



Season 3 | Episode 2

The Heart Behind Joni's House

Joni Eareckson Tada

FEBRUARY 25, 2021

Crystal Keating:

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 include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts, and find all of the resources mentioned at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Worldwide, over 1 billion people live with disability. Many are hidden away in back bedrooms, suffering rejection and isolation. This past year, COVID-19 has aggravated the struggles so many face related to hunger and lack of medical care. As we kick off season three of the podcast, I'm so excited to be sitting down with Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO of Joni and Friends, to talk about a brand-new ministry initiative that's providing complete Christ-centered care for people living with disability around the world.

Welcome to the podcast, Joni.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Good to be with you, Crystal, and I am excited about that initiative as well, so excited, and in fact, I want our listeners to be excited also.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I know they will be, and we're going to get into that, but first let's talk about your health. You were diagnosed with COVID-19 at the end of 2020, after being quarantined pretty much the whole year. Can you give us an update on your recovery? How are you doing? How are you feeling?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, I'm doing well, although I think our friends tuning in can tell my voice isn't the best. My lungs are still recovering, a little bit of energy lacking, but that's okay. I think for me it was... I'm just glad to be in the clear.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely. Well, a lot of people wrote in asking, "Did Joni have to go to the hospital? Was she put on a ventilator?" How was it for you? What were your symptoms? What was the worst part of COVID for you?



Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, really quickly, yes. I do use an external ventilator at night, which really gave me an advantage with my lungs, thank the Lord. I did go to the ER, the hospital, to receive the antibody infusion. I qualified because of my age and my disability. I think, for me, the breathing was the hardest.

Also, Crystal, because of COVID and because of my illness, I lost a lot of caregivers. So I was in bed, by myself, alone. Who's going to help? Who's going to give me a bed bath, get me dressed, sit me up? It was a terrifyingly vulnerable feeling, where I felt exposed and very isolated. I just felt, I need help.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

...and I don't have help. It was pretty frightening. But again, that's behind me. I'm so grateful that I'm doing well. But I tell you, sitting there in the ER, Crystal, I kept thinking about so many, many people like me around the world who really don't have help. I mean, thankfully, once I came up out of COVID, friends were able to come and assist. But there are people like me who just don't have the kind of first-class access to medical care that I was receiving there in the hospital.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, and I feel like you and I really bonded when you had COVID, because I remember after coming home from the hospital, you just had this revelation, like, "I got such good care. What about everybody else?"

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Right. Exactly. That was my main thought. Sitting there with nurses. "Can I help you? Do you need cranberry juice? What can I do for you? Let's take your temperature. How are you feeling? Okay, wait here, don't go home yet. We want to double-check, see how you fare." The whole time, I'm thinking about so many, many people who just don't have that access to good medical care and it broke my heart.

I mean, COVID. My goodness, it created a war zone that ravaged, sure, most of the world, but especially people with disabilities. I mean, sure, I'm sequestered and I feel I need help, but what about all the other people who are forgotten and truly neglected. Sure, my grocery store wasn't well-stocked, but overseas, many people are succumbing to starvation. And yeah, I had a hard time making doctor's appointments, but in developing nations, broken limbs go untreated, surgeries are too expensive, medical care is non-existent. So COVID for me was a real eye-opener.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, definitely. It was an eye-opener for me, too, when I thought about the incredible needs of people around the world, and it really seems like people living with disabilities are disproportionately affected. I mean, things like access to medical care, like we're talking about, but then what about access to food? When [we heard from Jason Holden](#) last year, he was talking



about ports not being able to get food across and medical supplies. I mean, it was so much bigger than what we're experiencing here.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, I used to say that people with disabilities around the world are on the bottom rung of the world's ladder. But with coronavirus, it became clear that people with disabilities were pushed off that ladder. In a world scrambling for its footing, they were forgotten and they still are being forgotten. They're just eclipsed by the strong and self-absorbed, and so they become invisible.

When we cupped our ear and listened to what the World Health Organization was saying about starvation among those with disabilities, and then when we listened to our international partners that we work with, through [Wheels for the World](#) and [International Family Retreats](#), when these friends, trusted friends, started sharing with us the desperate plight, people are going hungry, people are more fearful of starving to death than getting COVID, hospitals just won't see these individuals, our hearts broke and we thought, "We've got to do something."

So coronavirus really opened our eyes to what we need to be doing to address the plight of people with disabilities overseas. Coronavirus was good in that it really, really opened our eyes.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, it did, and I think that's why we're here today. We're talking about this new initiative called [Joni's House](#). So how was the idea of Joni's House birthed?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Okay, I'm going to take it back many, many years ago, Crystal. I've traveled to 57 countries. I've seen countless people with disabilities in impoverished places. They're trying to eke out a living. But I remember once being in the Philippines during a monsoon downpour, and I saw a paralyzed woman pulling herself through a muddy street to the back door of a small restaurant. I was told by our host that she was hoping to receive leftover food. Our Filipino host shook his head and he lamented, he said, "Things should not be this way."

I remember on the flight home, I kept praying, "Oh, God, if you would but graciously use my life to make a difference in people like that, I am all in." So, decades ago, I started praying about the... well, the concept of something like Joni's House. I mean, because begging for food or being denied medical treatment, dragging your useless legs through the dirt for lack of a wheelchair, things should not be that way.

Crystal Keating:

No.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

It's why, when it comes to the needy and the afflicted, the Bible is constantly using words like rescue, defend, help, speak up for, care for. Because God doesn't simply want us to, quote, "remember the afflicted" or, quote, "pray for the poor," although both of those things are extremely important. No, he calls us. He tells us to be his hands, his feet, to actually do something.

I mean, one of my favorite verses, okay, for Wheels for the World has always been Psalm 113, where it says, "Lift the needy out of the ash heap and seat them on a throne of honor." Okay,



that's actually doing something. You've got to roll up your sleeves and lift the needy. Not just pray for them, not just empathize or remember them, but actually do something.

That's what Joni's House is. It is a wonderful center. It's not a program so much. It's actually a disability center in these developing nations. Centers that become hubs for our Wheels for the World outreach, wheelchair repair, medical help, food distribution, micro enterprise. That is, job skills training.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, my goodness.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

A place where people with disabilities can come and be served. I'm thinking of that woman that I saw in the Philippines. Oh, how she would have benefited from something like Joni's House, a center in her neighborhood where she could go for help. She could find food. She could get medical treatment. She could hear about the word of God, about Jesus Christ.

I couldn't be more thrilled. Joni's House is, for me, a dream come true. It is that heartbreaking scene that I saw in the Philippines so many decades ago, I'm seeing the answer happen before my eyes for women, thousands, praise God, maybe millions of people around the world like her.

Crystal Keating:

Wow, and think of the prayer that you prayed so long ago, and God's bringing it to fruition. I really feel like Joni's House answers the call of the Luke 14 mandate, where Jesus said, "Go out, find the disabled and bring them in that my father's house may be full." Somebody might be asking, "Well, Joni, is this a social gospel kind of initiative or... What's the focus?"

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, I think we are simply doing what Jesus would do, especially in this world of pandemics where people with disabilities are at greater risk. I mean, consider James chapter two. It says, "If one of you says, 'Go in peace, keep warm, be well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" Now, that's God speaking in the book of James.

Crystal, a disability is fraught with physical needs. You cannot say to a person with a disability like that woman in the Philippines, "Here's the gospel. Jesus loves you. Now go in peace. I hope your needs get met." No. At Joni and Friends, we understand that doing something for the body does something for the heart.

You know what, Crystal, I think about [Family Retreats](#), and our listening friends understand what we do through Family Retreats. Sometimes our teams, if there's a need, maybe we'll put a generator in the room so that wheelchair batteries can be charged. Well, what does that say to the mother, bringing her child in a wheelchair into that room? It says, "Oh my goodness, these people care about me. This is so practical. So helpful. So useful. I'm going to listen to what they have to say about their God. He must be awfully great to inspire this kind of compassion."

That's what it means to give the gospel in such a way as to make it winsome, to make it beautiful, to make it compelling, to make it irresistible to people who need to know Jesus.



Crystal Keating:

Yeah. We are opening the door, through our love, to experience the royal, lavish love of God in Christ.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Yeah. I think that when we give practical support, such as we are doing at Joni's House, it's a way of underlining the salvation message with a yellow highlighter. It kind of draws attention to the grace-filled message that says, "Look, if you have any doubts about how much Christ loves you, look, here is what his compassion looks like. So believe in him. Look, we're helping you show that he's proved himself worthy of your trust and it's oh so biblical."

You mentioned that word, the social gospel, but we've got to remember Titus chapter two says that, quote, "We adorn the name of God through good works." Wow. I mean, to adorn means to make the good news, the salvation message of Jesus, to make it attractive, to make it beautiful. It magnifies the cross of Christ and thereby draws attention to the loveliness of Jesus.

I mean, Crystal, practical support doesn't make the gospel more meaningful. I want our friends to really hear me on this. No, we can never add to the gospel. We're not talking about a social gospel. We're talking about the true gospel that has social impact. I'm convinced, I think all of us are at Joni and Friends, Jesus loves this stuff. I mean, think of it, when he spoke, he always gave his touch. He healed through his words and his hands, and it is exactly what Joni's House is doing.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, that is so true. You know what I love about Joni's House, is that we're partnering with evangelical churches and local hospitals, where we can provide medical care, patient advocacy, evangelism, Bible study, food distribution, dignity kits, physical therapy, vocational... I mean, it just goes on and on. People will experience the tangible love of Christ that changes the soul of a person, as well as the heart of their village. So, Joni, what do you see as the future for this new initiative?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Oh, Crystal, I have so longed for a breakthrough like this. To me, Joni's House is my legacy. Unlike a new program, it's a place, it's a disability center, where the disabled like that woman in the Philippines, who had nowhere to turn, nowhere, they can come. People with disabilities can find spiritual healing in Jesus as well as hands-on help from his people. This is huge.

Well, I think that our friends listening are going to tell their friends about it, and then their friends are going to tell their friends, and they're going to jump on social media, and they're going to share this program with their friends. I want the word to spread, and I see Joni's Houses all across the world. I see the Church waking up to, "Oh, my goodness. Here is a group of people in my own neighborhood, that they're not allowed into a hospital. They're starved. They actually are starving." I mean, I get thrilled thinking about pastors, rolling up their sleeves, motivating their congregations, diving in, and making a difference in the lives of people like these.

Crystal, let me tell you what we are actually doing in one Joni's House. This is with our wonderful friends in a developing nation. I will not mention the nation because I want to protect our friends there. It's a rather limited access country, as it were. People with disabilities in one



of the cities cannot go to the hospital. They're not allowed. They don't have the money to go to the hospital. They can't afford the surgery. There isn't anything such as health insurance.

So what we are able to do is, in partnership with our good friends, we're able to scholarship surgeries. So our friends find the individuals who are in most need of surgery, they come to the Joni's House and they are prepped, they go through all the admissions programs right there in the House, which is, of course, near the hospital. While they're there, although these people are of a different religion, they hear the gospel. They're encouraged to, and in fact they participate in the worship services. They listen. They hear Christian songs. They hear the preaching of God's word.

Even after their surgeries, they come back to that same center where they are allowed to recuperate, and recover, and do a little bit of rehab. During that week, again, even though they are of a different faith, they come to the worship service, they hear more gospel preaching, they understand what the good news is all about. This is a wonderful way to win their hearts for Jesus Christ.

Crystal Keating:
Absolutely.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Through a surgery, through scholarshiping of surgeries, these people have the chance to be exposed to not only the words of Jesus, but the touch of Jesus. That is so exciting to me, that the gospel will go forth in such a unique, powerful, creative way.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, and we have so many compassionate people listening right now, and I bet they're saying, "How can I get involved? What can I do? Can I volunteer? Can I work there? I want to help."

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Well, I think there are all kinds of ways to help. Of course, prayer is the biggest way.

Crystal Keating:
Yes.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

We want people to pray because nothing of any eternal good will be accomplished if people don't intercede. We want Joni's House to spread around the world, so pray that the doors will open, pray that we can go into some of the most limited-access countries in the world, where people with disabilities truly are ignored and abandoned, neglected.

We want people also to give financially. This is a wonderful way to lay up your treasure in heaven, by serving the least of these, as Jesus would say. You are actually, through your gifts and prayers, giving a drink to the thirsty, you're clothing the naked, you are feeding the hungry. You're doing all the things that Jesus speaks of in Matthew chapter 25, honest practical ministry that is so hands-on, and so illustrative of how compassionate our savior really is.



Crystal Keating:

That is so compelling, and isn't our God amazing? We just love the Lord. Joni, thank you so much for your time. Through Joni's House, we are on the frontline, showing the love of Jesus to people with disability, as we meet their most vital needs. We're also helping families become economically self-sufficient, restoring their worth and value in the community.

If you'd like to learn more about Joni's House, you can go to joniandfriends.org/jonis-house. That's joniandfriends.org/jonis-house. We'll also have a link on our podcast page. There, you can see a wonderful video of Joni signing the certificate that made the first Joni's House a reality in El Salvador.

Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired by our conversation, please leave us a five star review. This is a great way to help other people find encouragement from these conversations. To get our next conversation automatically, please subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating, and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

©Joni And Friends
[Listen to the episode](#)