



Season 3 | Episode 33

How Jesus Changed My Perspective on Spastic Quadriplegic Cerebral Palsy

Renee Dollenmayer

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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 or find us at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Today on the podcast, I'm joined by my friend, Renee Dollenmayer, a young woman who lives with spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, a studious university senior majoring in rehabilitation services, and a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Welcome to the podcast, Renee. I'm so excited to talk to you today.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

Crystal Keating:

It's super fun to have you on the show today because you and I got to know each other pretty well as you served as a Joni and Friends intern in our Response Department. And we had the opportunity to work closely together over the past few months, ministering to others who've contacted Joni and Friends looking for spiritual and practical encouragement and resources related to living with a disability. And you know something about that. So it's been such a joy to learn your story, and I'm excited that you're taking the time to have this conversation with me today.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yeah, for sure. It's been such a joyful ride. Seeing how the Lord has just worked through my internship with Joni and Friends and how it's grown me spiritually, emotionally, mentally, just all the good stuff.

Crystal Keating:

All the good stuff. Well, I can't wait to hear more about that. So as we begin, I'd love, if you could share a little bit about yourself with our listeners. You told me that you were born actually as a triplet with two other brothers, right?



Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes. Correct. So I was born, I think it was about three months premature. And so that's what caused my disability of spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, and my brothers are completely able-bodied. And so yeah, for a long time, it was hard for me to see purpose in disability or beauty in disability. But the Lord has blessed that beyond measure for sure.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Renee, talk a little bit more about growing up with cerebral palsy. What was your family like? What were some of the expectations upon you? Tell us more about your young life.

Renee Dollenmayer:

So growing up, my family was always like, if your siblings do it, you can do it too. And so I was always really pushed to go after whatever I wanted to do in the world. But in terms of my faith growing up and how I was raised, we were raised in the Catholic church, and I had a lot of questions about who God was, how, why I was created differently, I guess you could say. In the church I'd feel like I was so different from everyone, obviously. And I was searching for so many answers and it was honestly really hard growing up with my disability, just figuring out, okay, what is my purpose? Where is my place in the body of Christ? Do I need to be healed to be a faithful follower of Jesus? Yeah. There were just lots of questions I had growing up. And I would say I had a lot of anger and bitterness as well in terms of my disability, because I didn't understand when all the kids would go and play and I couldn't do something, how God was working that together for the good at the time.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Those are big questions to have as a young child. So maybe you can explain a little bit even about your disability. What is living with spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy like, and what did that allow you to do? What did that limit you from? And then how did you kind of work out those spiritual questions as you grew? Those are a lot of questions all at once but...

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes. So my disability basically impacts my whole body in a sense. Spastic means super tight. Quadriplegic means it affects my arms and legs, and so I'm a power wheelchair user. I've used a power chair since I was six years old, I think. And growing up, I would say I maybe had a little bit more mobility just because I was a lot lighter, my body could move easier. And as I grew up, I developed a lot of chronic pain. And obviously as all of our bodies grow older, we're wasting away day by day, but our soul is being renewed each and every day. But when you add disability on top of that, it's kind of like a double whammy. So as I grew up, I developed a lot of chronic pain and that's when the depression and anxiety also came into play with that of, okay God, I don't know what you're doing, or I don't know why I'm going through this.

There were a lot of dark spiritual and just physical dark moments in my life where I questioned my purpose; I questioned my life. I questioned my place in the body of Christ. And what I would say kind of helped me out of that spiritual darkness and just darkness in general, was I had great spiritual mentors. When I got to high school, I was involved in a ministry called Young Life. I had leaders pouring into me and ministering to me and reminding me who I am in Christ. And I will say, although that ministry was great, I still struggled as someone who was disabled. Okay, where do I fit in here? Because it still felt like something was lacking.



And I think for a long time, even as a freshman in college, I questioned God, "Why haven't I been healed?" And one day I was leading my girls in a Bible study and the Holy Spirit just spoke over me and he said, "Renee, for so long, you've been searching for a healing. But what if I told you that your disability is your healing?" And so that's kind of been my renewed perspective ever since, that my disability is my healing, and the Lord has worked through my disability to light me on fire for him because he is my hope. He is my ever-present help in times of trouble.

Crystal Keating:

And that is deep. And here you are, you're a young six-year-old girl in a power chair. You're growing up. You have all these questions about your purpose, about healing, and then you have your parents saying whatever your brothers and sisters can do, you can do also. And so that actually pressed you into going to college. Tell us about your experience as a university student. Even though you're like on the back burner, you're still wrestling through some of those spiritual issues that many of us face, disability or not. Where is my place? Who am I? What is God calling me to do? Tell us about how it's been as a university student. How did you choose rehabilitation services?

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yeah, so I go to a university in Dayton, Ohio called Wright State. It is known for its accessibility. And so that's how I picked the school. And I actually went into college being an education major and it just really wasn't for me. I thought all my life I wanted to teach. But the Lord revealed to me that "Renee, you can minister and teach the world without being a 'teacher' in a school." And so I have a heart obviously for the disability community and people who just aren't as privileged. People who are going through major hardships and hurt. And so I think that's how I picked rehabilitation services, but the Lord has worked in the past three years because when I went to college, I thought my faith was honestly the strongest it would ever get. I kind of put this cap on it of like, "Oh, you know your identity is in Christ, your faith is strong."

But little did I know that our faith is ever growing and is always growing and we can never stop growing with Jesus. And so through that, and through my internship, I've discovered that all I want to do the rest of my life is serve people and serve Jesus for his kingdom. And so when people ask me when I want to do after I graduate, whatever is going to serve people and serve his kingdom. So I may not use my degree. I may use it. We'll just see whatever the Lord has in store.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, right on. Well, and I know you desire to finish strong at the university and yet you've sensed this call from God to serve in the ministry. What's that tension been like for you? I mean, you were your sorority's chaplain, right?

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

You've been all about the gospel and ministry. Talk about that.



Renee Dollenmayer:

I've always had a heart for the Lord and desired to seek him more and more. And through that, and especially through this past summer, the Lord has affirmed my calling for ministry. I think I always felt like I wasn't equipped enough, or I didn't know the gospel enough, or I just wasn't educated enough on the gospel. I mean, I was honestly at moments afraid to share my faith in Jesus Christ because I'm on a pretty secular campus. And so it was something that I almost felt shame for a really long time, or like, "Okay, I got to cut back on the Jesus." But the Lord has revealed to me that when you're uncomfortable, that's when you know you're growing. And so I started just sharing my heart for the Lord. And through that, obviously in my sorority I get to lead Bible studies. I get to encourage; I get to love on people and show them the hope of Jesus as they're going through these college years.

And it's been a huge gift and I think I've discovered this summer that I am such a person that loves to have my life planned out to a T. I want to know exactly what I'm doing and when I'm doing it. And how I'm going to do it. Don't we all?

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Renee Dollenmayer:

And the Lord has made me get uncomfortable and surrender to him. And it's a daily battle of, "Lord today I choose you. I don't choose this world. I choose you, Lord Jesus." And so, yeah, it's definitely something I'm working through each and every day and a challenge always. But as long as I remain in him and remain obedient, he will guide me to exactly where I need to be.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. As a person who also was a young Christian on a very secular university campus many, many years ago, I know that feeling. And yet, what does the Lord say? Like you're blessed if you're persecuted for my name's sake. And it's kind of an interesting tension because you're bringing light into a dark place. And especially for me before I became a Christian, I didn't know I was in the dark. But when God opens your eyes... And so you're a person that is bringing the hope and the light of Christ, wherever you go. And you have a really interesting platform in many ways. And I love the way that you follow the Lord as your shepherd, because you got connected with Joni and Friends. Talk about how you heard about our ministry and then how you became an intern.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yeah, absolutely. So I always knew of Joni Eareckson Tada. Actually in my moments of deep depression and chronic pain, one of my young life leaders gave me one of her devotionals. And so I started reading it, but I never really knew there was a ministry. And then I was actually on a road trip with my small group. We were going on a little road trip to Michigan, and I met this girl named Ashley. And she was like, "Oh my gosh, Renee, have you heard of the ministry, Joni and Friends?" I think she had been to over 10 Family Retreats. And I was like, "No, I haven't." And keep in mind, this was not even a year ago, honestly. And so I was like, okay, let me look into this. And I literally just got on the website and searched 'Joni and Friends jobs,' 'Joni and Friends internships.'



And I saw that there was the internships and I literally just started filling out the application. Didn't really know what I was doing and why I was doing it, but I just felt a strong call to do it. And then I got connected and I was like, wait, this is actually happening. I'm actually doing this and doing ministry work. And if you would've told me two years ago that I would be doing what I'm doing now, I would've thought it was just so funny. I would've thought it was a joke because I didn't expect God to take me where he's taken me for sure.

Crystal Keating:

Well maybe you can talk a little bit about what you did in your internship.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Like you said to our listeners, I got to work with Crystal. Crystal was actually my supervisor during my internship time, and I got to be a part of the Response Department. So I got to spend a lot of time in prayer and responding to the needs of those affected by disability. But I went into the internship thinking I would just be pouring out to other people all day long, serving others, which is great. And I love doing that. But during my internship, I actually got to pour a lot into myself, discover who I was and am in Christ and just see his love for me and his care for me. And so it was almost like I got to experience just a supernatural amount of spiritual rest and just get to learn more about who our God is. Just a lot of personal growth happened during my internship with Joni and Friends.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. We had an interesting dynamic because it was remote. You're in Ohio, I'm in California. So we were doing it all through Zoom and Teams, but that didn't stop the effectiveness. And I think one of the cool things about an internship is it's not just what you're doing. It's actually being around like-minded believers who have gone there. They've been there. You know, Joni and Friends has been around for over 40 years. And so that aspect of discipleship is a really big benefit I think of being an intern when you're around mature believers who can teach about ministry. And I think that was a really cool aspect of our relationship and the team's relationship. You know, the Response Department has two other people who are wheelchair users there: Scott Bankhead, you've heard him on the podcast. Tracy Motoda, you've heard her on the podcast a couple of times.

So we just had this sweet camaraderie. So that was just such a neat thing that God drew you in that way. Well, Renee, we have so many more deep things to talk about and I think we're going to have to have another conversation. And I just want to get into more about your ministry and about your heart and even some of the dark times that you went through. But as we wrap up this conversation as a Christian college student with such an on-fire passion for serving God, are there words of advice or perspective that you have for other Christian students living with a disability?

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yeah, I would say keep pressing forward and fighting the good fight and racing the race set before you, that you are only going to get this season as a college student one time, most likely. And we are called to minister to the lost, to minister to the broken, to minister to the disabled. And so go out and spread his word and be who he's called you to be because college is a time where you do really get to discover yourself and find yourself in Christ. And so I pray that's an

encouragement to any young person listening, that they can just be encouraged that God is working even in the seasons where maybe they don't see it or feel it as much.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. Renee, it's always a pleasure to speak with you. Thanks for being on the podcast.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Thank you so much, Crystal.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired, please send me a message or leave a five-star review on your favorite app. That's a great way to help other people find encouragement from these conversations. And to get our next episode automatically, subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

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