



# **Biblical Care for Families Affected by Disability**

# Biblical Care for Families Affected by Disability

Guiding Principles for  
**MAKING a DIFFERENCE**

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   THE IRRESISTIBLE CHURCH SERIES   



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*Biblical Care for Families Affected by Disability*

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# CONTENTS

Dear Reader .....	5
Introduction .....	7
The Counselor's Purpose .....	11
<b>The Gospel Truth about Disability .....</b>	<b>15</b>
In the Image of God .....	15
What is Disability? .....	17
Prejudice and Disability .....	18
Suffering and Disability .....	22
The Bible on Disability .....	24
Disability and the Teachings of Jesus .....	26
Disability and the Body of Christ .....	29
God's Great Purpose .....	33
The Church on the Way to Wholeness .....	36
<b>Providing Biblical Care .....</b>	<b>39</b>
The Family Caregiver as Counselee .....	42
The Spouse as Counselee .....	47
Premarital Counseling and Disability .....	50
Siblings as Counselees .....	51
The Person with a Disability as Counselee .....	53
<b>Good News for Families Affected by Disability .....</b>	<b>61</b>



Dear Reader,

You've got what it takes.

If the entire premise of this book were to be summed up in five words, they would be: You've got what it takes.

You already know how to provide biblical care. Whether you've got a string of credentials and licenses in counseling related fields, or you've approached the emotional and spiritual needs of people in your congregation as a lay person, you have knowledge and experience that God has already used to help individuals in your care. This book is not an attempt to "set you straight" or tell you how counseling really ought to be done.

No. Our purpose behind getting this book into your hands is to enable you to more quickly engage families affected by disability. Many counselors feel too intimidated or ill-equipped to effectively work with individuals whose primary struggle seems to be a condition that will characterize their life until the day they die. And yet, skilled counsel is just as needed

to shepherd this portion of the population towards healthy responses towards trials as with any other.

So, consider this book to be an assist. We want to give you an understanding of disability so that as you wade into your next conversation where disability plays a significant role, you have a handrail to keep you from feeling adrift.

After all, you already know the Wonderful Counselor (Isa. 9:6), and *he* already knows the great wilderness his people travel through (Deut. 2:7).

For the Glory of His Name,  
Joni and Friends

## Introduction

At the age of 8, Jason was diagnosed with a brain tumor. During his treatment, he lost his vision and partial use of his left side. Perhaps you can begin to imagine all the stresses his family faced: adaptations to the family home, therapy appointments, grief over lost dreams. Those would be significant enough, but then Jason's parents separated. They've been in and out of church a lot, more out than in on account of the medical complexities, but when they come to church, Jason usually dominates the conversation, oversharing about new aches and pains he's feeling and worrying what medical test or procedure he might need next to rule out more cancer.

Kim's been quadriplegic since a diving accident as a young adult. She had nowhere to go except back to her parents' house. They are elderly, without a lot of resources. She hardly ever gets beyond the walls of her house and she wonders whether anyone would even notice if she just turned her face to the wall and let herself slip away. Her parents seem perpetually adrift, and



you've noticed people walk around them rather than engage in any meaningful conversation.

Ted and Bonnie were delighted when they added healthy twin boys to the family. They were the darlings of the church nursery. But then the terrible twos arrived with tantrums and meltdowns and, a year later, things were no different as the family (and church) lived through the terrible threes. It became more and more obvious that the slower language development wasn't on account of the boys being twins: there were serious developmental issues. Barely anyone was surprised when each twin was diagnosed with autism. Ted and Bonnie do the best they can, but their older children really struggle. What once seemed a happy, connected family has split open with older siblings who have walked away from the faith and hurting people on all sides.

Do you have individuals like this in your church? Maybe their situations don't seem quite as severe as Ted and Bonnie's, Kim's, or Jason's, but you've seen how a new diagnosis, or the aftermath of an accident, has derailed an individual and the entire family. In fact, with statistics showing that approximately one in every seven people lives with

a disability,<sup>1</sup> there are likely *many* individuals with similar stories in your church and community.

Where do you begin to help?

Perhaps you feel unqualified to step in because you have so little understanding of disability and the new world they live in. You can't help but think that someone else must surely be more qualified to provide the needed care.

If you recognize yourself right now, let's take a step back and isolate a goal we hope you have for *any* relationship where you provide biblical care and/or counseling.

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1. Houtenville, A. and Boege, S. (2019). Annual Report on People with Disabilities in America: 2018. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. (Accessed online at [disability-compendium.org](http://disability-compendium.org), 12/14/2020)



## The Counselor's Purpose

Your purpose is to help a person move from where he or she is to where God wants him or her to be. Your goal is to guide individuals in the process of maturing in their relationship with Christ, those in the process of leaving sinful behaviors and attitudes behind and becoming more like Christ, more fully the person God created them to be. At the core of counseling, we find the biblical model of discipleship.

This might make sense on an instinctive level for people with marriage stresses or other everyday trials, but if a part of you questions whether this is still the same goal while working with individuals with severe, even catastrophic, trials, remember the words of Romans 12:2: “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.”

The church has copied the customs of this world when we treat children with intellectual disabilities as “angels” who can’t be held responsible for their actions or when we consider persevering in hardship

to be such a great virtue that any vices get overlooked. When we excuse self-absorption or a rebellious spirit as “necessary coping strategies,” or we turn a blind eye to sin because “they already have it so hard,” we’re looking to the world to inform our behaviors. God does not pause from hewing out the “living stones that [he] is building into his spiritual temple” (1 Pet. 2:5) when a disability strikes. In fact, a disability is part of his masonry, part of his good and pleasing and perfect will.

Paul goes on to say in Philippians 1:6, “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.” God’s work is continuing. The accident or illness did not interrupt his plans for the good work of sanctification he will accomplish. It is *part* of his work. Part of his *good* work... not just in a general way for the primary person affected, but in a specific, targeted, purposeful way for everyone touched by this hardship in whom he has begun a good work.

Of course, don’t slap that idea on like a Band-Aid, rushing to make everything “better” in the same way someone might quote Romans 8:28, “God causes everything to work together for the good...” when a

person still suffers from the shock of a life changing injury or diagnosis. Instead, these gospel truths can help inform you and the attitudes you hold towards debilitating circumstances such as paralysis and other long-term disabilities.

So just as with any other person who may come and sit down across from you for counsel, your purpose is to help a person affected by disability become more like Christ and help him or her apply the principles and promises from God's Word.



# The Gospel Truth about Disability

## In the Image of God

The beginning is always a good place to start, and the Bible begins with the assertion that every human life has value. Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” A few chapters later, we are reminded of this same truth: “When God created human beings, he made them to be like himself. He created them male and female, and he blessed them and called them “human” (Gen. 5:1-2). Throughout the book of Genesis, Scripture affirms that God created men and women in his own image.

Christian thinkers have interpreted the idea of being made in God’s image to mean a variety of different things over the centuries—perhaps the image of God refers to our intellectual gifts, or our ability to rule over the earth, or even our upright stance!



Unfortunately, these kinds of interpretations often result in the exclusion of some people with disabilities. For example, if we define the image of God in terms of intellectual abilities, then people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities will be regarded as less than human.

However, understood in its original context, Genesis makes a revolutionary claim about the worth of human beings. Ancient cultures reserved the phrase “image of God” for kings, whose power came from being the sole representative of the divine. In contrast, Genesis depicts all humankind, regardless of gender, heritage, ethnicity, or any other characteristics, as being created in the image of God. We *all* represent the triune God, and this likeness establishes a high value for human life (Gen. 9:6).

When sin entered the world, it damaged—but did not destroy—this great purpose of humanity. The consequences of disobedience now mark our lives: we are haunted by death. As Romans 5 says, “When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. Still, everyone died—from

the time of Adam to the time of Moses” (vs. 12-14a). Later in that same letter, Paul says we groan along with all of creation in bondage to decay (Rom. 8:21).

The Good News is that God is with us in the midst of our suffering—Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, experienced all the difficulties we do (Heb. 2:18, 4:15), and, as we already noted, he works in all things for the good of those who love him—the *ultimate* good that they may become like Christ and share in his eternal glory (Rom. 8:28-30). This is mysterious! But what does it have to do with disability?

## **What is Disability?**

Disability is an umbrella term, a contemporary concept used to describe a wide variety of impairments and difficulties—cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, muscular dystrophy, spina bifida, ADHD, to name just a few. Limitations including physical, intellectual, and even emotional differences can all be labeled as disability: a word usually understood as negative—literally unable, or lacking ability. Many of us may assume that life with a disability is uniquely awful, something to be feared and shunned... even to the point of “compassionate” killings, supporting

assisted suicide legislation or the termination of a child diagnosed with a disability in utero. Even if we hold a consistent life ethic that condemns such killings, we can imagine disability as a condition of suffering without rest or relief. But that is not always the case.

True, many people affected by disability around the world experience ongoing suffering, especially from social isolation, economic poverty, cultural stigma, and sometimes physical pain. But some people with disabilities do not interpret their situation as a tragedy. Instead, they proudly—for good or ill—claim it as their identity. For example, the Deaf community, rather than accepting a medical description of deafness as not being able to hear, views being Deaf as belonging to a culture with different communication styles. Sign languages around the world are true languages, with their own syntax and grammar, not to mention beauty and uniquely expressive capacity!

## **Prejudice and Disability**

While the Deaf community is a somewhat unique example, in plenty of other instances, individuals living with medically diagnosed disabilities do not see the disability as a source of suffering or weakness. It is

simply part of who they are. Their use of a wheelchair—or other aid—is as normal to them as wearing a pair of glasses or being left-handed might be for you.

Tracey<sup>1</sup> was born with a degenerative nerve disorder and started using a wheelchair as a child. Her parents always taught her that God created her just as he intended, “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14, KJV). With this rich foundation in truth, Tracey never considered her disability a problem, as it was clearly God’s best for her. When the occasional well-meaning Christian offers to pray for her healing, she is initially taken aback, wondering what’s wrong with her that needs healing.

For Tracey, what gets her down about her disability is people’s misconceptions. She is an experienced social worker, and yet because of her wheelchair, people often ignore her or merely speak *about* her with the person she is with. One example of this regularly occurs at medical appointments: the providers nearly always look to Tracey’s husband to discuss the specifics of her condition.

In fact, many people with disabilities assert that they suffer less from their specific condition than from their community’s response to their limitation.

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1. Name used with permission.

Scott<sup>2</sup> holds a bachelor's and master's degree, but people still talk down to him as if he were a child because they assume he has an intellectual disability. Why? He has spina bifida and uses a wheelchair. This ongoing belittlement is one of the greatest sources of frustration for him... much greater than the process of getting ready for work in the morning, even though it may take him twice as long as a co-worker whose legs work just fine.

In some contexts, a community's prejudice can be far worse than disheartening or frustrating. It can be brutal. In these communities, people with disabilities are among the least of the least. Their suffering can seem to have no relief and no end. While the United States has come a long way in protecting the rights of people with disabilities through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and other legislation, not every injustice can be fixed with better laws. It is important to listen to the experiences of people with disabilities always, but especially so in the initial stages of counseling. Begin the counseling relationship as a learner and without sharing advice, as many individuals have been hurt by prejudice, exclusion, or rejection—sadly,

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2. Name used with permission.

all too often from religious communities that missed the opportunity to welcome them.

In July of 2018, *Christianity Today* reported on the findings of Clemson University sociologist Andrew Whitehead who studied church attendance among children with special needs. Whitehead found that children with autism are 1.84 times more likely to never attend religious services than children without a chronic health condition. Whitehead is himself a father of two children with autism spectrum disorder and knows firsthand some of the reasons for this disheartening statistic. He says, “We have had a church tell us that there was no way for them to serve our child’s needs and that if we were to attend it would have to be either my wife or I providing him care every Sunday.”<sup>3</sup> Words like these from church leadership are not the only source of hurt. Whitehead acknowledged that comments suggesting that the children won’t really get anything out of participating—or looks that communicate the parents just aren’t doing a good enough job “controlling” the kid—also wound a family deeply.

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3. David Briggs, “Study: US Churches Exclude Children with Autism, ADD/ADHD” *Christianity Today*, July 20, 2018, [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-web-only/study-us-churches-exclude-children-with-autism-addadhd.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-web-only/study-us-churches-exclude-children-with-autism-addadhd.html) (Accessed 2/15/2020).

## Suffering and Disability

The connection between suffering and disability can be complex. Some individuals do not equate their diagnosed disability as a source of their suffering, instead seeing their hardships as stemming from societal attitudes. In contrast, others may experience such physical suffering—as with chronic pain—that the suffering itself is disabling. Terminology can be confusing as well, since some individuals resist the label disability, preferring words like syndrome or condition. Kristin<sup>4</sup> was born with a degenerative eye condition, and even as she lost more and more of her vision in her teens, to the point that she required assistance for everyday activities, she thought of it merely as a condition. Not until a short-term mission trip to Nicaragua where Kristin connected with a child with a disability, did she begin to describe her own condition as a disability. In Kristin’s case, the difference was more than just a difference of perspective or a question of semantics. In recognizing the similarities between the Nicaraguan child and herself, she began to see how God was inviting her,

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4. *Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast*, “Losing Sight, Gaining Vision – Kristin Hamer” *Season 1: Episode 26*, July 18, 2019. [www.joniand-friends.org/losing-sight-gaining-vision](http://www.joniand-friends.org/losing-sight-gaining-vision).

based on her unique gifts, abilities, and experience, to advocate for others with disabilities.

Nonetheless, a significant percentage of people living with disabilities suffer a great deal from the disability itself. Chronic pain can rob a person of the ability to focus, making each day a trial and even prayer seem pointless. Managing the dailiness of bowel routines and medical records—not to mention insurance hassles, and the coordination of hard-to-find personal care assistants—can be a perpetual cycle of hardship and suffering. These are just a few examples of what a person with a disability may be up against.

But suffering is not unique to people with disabilities. In fact, suffering is a part of the normal Christian life in a broken world (Rom. 8:13-23). Whether from disease or death, persecution for being faithful (John 15:18-25), or God's discipline of his children (Heb. 12:5-11), we should expect suffering (James 1:2). The good news, however, is that suffering is not the end of the story. As the book of Revelation says, God will dwell among his people and wipe every tear away: "there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." (Rev. 21:4).



## The Bible on Disability

With this broad perspective in mind, we can now more fully appreciate what the Bible has to say about people with disabilities. Ancient Hebrew and Greek writers bluntly referred to people with specific physical disabilities as blind, deaf, mute, lame, and crippled, while contemporary usage emphasizes person-first language: John uses a wheelchair, or Ellen has a visual impairment. Modern translations are more sensitive, which is important for people living with disabilities to access Scripture without unnecessary offense. But it is interesting that the Bible typically uses the same words for both physical and spiritual states. Depending on the context, biblical terms now translated as disabled may refer to physical, metaphorical, or spiritual conditions (or all three at once). For example, Paul contrasts God's power with his weakness in 2 Corinthians 12, which encompasses Paul's physical thorn (perhaps a visual impairment) his metaphorical lack of ability, and his spiritual incapacity, all of which work together to display God's power (2 Cor. 12:9).

More specifically, some of the physical impairments described in Scripture are congenital (from birth), like the man in John 9 who was born blind. Other

physical disabilities were acquired later in life, sometimes traumatically. In 2 Samuel 4:4, Mephibosheth was accidentally dropped during a crisis, and could not walk for the rest of his life. Conquering armies often brutally maimed soldiers on the losing side to prevent them from fighting again in the future (1 Sam. 11:2, 2 Kings 25:7). Age itself usually brought (and still brings today) a progressive loss of abilities (Gen. 27:1, 1 Sam. 3:2, 2 Sam. 19:34-36, Eccl. 12:1-7).

These conditions and afflictions do not surprise God and have divine purpose. God is sovereign over everything, including specific limitations like being “slow of speech and tongue” in Moses’ example (Ex. 4:10-11, ESV).

Such physical impairments are best understood as a result of the fall, where death and disease entered the world as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin. In looking ahead to God’s promised restoration through the Messiah, the Hebrew prophets consistently use metaphors of healing physical impairments (Isa. 29:18, 35:6, Jer. 31:8, Mic. 4:7). At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus claims Isaiah 61 as his Spirit-anointed mission, to proclaim the good news to the poor, bringing sight to the blind, and setting the captives free (Luke 4:18). In the following pages of Luke’s

Gospel, we see Jesus intentionally reaching out to those on the margins of Israel: women, Gentiles, the poor, and people with disabilities.

Perhaps even more significant, however, is the way the Messiah will accomplish this. Isaiah famously describes a suffering servant who will accomplish redemption for the nations. In the person and work of Jesus Christ, God became flesh and plumbed the very depths of human experience (John 1). He willingly chose the humility of dependence through both physical and mental limitation. He accepted pain so severe it caused him to cry out loudly (Matt. 27:46-50), and he will live the rest of eternity with the visible scars of his abuse.

For us.

If Jesus willingly took on such profound limitation and suffering because of what it could accomplish for the glory of God and the good of all people, then there is nothing inherently bad about being disabled. *Any* disabling condition can be used for God's glory.

## **Disability and the Teachings of Jesus**

While Jesus lived out a powerful example of God's good purposes in limitations, he also specifically taught to correct sinful beliefs about people with disabilities.

In Jesus' day, many religious groups believed people with disabilities were beyond God's blessing; the feast of future redemption described in Isaiah 25 had been interpreted to exclude those with physical impairments. But in Luke 14, after healing a man with dropsy (a painful and disabling disease), Jesus preaches a powerful parable that contradicted this common interpretation. Instead of proudly seeking the places of honor (like the religious elite who were hosting him for dinner habitually did), Jesus says that we should humble ourselves, so that God will exalt us. Bringing the story to its uncomfortably sharp point, Jesus then tells his host not to invite friends or rich neighbors to his feasts, but instead to proactively seek out and intentionally "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:13; 21-23). In stark contrast to the typical guests of honor whom we celebrate and admire, in the great banquet Jesus describes, people with disabilities are the honored guests.

Through this parable of the banquet in Luke 14, Jesus reiterates the global scope of salvation as originally described in Isaiah by locating people with disabilities at the center of the celebration. Revelation 19 elaborates the image of this celebration feast of redemption as the wedding feast of the Lamb. What

happens to our views of disability if we consider the possibility that at that glorious, eternal feast, our disabled Christian brothers and sisters will be in the middle of the celebration, undisputed guests of honor?

Other arguments in Scripture indicate this very thing. At the same dinner party where Jesus urges the host to invite people with disabilities, he talks about the absence of those guests indicating a lack of future blessing. What's more—in a dramatic illustration of Jesus' initial teaching to approach the banquet table with humility so that you are not shamed when the host brings a more distinguished guest to sit in the seat of honor—the master in the parable tells his servants to compel people from the streets of the city to come in so that his house will be filled. In the same way that the beggar Lazarus in Luke 16 is brought from the rich man's gate to Abraham's side while the rich man becomes the beggar, in this parable, all “the poor and crippled and blind and lame” are taken from their humble seats begging on the street corners and given honored space at the feast. We can easily infer which seats have been made available for the original invitees who were too caught up in their own importance to attend the banquet. In stark contrast to the

religious understandings of his day, Jesus explicitly taught that people living with disabilities are honored guests in the kingdom, and that his disciples ought to follow this pattern of gracious hospitality without any expectations of financial or social reward.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul, too, speaks of an upside-down way of understanding who is valued. In chapter 12, Paul describes the church as a body with many different parts, where diversity is part of God’s design. The metaphor of a body with distinct members illustrates his point that individual members of the church must be exercising their various spiritual gifts for the good of the whole. Right in the middle of this famous image, Paul says that—contrary to our expectations— “some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary” (1 Cor. 12:22). In a body of parts who all need to be equally exercising their gifts, there’s a plot twist: some parts are *more* necessary. And those parts? They are the ones who seem weakest and least important.

## **Disability and the Body of Christ**

For us to be effective in providing biblical care, we, as members of the church, must honestly consider how

we view the parts of the Body of Christ who seem weaker. Can it be said that we honestly see those who appear weaker as indispensable?

We can assent to these truths from Scripture and yet still have underlying assumptions—even prejudices—that prevent us from effectively counseling a family member or person affected by disability. Identifying your own preconceptions about persons with disabilities will be one of the most important pieces of your preparation. You can pray with the psalmist, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.” (Ps. 139:23-4). Let any new awareness of your own sinful thoughts and attitudes prompt repentance. Then God will lead you in the way that allows you to see every person as an individual worthy of being known and unconditionally loved, just as Christ loves and accepts you.

If you attended church with Chrissy, you might struggle with seeing her as indispensable. Chrissy is blind and non-verbal. Her parents wheel her around in a pediatric chair that has plenty of strong straps to keep her from getting injured during one of her frequent seizures. Some people would dismiss this child

as not even worth the care she requires. How is it, then, that the church is *incomplete* without Chrissy's presence and the many others who live with similar weaknesses?

Paul's description of the church cuts against our tendency to prize those who, like us, appear strong and self-sufficient, and fulfill our cultural obsessions of outward success. As Christians, we need the scriptures to correct our cultural assumptions about people with disabilities.

To extend the metaphor, the Body of Christ itself is disabled—lacking necessary parts, facing profound limitations—without the presence of people with disabilities. This may be a radical shift in perspective from your natural inclinations. And yet, God's design is even still more incredible.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul is talking about spiritual gifts. Not only does the church need the presence of people with disabilities to be whole, but each member has a divinely designed diverse spiritual gift that should be actively exercised!

This truth will cause some people to stop in disbelief. You may wonder how someone with severe limitations can exercise a spiritual gift. Justin is non-verbal, and he uses a communication board attached



to his wheelchair to encourage others around the world as a short-term missionary. Robin, who has Down syndrome, is a mighty prayer warrior. Cindy uses an electronic lapboard for communication on account of cerebral palsy. And when she cues up her communication device to the words of “Amazing Grace” and then painstakingly mouths the words as the AI voices them, the effect is profound. Jessica, too, is nonverbal, yet people confide to her parents that when they spend time with her, they see God in a whole new way. God has used these four individuals, and others with similar diagnoses, to build up his church... just as he has used hundreds of thousands of our Christian brothers and sisters over the centuries.

As Paul concludes his discussion of spiritual gifts in this letter to the Corinthians, he sets out to show us “a still more excellent way.” This excellent way is one of the most well-known portions of Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13, the Love Chapter. Here Paul gives us a profound description of what love looks like: it is patient and kind; it does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. This pure love—that is such a struggle for strong and self-sufficient people—is frequently displayed beautifully by adults and children with

moderate to profound intellectual disabilities. This “more excellent way,” this way that is better than teaching, healing, prophecies, and miracles, is frequently found among the weakest in our churches.

## **God’s Great Purpose**

But what of individuals who show no knowledge or understanding of God and have no evidence of the Spirit at work in their life? Just because we cannot see God’s redemptive work in a person’s life because of a severe disability, who is to say that God is not actively conforming that person to His image? There are many examples in creation of God working wonders with no human to witness them. A God who extravagantly designs undiscovered sunsets for his glory could certainly also craft beautiful displays of his love and grace in the life of a person with severe disabilities. The beautiful display of his love and grace might go uncelebrated now, but when its fullness is known in heaven... what glories will be revealed!

But even in the here and now, God has a great purpose for placing people with severe disabilities in the church. That purpose? To show his power. Weakness gives room to better showcase the vastness of God’s

strength. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12) revealed God’s sufficient grace and prompted Paul to boast in his weakness because it reminded him of his dependence on God’s strength... and of God’s provision of that strength.

What was true for Paul in his personal experience can—and should—be true of the Body of Christ. The weaknesses in our midst—whether it be chronic illnesses, disabilities, addictions, or mental illness—cause us to cry out to God for the thorn to be removed. Let’s be clear: the thorn in this analogy is *not* the person directly affected by whatever weakness we’re discussing. The thorn in the flesh is the diagnosis, the struggle. Certainly, we should follow the example of Paul in asking God to remove it, but if he doesn’t, remember that God’s grace is sufficient—and there may be tremendous purpose in God permitting the thorn to remain!

Again, God’s grace is not just sufficient for the individual, it is sufficient for the entire Body as it cares for the weaker members, as it cries out, in the words of King Jehoshaphat when surrounded by enemy armies, “O our God...we are powerless... We do not know what to do, but are looking to you for help” (2 Chron. 20:12). This complete dependence glorifies

God because it allows us to better see the greatness of his strength.

You, as counselor, do not need to be well-versed in every kind of disability or be able to shepherd the counselee to complete recovery. That should not be an expectation anyone has for this relationship. Far more beautiful is the truth that you are part of God's provision of grace when he doesn't remove a thorn.

Yes, God has great purpose for placing these seemingly weakest members in his church. When a church does not have any "weaker members" it can become too convinced of its own capabilities. It can glory in their own strength rather than in God's strength.

Somewhat paradoxically, people living with obvious, long-lasting forms of suffering can contribute to the health of the church by making it more necessary for the entire church to depend on God. With that increased dependence on God, the church will grow in maturity. As Ephesians 4:15-16 says, "[G]rowing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love." As *each* part of the Body of Christ

contributes according to God's gifting, when *each* part is securely joined to the rest of the body, true maturity will result. Just imagine the powerful witness of a church that values the gifts and presence of *all* God's people—including those with disabilities—to a world that idolizes self-sufficient strength and external perfection!

## **The Church on the Way to Wholeness**

The heart of Christ is that *every* person is of equal worth and value because we *all* are created in the image of God. With this truth as a foundation, we can welcome every person who walks into our church with a heart of unconditional love, opening every avenue of ministry to every person. This is not to say that appropriate training is unnecessary, only that the disability should not be the disqualifier. Through each aspect of the life of the church—teaching, fellowship, worship and discipleship, to name just a few—we ought to “think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works” (Heb. 10:24). In this practice of stirring up one another, we will discover something profoundly true of each of the “one

another's" taught to the New Testament church: it is meant to be mutual. As you disciple—counsel—people affected by disability towards love and good works, *you will be stirred up* to more of the same.

Sadly, as previously mentioned, too many religious communities have not been intentional about including people with disabilities in God's house. Instead of a hearty welcome, people with disabilities are often ignored, excluded, or simply forgotten, and end up absent from our churches. And when people with disabilities are absent, it often means their families are, too. In your counseling relationship, acknowledge the barriers of being accepted and included in community and the life of the church, and recognize that your presence is powerful. Many, if not all, challenges associated with disability contain a relational component, frequently on account of some form of social alienation. You, as a member of the Body of Christ can build understanding and belonging. And as a counselor, you have the potential to help heal some of the hurt caused by ignorance or outright rejection.

How can you do this? What are the specifics of providing biblical care to an individual or family affected by disability?



# Providing Biblical Care

While it is true in any potential counseling situation, it is critical to see each person as an individual with unique needs, dreams, and desires (Ps. 139:13-16), as well as someone who desperately needs the grace of God to meet them in their sinfulness (Rom. 3:23). The reason the counselee has made an appointment with you may be related to disability, but not necessarily. It may be something completely unconnected—perhaps a conflict with a co-worker, a porn addiction, or the death of a loved one.

The near opposite sentiment can also be true. As Jimmy Peña—author of *PrayFit* and body builder before chronic pain rerouted his life—says, suffering just doesn't hurt where it hurts: there is a ripple effect.<sup>1</sup> In his case, a new diagnosis of disability affected his own perceptions of identity and value. He had always been a body builder. If he could not even get out of bed, who was he?

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1. *Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast*, “Who Am I? Rediscovering Your Identity After Loss – Jimmy Peña” *Season 1: Episode 24*, July 4, 2019. [www.joniandfriends.org/rediscovering-your-identity-after-loss](http://www.joniandfriends.org/rediscovering-your-identity-after-loss).



For Aaron, the tragedy of his wife Melinda's paralyzing car accident had much darker, far-reaching effects. The necessary adjustments of seeing to his wife's care—and the unknown territory of how his own needs for marital intimacy might be met—seemed to give him license for all kinds of selfish behavior. Before she had even completed her time in the rehabilitation hospital, he sought out anyone who would help him justify a divorce. Aaron's unbridled, self-centered self-absorption in response to Melinda's catastrophic injuries cost her the marriage, her health insurance, her home, and her children. Sadly, Melinda lived out the rest of her days in a nursing facility.

Aaron's furnace of affliction illuminated areas of habitual sin that might have continued hidden below the surface if his beautifully gleaming life had not been totaled in his wife's accident. And yet he placed all the blame for the situation on God allowing Melinda's quadriplegia.

Because presenting needs may be a mere sliver of the true areas of concern, work to discern the true relationship between the individual's need for counsel and the existence of disability. Maybe depression has settled in because of loneliness and the person's dream of marriage and family seem out of reach on

account of the disability... but then again, maybe the individual's attempt to gain attention through manipulation is the root issue. Or perhaps a person struggles with anxiety on account of underemployment,<sup>2</sup> yet further discussion reveals a bitterness against God. A person could even be experiencing symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder because of abuse related to disability<sup>3</sup> or simply from living with the life-threatening condition itself.<sup>4</sup> No matter how complicated or straight-forward the situation appears at first, take the time to listen as you would with any counselee: both to the individual and to the Holy Spirit's leading.

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2. The unemployment rate of persons with disability is more than twice that of those without disability, and of those who are employed, about a third of them have only part-time hours. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics – 2018, February 26, 2019, (Accessed 2/15/2020). [www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm)
  3. In a 2012 survey, over 70 percent of people with disabilities reported they had been victims of abuse. Thomas F. Coleman, J.D., *Spectrum Institute*, “Statistics on Disability and Abuse Should Inform the Legislative Process” [www.disabilityandabuse.org](http://www.disabilityandabuse.org) (Accessed 2/15/2020).
  4. Bruce Jancin, *MD Edge*, “Illness-induced PTSD is Common, Understudied,” May 17, 2017. [www.mdedge.com/psychiatry/article/138435/depression/illness-induced-ptsd-common-understudied](http://www.mdedge.com/psychiatry/article/138435/depression/illness-induced-ptsd-common-understudied) (Accessed 2/15/2020).

## **The Family Caregiver as Counselee**

When we speak of counseling families affected by disability, who, exactly, do we speak of? An important category of people in need of biblical care and counseling is the family caregiver. A family caregiver is any family member who carries the bulk of caregiving responsibilities or duties. Typically, these are parents, a spouse, or an adult sibling of the person living with one or more disabilities.

Caregiving is an exhausting task, even when the family caregiver has in-home assistance. Beyond the physical demands of lifting, helping with toileting routines, or restraining a child—who, in the middle of a meltdown endangers him or herself—there are the mental demands of coordinating therapies, advocating for the medical or educational assistance necessary, or staying one step ahead of a child that may disappear out the front door while the rest of the house still sleeps. No matter the specifics of a caregiver's routine, without sufficient support and respite, burnout is certain. Simple ingratitude on the part of the care-receiver can also burn through a caregiver's good will. Even if burnout doesn't seem imminent, operating under high levels of stress, with minimal or interrupted sleep, for extended

periods of time can lead to a variety of secondary health concerns.

Unsupported caregiving can also magnify problems such as resentment, antagonism towards others, discontent, and an overall cynicism towards life. It may be difficult to address some of these more hidden spiritual issues without first offering to strategize on ways to lighten the caregiving load and enlisting additional help. Help may come from extended family, a support group from church specifically organized to provide practical helps, or community services available to families impacted by disability. Often a caregiver, so overwhelmed by the unending responsibilities, feels he or she has no reserve left to seek additional help or maneuver a complicated process to obtain aid, much less tackle a serious issue of the heart. Assistance with routine activities like housework, meals, shopping, and transportation for typical siblings can make a world of difference.

You may find that a caregiver who is “keeping it all together” suddenly seems to fall apart when they finally have others to help carry the load they’ve been carrying alone too long. By giving them practical support and the permission to acknowledge their own needs and weaknesses, you can pave the way for

more meaningful counsel. In addition to the sheer exhaustion of family caregivers living with 24/7 routines and responsibilities, other common struggles include isolation, cycles of grief, and paralyzing feelings of guilt.

Sadly, many Christians experience isolation from the church body. However, isolation for families affected by disability stretches far beyond just the local church. Often, the high number of medical appointments and therapies keep families from participating in “extras” like youth sports, community days, and even get-togethers with extended family. With conditions that cause weakened immune systems or behavioral challenges, leaving the house for errands or a family meal at a restaurant may be a near impossibility. Wheelchair users can be isolated simply because of accessibility issues: steps into a friend’s house, or restrooms too narrow to accommodate a wheelchair.

Family caregivers also live with ongoing cycles of grief. Contrary to the term, these emotions associated with grief do not always follow a cyclical pattern. Feelings of loss, despair, depression, fear, and anger can come and go seemingly without reason alongside happier feelings. For instance, as a teen

with intellectual disabilities approaches adulthood, parents may feel pride over how much the young person has learned and developed while at the same time grieving that their child's transition looks so unlike the typical story of college graduation and an upward-moving career. Perhaps the parents may also feel a sense of despair that they will never have the independent retirement years they looked forward to, fear over who will watch out for their child once they no longer can, and anger that no one understands. You may think that grief over a missed milestone, such as high school graduation, may be completely absurd when the child was never expected to learn how to talk, but like pulling at a tangled wire, it is hard to see initially what is connected. And the emotions that seemed to have steadied at one point, can suddenly resurface when the mail brings a wedding announcement from the son or daughter of a friend.

When these feelings of loss are not grieved in healthy ways, resentment can set in. When Candace gave birth to a baby girl with multiple disabilities, she was thankful her parents wanted to chip in as much as they did. As the years passed, though, Candace realized that her parents were only interested in helping

“fix” their granddaughter. They could not see this little girl as the precious grandchild she was. Over time, Candace developed a deep-seated resentment towards her parents and the time between visits began to be counted in years rather than weeks.

Caregivers can also struggle with guilt. When living next to someone who has enormous, complex needs, a caregiver can feel as though their real needs don't matter. Peter Rosenberger, author of *7 Caregiver Landmines*, speaks “fluent caregiver” after caring for his wife Gracie for more than 30 years. In his radio show “Hope for the Caregiver,” many of his conversations with other caregivers center on showing how family caregivers need to see their health as an investment in the care of their loved one.

It's less complicated, of course, if the care-receiver acknowledges this need. Some individuals with disabilities can become so used to the way their family member provides care that they understandably resist the presence of anyone else coming to help, especially for the more personal caregiving routines. That's why Joni Eareckson Tada often shares how much she works to give her husband Ken breaks. Beyond encouraging him to take regular fishing trips with his guy friends, she trains quite a few friends and

even neighbors in her care needs so many can share the weight of the responsibility for her care. She knows the importance of breaks for Ken, so if she senses he needs an extra one because she's sick, she's not opposed to sending him out for a quick walk around the block while she sits alone and, in her words, "lick my snot" while she waits for his return.<sup>5</sup> Because of her continued efforts to lighten his caregiving load, Ken feels guilt-free packing his fishing gear for regular time away. Part of your ministry to the family caregiver may be working with the care-receiver to see the value in this kind of respite. Sometimes fear or a perceived loss of control causes this reticence, other times it is a sense of entitlement or a habit of manipulation.

## The Spouse as Counselor

While any relationship can feel a keen stress on account of disability, marriages can take the hardest hit. In fact, Gary Chapman, author of *The Five Love Languages* and co-author of *Sharing Love Abundantly in Special Needs Families*, names seven key stresses on a marriage when a

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5. *Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast*, "When Disability Challenges Your Marriage," *Season 1: Episode 45*, November 21, 2019. [www.joniandfriends.org/when-disability-challenges-your-marriage](http://www.joniandfriends.org/when-disability-challenges-your-marriage).



disability is present. This may be true when one or both spouses have a disability, as well as if a child or other dependent has a disability. These seven stresses include:

***Time constraints*** – Far beyond just the everyday busyness of most families, families affected by disability often have schedules filled with doctor visits, therapies, and meetings related to caring for the person with the disability.

***Financial*** – The cost of medications and therapies along with reduced availability for work, can stress even the most financially solid families. Family caregivers also live with an ongoing concern regarding how they will finance future care.

***Emotional*** – Like we already discussed, it is common to struggle with guilt or grief. It can also be a challenge for a person to find a safe space to process these feelings, compounding the problem.

***Isolation*** – In addition to the realities of isolation already mentioned, a couple living with ongoing isolation can experience small problems that mushroom when they go unchecked in the natural give and take of community.

***Geographic separation*** – It is not uncommon for one spouse to stay at the side of a child with extensive medical needs, say during hospital stays, while the

second spouse works and cares for the other children. Sometimes the need for additional income can also prompt long separations.

***Anxiety about the future*** – What if the disability worsens and it gets to be too much? Who will care for the person with a disability when the family caregivers no longer can? If the only option is a residential facility, who will make sure a good quality of care continues? Who can I count on to love my disabled loved one?

***Lack of support*** – When a child has significant special needs, it is a challenge to find individuals who can provide respite, babysitting for a date night, or even an hour break on Sunday for church. Lack of support can also take the form of suggested “fixes” without truly understanding the issues or, more obviously, outright rejection of the couple’s choices.

In addition to these seven areas, the issue of lack of privacy can also place undue stress on a marriage. If a couple regularly has in-home assistance or in-home therapy, the near-constant presence of a “third person” in the marriage can jeopardize a couple’s ability to feel safe with the intimacy of sharing a home. It can feel as though each spouse is an outsider in their own home as life must be rearranged for the presence of the in-home help.

## Premarital Counseling and Disability

Each of these areas of stress can be a springboard for speaking with an engaged couple about challenges they may face in marriage as a result of a disability: either if one of the spouses-to-be is disabled or if it is a remarriage and there are one or more children who have disabilities. Of course, no one can know what the future holds, but helping a couple talk through steps they can take to minimize potential stresses and provide options for when these stresses do overwhelm, will be an important topic of discussion.

An additional note about providing biblical care in premarital counseling: some of the parameters of government assistance make it financially difficult for couples affected by disability to marry. A single person receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) could lose all or part of the benefit if he or she marries. If two individuals receiving SSI marry, their monthly benefit will be capped. During the year 2021, the monthly SSI limit for couples is \$1,191.<sup>6</sup> This is only three quarters of what the two would have access to as unmarried individuals. In other words, if a couple in this situation were to marry, they would lose 25

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6. Social Security Administration, “SSI Federal Payment Amounts for 2021” [www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/SSI.html](http://www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/SSI.html). (Accessed 12/30/2020)

percent of their income. In light of this, some couples struggle with the question of whether they can enter a “spiritual union” without being legally married. As you counsel couples such as these to honor God’s design for marriage and his instruction for obeying ruling authorities, work to help them find possible ways of making up the financial difference. There have been churches that, when seeing this predicament before two of their members, have worked to mitigate the financial stress through regular monthly provision for the couple’s needs.

## **Siblings as Counselors**

As in any family, children can quickly absorb the stresses of the parents. Each of the previously mentioned stresses that threaten the health of the marriage can affect a sibling’s sense of wellbeing. But siblings often have an additional stress unique to their situation: siblings don’t want to burden their parents more. With a desire to ease the parents’ stress the only way they know, siblings can take on responsibility and burdens well beyond their years. One sibling shared, “I was generally expected not to take up too much space or attention, and I learned to be okay

with that.”<sup>7</sup> Not all siblings learn to be “okay” with the expectations placed on them, though, and along with opportunities for bitterness and resentment, a sibling might struggle with envy of a parent’s attention or of a family not burdened by disability. Help a typical sibling feel seen for who he or she is by acknowledging the sibling to be an individual distinct from the diagnosis of a brother or sister. At the same time, leave room for the sibling to process difficult questions or sinful attitudes related to the disability.

Many siblings also know from a young age that they will one day hold the primary responsibility of caring for their sister or brother with a disability. Even if such a transition is years away, it can color the way the sibling sees the world. For example, one young adult wrote this about some of the anxiety that she wrestled with as she considered her future: “When I was 15, I wrote a paper about autism for an English class. The research I did hit me particularly hard one day, so I cried. When Mom asked what was wrong, I replied that I was worried for my sister’s future. Mom simply replied, ‘I don’t worry.’ She wanted

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7. The Sibling Support Project, “How to Let Young Siblings Know You Care” Slide 19, [www.slideshare.net/DonMeyer18/how-to-let-young-siblings-know-you-care](http://www.slideshare.net/DonMeyer18/how-to-let-young-siblings-know-you-care) (Accessed 2/15/2020)

me to live my own life for myself, for as long as possible. It was an empowering moment. I was far less nervous about moving away and going to college because of that.”<sup>8</sup>

Any young person living in an environment of ongoing stress can settle into unhealthy coping strategies unless helped. Though it is understandable for a sibling to fall back on a problematic technique for the sake of survival, you will serve him or her well by equipping each sibling for lifelong patterns of growing in godliness.

## **The Person with a Disability as Counselee**

And of course, your counselees will include people living with their own disabilities. Depending on their awareness of their limitations and unique situations, they may experience these same struggles to varying degrees. There are, however, unique realities for those affected by disability.

Before going any further, it is important to note that you should not assume you know what level of

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8. “How to Let Young Siblings Know You Care” Slide 70. For more help for siblings, see Sibling Support Project, [www.siblingsupport.org](http://www.siblingsupport.org).

understanding the person with a disability has about his or her own limitations. As mentioned earlier, physical limitations do not equate to mental limitations. Disabilities warranting wheelchair use may or may not affect a person's intellectual capabilities. Even nonverbal individuals may be able to communicate a wealth of observation and understanding through the help of a communication board or other assistive device.

Ido Kedar<sup>9</sup>, a nonverbal young man with autism, had no method to express his thoughts with language until he learned how to use a letterboard to spell out words in middle school. When he was finally able to communicate with words, he revealed that he had understood everything that had been said to him and about him during his younger years. He knew his body was not performing properly in response to the directions he was given in therapy but had no way of letting anyone know. From experiences like Ido's, we learn to speak to those with disabilities with the expectation they understand every word we say—even if they do not demonstrate a basic level of comprehension. What's more, assume they can understand the tone of your interaction: let it be characterized by love and respect for

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9. Kedar, Ido. *Ido in Autismland: Climbing out of Autism's Silent Prison*. Sharon Kedar, 2012.

the person as a bearer of the image of God. Who knows how well a person with severe disabilities might grasp the complexities of the world around him?

People with significant physical disabilities can often feel ashamed of their constant need for assistance, of being a “burden” to those who love them. This feeling can be so significant that many individuals believe their own death would be a mercy to their loved ones, and perhaps even feel duty-bound to shorten their life. Of course, it only exacerbates the problem that many of today’s cultural messages argue this very thing.<sup>10</sup>

There is a better way. In Joni Eareckson Tada’s article for *Christianity Today* “The Beautiful Truth of Being a Burden,” she writes, “As a quadriplegic who is rapidly aging, one part of me doesn’t want to burden my husband, Ken. The other part understands that this messy, inconvenient stage of life is supposed to reflect God’s highest purposes for us as a couple, and as a family.” Just as the church is strengthened by accepting the weaknesses of its members as opportunities to see God as stronger and more capable to provide, family units are invited to experience this same incredible reality.

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10. For more on this, see *When Is It Right to Die?* by Joni Eareckson Tada.



Sometimes, though, the opposite issue causes problems. The person with a disability has grown used to the service of others and besides ingratitude, has allowed a self-centered perspective to crowd out ways in which he or she can alleviate the burden of care. Does the counselee notice natural breaks in a caregiver's activity that make it less inconvenient to request a favor? Does he or she make it a habit to "group" needs, perhaps requesting water and an extra blanket at the same time rather than requiring the caregiver to make two separate trips? Some persons with a disability should be encouraged to do far more to bear their own burden as they are able: arrange for grocery delivery, coordinate scheduling of appointments, maintain an accurate inventory on supplies related to their own disability, etc. These individuals need the reminder of Philippians 2:4, "Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too" as well as Philippians 4:4-5, "Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do."

In fact, a key part of your work will be helping your counselee understand and apply biblical truth and principles to the struggles, conflicts, and circumstances they face. Disability, like other suffering,

often magnifies sinful actions and attitudes. For many people, seasons of suffering—where sinful attitudes rise to the surface—alternate with seasons of greater wellbeing. During the seasons of wellbeing, we can believe we have our sinful impulses under control. When stress and suffering continue, however, our sin, like the impurities in silver set over a fire, rise to the surface. The time you spend together with your counselee can be part of God’s refining work, and you can comfort him or her with that reminder from Malachi 3:3, “He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the Lord.”

Please make certain to articulate the difference between God graciously allowing disability so sin rises to the surface to be addressed and the myth that God has punished him or her with a disability for sin or a lack of faith (John 9:3, 2 Cor. 12:8-9). Spend time discussing the biblical truths reviewed at the start of this book, especially that God is sovereign over suffering, good through all suffering, and has a plan and purpose for our sanctification through suffering (Rom. 8:28-30). A disability is often God’s choicest tool in sanctifying—that is, refining and purifying—

an individual, drawing him or her closer to Christ. When the apostle Paul in his own sufferings stated, “This happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God,” he was declaring a fact for all individuals who must live with disabling conditions (2 Cor. 1:9).

In fact, depending on the theology that has shaped the individual, it may be important to work through several topics related to sin and disability, including healing. Consider together how the Bible shows healing to be multifaceted. While Jesus did heal many during his earthly ministry, he didn’t heal everyone; his primary purpose for coming was to preach the gospel (Mark 1:29-38). Indeed, ultimate healing is found through repentance: eternal life in the presence of our Lord and Savior (2 Peter 3:9).<sup>11</sup>

Focus, too, on the themes of forgiveness, acceptance, security, and significance found in our relationship with Christ (Eph. 1:3-8). Work to convey a clear understanding that our identity in Christ provides value, worth, and purpose far greater than any earthly pursuit or achievement. For a person who has been rejected on account of weakness, shown that they control so little in their day-to-day life, and cast

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11. For more on healing, see *A Place of Healing* by Joni Eareckson Tada.

aside because of their limitations, the gospel is really and truly Good News. Help them to apply biblical truth to the specifics of their situation. One powerful way to do so is to teach your counselees to pray proactively using God's word. (Great starting points can be Proverbs 3:5, Philippians 4:19, and of course, the Psalms.)<sup>12</sup>

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12. For additional thoughts on this, see "Speaking God's Language" by Joni Eareckson Tada or *Praying the Bible* by Don Whitney.



## Good News for Families Affected by Disability

The gospel proclaims the upside-down Kingdom of God, surprisingly contrary to what society thinks is good news. As Paul says, “God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful” (1 Cor. 1:27). Too often people with disabilities—whether that be around the world, down the street, or in the back pew—are considered foolish and thought to be powerless. Yet they are close to God’s heart and at the center of His shocking and saving grace—the grace that rescues us from sin.

Like all hardships, disability can magnify our natural tendencies toward self-pity, self-centeredness, ingratitude, and other sin. When God calls us to a life of Christlikeness, nothing he sends our way exempts us from that call. We have no excuse to justify patterns of sin in our life or in the lives of those around us, even if yes, their sufferings seem so much greater than our own. This greater suffering should certainly prompt deeper empathy and compassion,

but let's not mistake settling for less truth as an act of compassion. Even as you keep in mind the unique challenges of families affected by disability, care for and love each individual member as you would anyone else.

This brings us back to our initial point that counseling is discipleship. It is an honored trust to come alongside a person and help them move from where they are to where God wants them to be, from being self-focused to God-focused. God has gifted you with the training and spiritual insight to search out the root causes of whatever presenting need brought the counselee into your office. It is your privilege to come alongside each counselee, helping them to mature in their relationship with Christ as they learn to turn from sin and serve and follow him.

As you provide biblical care to individuals and families affected by disability, chances are, you will see the truths of Proverbs 27:17 played out: "As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend." You may come to realize the giving and the sharpening has not been all in one direction.



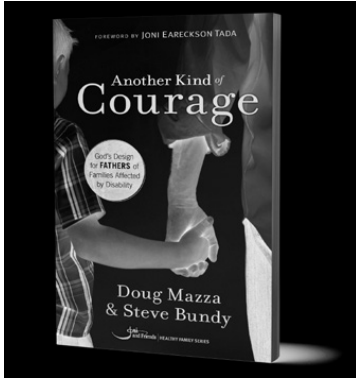
Joni and Friends was established in 1979 by Joni Eareckson Tada, who at 17 was injured in a diving accident, leaving her a quadriplegic. Since its inception, Joni and Friends has been dedicated to extending the love and message of Christ to people who are affected by disability whether it is the disabled person, a family member, or friend. Our objective is to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of this group of people in practical ways.

Joni and Friends is committed to recruiting, training, and motivating new generations of people with disabilities to become leaders in their churches and communities. Today, the Joni and Friends International Disability Center serves as the administrative hub for an array of programs which provide outreach to thousands of families affected by disability around the globe. These include two radio programs, an award-winning television series, the Wheels for the World international wheelchair distribution ministry, Family Retreats which provide respite for those with disabilities and their families, Field Services to provide church training along with educational and inspirational resources at a local level, and the Christian Institute on Disability to establish a firm biblical worldview on disability-related issues.

From local neighborhoods to the far reaches of the world, Joni and Friends is striving to demonstrate to people affected by disability, in tangible ways, that God has not abandoned them—he is with them—providing love, hope, and eternal salvation.



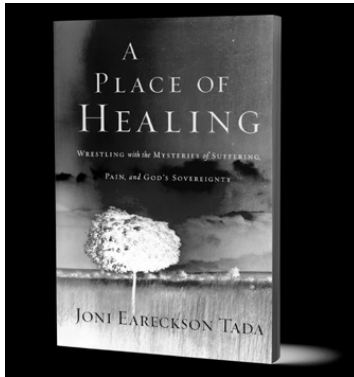
# Other Recommended Resources



***Another Kind of Courage:***  
*God's Design for Fathers of Families Affected by Disability*

In *Another Kind of Courage*, Steve Bundy and Doug Mazza, both fathers to young men with significant disabilities, speak about God's design for fathers of families affected by disability. With additional stories from dozens of other fathers familiar with the journey of a life affected by disability, this book encourages with honesty and wisdom.

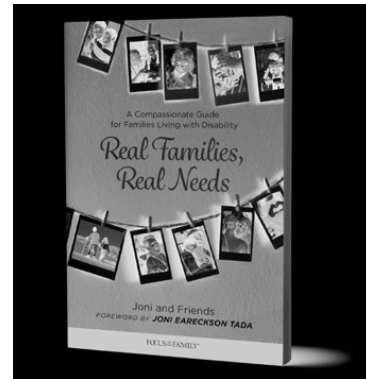
ISBN: 978-0983848479,  
224 pages, Paperback



***A Place of Healing:***  
*Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty*

"If God can heal me, why won't He?" In *A Place of Healing*, Joni Eareckson Tada considers foundational questions about healing, suffering, pain, and hope and what she's learned about God's purposes for her own quadriplegia and chronic pain.

ISBN: 978-0781412544,  
256 pages, Paperback



***Real Families, Real Needs:***  
*A Compassionate Guide for Families Living with Disability*

Whether a father, mother, sibling, grandparent, or other relative to a person with special needs, questions arise based on the specific role in the family as well as unique needs for support.

*Real Families, Real Needs* by Joni and Friends contains five sections to address every member of the family, providing encouragement, wisdom, and insights from God's Word.

ISBN 978-1589979253,  
272 pages, Paperback