments and I had a lot of questions for God.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I, I can understand why when there's such anticipation and you think those people are getting healed, but what about me?

So, I'm curious to know, did you ever experience outside pressure from your friends? After you came back from Kathryn Kuhlman, did your friends say, you know, Joni, it's, it's cuz you really don't believe, or you, you have maybe some hidden sin? Was the church community coming alongside of you? What was their perspective at that point?

And the reason I ask is cuz to this day, we have people writing us who want to be healed, and the faith community in which they're a part of has a belief that they should be healed. That sin is keeping them from God's good hand, and they feel not only disconnected from the life of the church, but they really feel disconnected from what they think about God.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, I can see why they might feel that way. I felt the same. And it's because there are so many verses disconnected from the larger context of what God's overall arching purposes are when it comes to healing.

Crystal Keating:

Right? Cuz when we think about Jesus, what stands out for some of us? It's that he did so many miraculous physical healings. Paralyzed people walked. The blind could see. The deaf could hear all of those things. So, you were experiencing that same kind of disconnect.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, again, many verses are often taken out of context, or their meaning is not entirely absorbed. Look at John chapter 14, verses 12 to 14. Jesus says, verily, verily. Now that's an important thing. It means listen up.

Don't miss this. Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I am doing. He will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father, and I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. Now right there, wouldn't you think that that means if I ask God to heal me, he will?

Crystal Keating:

Right? It's the prayers of a faith-filled person that you think this is gonna move God's hand to exactly as I ask him. This is gonna glorify God.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Exactly. And let me tell you a portion of scripture which helped shed light on John chapter 14. Let's take another look at a different scripture where healing is talked about in Mark chapter 1.

Jesus is in Capernaum with his disciples, and he is healing people left, right, and center. Long after sunset, they go home. But before the sun rises the next morning, they all come back looking for Jesus. The disabled, the blind, those who need healing, and Simon Peter looks for Jesus, but he's gone. He's disappeared.

Finally, they find Jesus at the top of a hillside, and they say to him, Simon says to him, "Master, everyone is looking for you." In other words, come back. These people want to be healed. Your work's not done here, Lord. But listen to what Jesus says to Simon in Mark chapter 1 verse 38. He says to them, let's go somewhere else.

Let's go to the nearby villages where I can preach there also. And then he says, for this is why I have come. Suddenly, I realized that Jesus has his priorities, and they might not always be to heal somebody physically. Because whenever people came to Jesus just to get their problems fixed, only to get healed, the Savior always backed away.

And I think Mark chapter 1 showed me the priorities of Jesus Christ. Because the same savior who healed withered hands and opened blind eyes said, if that hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If that eye, that one I just healed, if, if that eye causes you to go astray, gouge it out. That shows that Jesus places a much greater priority on the condition of the soul rather than the body.

And we all understand that. Let's say, Crystal, you had to choose between paralysis of your body or paralysis of your mind. Which would you choose?

Crystal Keating:
Body.

Joni Eareckson Tada:
Of course. We would all choose our body. No one wants to lose their mind, and so we have to agree. We all agree that the soul really does have more value than the body.

We agree that the good of the soul is greater than the good of the body. In other words, things like patience, perseverance, character development, virtue, these things are more valuable than walking, playing a game of tennis, reaching for something in the refrigerator, or even holding the hand of a loved one.

We all agree that, and Jesus' priorities are the same. God is far more interested in the condition of the soul than he is of the body. And Crystal, that really helped me put into perspective that Jesus is concerned about my temporal problems. But they are not his main, nor his ultimate focus. The condition of my soul is. That's when I began to look closer, look deeper into the word of God to find out, tell me Jesus about how you want to heal my soul.



Crystal Keating:

Well, Joni, if Jesus' priority seems to be on our soul and on the invisible parts of who we are, how would you respond when people who cared for you, people who love the Lord would come and say, let me pray for your healing? I mean, people still do that today. They believe that you should and can be physically healed. How do you respond to them?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, for one thing, I always invite people to pray for my physical healing. Paralysis is hard. I deal with chronic pain. I often ask people to pray that God would relieve my pain. But you know what?

I mostly will tell them. I'll say, oh, thank you so much for praying for me and my healing. So, can I give you some specifics? And they'll say, wow, yeah, sure. Tell us exactly how you want to be prayed for. Well, would you please pray that when my hip is in great pain, I won't whimper or complain or plummet into despair and discouragement?

Would you pray that when I wake up tomorrow morning and realize, uh oh, another day of paralysis? Would you pray that I don't get a peevish attitude and, and develop a sour disposition? Would you pray that a root of bitterness does not put its fingers deep down into my heart poisoning my life and everybody else's life?

Would you please pray that I'll be patient in the midst of this pain, asking God what he wants to teach me? Ask God for the deeper things. Would you? Because I think that's what he's interested in. And they always go away with an "aha". I had never thought about healing that way. And it, it's kind of fun to see the change in their thinking too.

And Crystal, I'm serious. I want God to heal me of the stuff that really matters. I mean there really are more important things in life than walking. And I will say there are even more important things in life than having use of your hands. And I think those important things are, am I being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ?

That's God's goal. And he redeemed us not to make our lives happy or healthy or free of trouble. He redeemed us to become more like Jesus Christ. And Hebrews tells us that if Jesus learned obedience through the things that he suffered, and of course, we know he did, then are we greater than our master? I don't think so.

No. So I wanna learn obedience through the things that I suffer. To me, again, that's the neat part about a deeper healing.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely. And it makes me think of Jesus's priority to make us holy. You talk about it's not about happiness. It's not about the temporal things. It's about the eternal perspective.

And we think of holiness may be as well. We're gonna be perfect. But it really means that he's setting us apart for his divine purposes, and I see that in you. I see that as God continues to



transform the days that your hip is gnawing at you, and you display patience, that you continue to be a testimony of God's supernatural power even within your own spirit.

And I, I just think that's the beauty of these 53 years in a wheelchair. That's what people see. What has God taught you about why he allows pain and hardship to remain in our lives? What's he up to?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

I think he's taught me that he wants to display his power in my life in a far more glorious way than if I were to jump out of this wheelchair. Oh, Crystal. The word for power in the Greek is dunamis. Okay. Now dunamis.

Crystal Keating:

Sounds like dynamite.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Exactly. Dynamite. And if I were to be healed right now, if I were to jump out of this wheelchair, what a dynamite display of God's power. Oh, my goodness. You and I would be on the phone. We'd be calling people. We'd have a celebration jumping up and down. But there's another word for which dunamis is its root, and that is dynamo. And I think me sitting in this wheelchair, I think I'm displaying just as if not a greater degree of God's power through a dynamo.

A dynamo is something large and steady and constant and producing an effect. And you know, dynamo creates electricity for a whole city and yet it's very quiet. It doesn't have the bombastic display of dynamite. But it is just as if not more powerful, just as great a display of God's power. So, I think me sitting in this wheelchair, trusting God, and saying, Jesus, I believe Psalm 1:19 where you tell me it is good that I have been afflicted for it causes me to learn of your statue.

I believe that. And so, I'm gonna be a dynamo for you. I'm gonna sit in this wheelchair and smile and that's gonna be a marvelous display of your power.

Crystal Keating:

And you truly are. You know, Joni, can you speak to those who live with a disability or an illness and maybe in a community where healing is expected? Really, in fact, they may feel like they haven't been completely healed because others think they don't have enough faith. Or there's some hidden sin that's keeping God from touching their body? What encouragement would you offer them today?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, this is what I would tell them. Look up Luke chapter 5. It's a marvelous, uh, story of four friends who brought their paralyzed buddy to see Jesus in order to be healed. And of course, we all know that story. The house was crowded with so many people. And so, the four friends had to go on top of the roof, rip up some tiles, and then they'd lower their paralyzed friend through the roof down in front of Jesus. Now here's the scene, Luke chapter 5. Jesus looks down at that paralyzed man's feet.



But then he looks up at the four friends and he says in Luke chapter 5:20, Jesus says this, when he saw their faith, that is the faith of those four friends. Ah, when he saw their faith, he forgave the man's sins and he healed his body. Your faith, my faith doesn't even have to depend on whether or not an individual's healed.

I use this verse all the time. There are often people who come up to me. Just recently, somebody came up to me in the parking lot of my church and said, Joni, if you only had enough faith. Can you not build your faith to believe in these verses? And I quoted to them, Luke chapter 5:20, and I said, the pressure's not on me, friend.

God can use your faith to heal me. So, I would encourage listening friends who are feeling as though, I, I, I know I've got enough faith just mirror that right back at your Christian brothers and sisters who are insisting that you need more faith to be healed. Just show them Luke chapter five, verse 20, where Jesus said it was the faith of the four friends that he used as a vehicle in which to heal that paralyzed man.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, that's such a great point. And it is a community of faithful believers where we turn our focus to God, expecting great things from him, and also accepting the good work that he promised to do in our heart. So, Joni, as we reflect on the past 53 years of life in a wheelchair, what has God accomplished in and through you, simply because you haven't been healed?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Crystal, I often think about Genesis chapter 50:20 the story of Joseph when his wicked brothers finally met him there in Egypt. Joseph says to them, you intended all this for evil. But God intended it for good. Now I love this next part, "for the saving of many lives".

Crystal, that's what my life in this wheelchair is all about. I think it's a powerful display of God's redemptive plan to save many lives. In fact, let me harken to the verse I shared earlier. Remember from John chapter 14, verses 12 to 14, he says, quote, "I will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father".

What did Jesus mean there? Well, this is what he meant. Think about it. When Jesus walked the earth, three years of constant, solid ministry at the end of his life when he went to the cross, what did he have to show for it? Just a handful of half-hearted disciples who sort of believed in him, but not really. In fact, at the cross, they all scattered.

But look what happened when Jesus, "went to the Father". That's the key. When Jesus went to the Father, he was able to send the Holy Spirit. And what happened when the Holy Spirit came? Well, read Acts because the very first sermon that Peter preached, thousands came to Christ and died for their faith. That is the greater thing.

That's what Jesus was talking about in John chapter 14, when he said that you'll do greater things than what I'm doing. And truly, we are doing greater things in that vast numbers of



people are coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. All because he has gone to the Father and has sent the Holy Spirit.

And I tell you what, Crystal, ah, I would much rather God use my life to win other people to the side of the Savior, than I would jumping out of this wheelchair to play a game of tennis. And Crystal, I'm not so sure that if I were to jump out of this wheelchair, it would make that much of a difference.

People think that, oh, what a powerful testimony. Millions would believe if you jumped out of your wheelchair. But then again, I think about Luke chapter 16, that amazing story of Lazarus the rich man who died and he was in a terrible condition, separated from his father Abraham. And he looked over that great chasm and said to his father, Abraham, would you please go tell my brothers, that they need to know the truth about who God is? But I, I love what Abraham says in verse 29. He says they have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them.

But then Lazarus counters and says, no, no, no, Father Abraham, if someone goes to them from the dead, they'll repent. But then Abraham said to them, ugh uh if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

Crystal, if I were to rise from this wheelchair, that's not gonna convince people. They'll probably think I was faking it for 53 years. I think what convinces people is turning to the scriptures, not just bits and pieces taken out of context and separated from other scriptures which shed light on the whole council of God.

That's what's gonna convince people, the word of God, not necessarily a dramatic testimony about either someone jumping out a wheelchair or being raised from the dead.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and Joni, you've embodied God's word these last 53 years and that's what makes the testimony of the Lord so powerful within you. Joni, do you still wanna be healed after all these years?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Crystal. You're one of my get-up girls and you know very well that when I'm going through range of motion exercises in the morning and your friends stretch my heel cords, what do I say? Stretch them heel cords. You never know if I'm gonna jump out of this wheelchair today and need 'em.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you so much for sitting down with me today, and I just know that your words will encourage so many to seek that deeper healing that God definitely promises for those who follow him.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Thank you, Crystal. Good to be with you.



Crystal Keating:

I love what Joni shared, what man meant for evil, God meant for good, for the saving of many lives. And even though God has the power to heal Joni at any time, he has used her as an audiovisual display of his power through weakness. If you'd like to honor Joni today on the anniversary of her diving accident, please visit joniandfriends.org/donate to make a gift to Joni and Friends. Your donation will share the hope of the Gospel and practical care with people impacted by disability all over the world. If you've been inspired by our conversation or have a question about something you heard, please drop me a message at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

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