

Season 4 | Episode # 23

## Pressing On: How to Lean on Christ Through Suffering

### Joni Eareckson Tada

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship... and sharing practical ways that you can include people with disability in your church and community.

Friends, this week marks an incredible milestone for our Joni and Friends Founder and CEO. This week, Joni Eareckson Tada turned 73, and as Joni will tell you, God continues to be so faithful. But as her challenges increase, Joni's lived in a wheelchair for more than five decades, faces daily chronic pain.

She's battled cancer and Covid. What exactly drives her to press on? As you listen today, I hope Joni's message encourages you as much as it has me.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Hi, my name is Joni Eareckson Tada. I thought I'd take just a few minutes to talk about pressing on because all of us, every Christian should be living out Philippians chapter three, verse 14, where it says, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize, for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." And what does press on imply other than there will be obstacles, right?

There will be hurdles to overcome. You've got to press through them. There are suffering and affliction to trust God with. We are to press on though we be weary. And at times that we feel like giving up, press on because there is a goal. The bottom line for every believer in Jesus is to keep striving. I mean, that's the bottom line, isn't it?

The end game to strive towards that heavenly goal, that prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ. Now, as a quadriplegic of well over 50 years, I know what it means to press on, to strive through afflictions, and to hurdle obstacles.

When I, um, broke my neck in that diving accident so many years ago, never did I think I would ever, ever smile again. It was a terrible day facing life without use of my hands or, or my legs. It was terrible. Yet, it was wonderful. It was horrible, yet glorious, all because that was the day I was, I was made, I was forced. God was asking me to strive to press on. My suffering pushed me to lean hard on God.

Second Corinthians chapter one, verse nine says, get this, now, let it sink in, these things, including breaking your neck, “These things happen that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God.” Don't you love that? So right away, my terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day in which I broke my neck and became a quadriplegic, it strangely became the wonderful day that I began leaning on God.

It wasn't doing it up until then. It became a marvelous thing when a follower of Jesus learns to turn his despair Godward, rather than inward. Frankly, I just got so tired of feeling sorry for myself. I, I wanted to turn it Godward, not inward.

And even if it's anger, turn it, turn it Godward. If it's the hardest of questions, turn it Godward. Utter doubt and disbelief, tell it to God because when you do, you engage him and in him all things then become possible. Hope is possible. Yeah, it's even possible to smile. When you must live with quadriplegia or two battles against stage three cancer, such as I have or chronic pain every day, such as I do even now, how does one press on?

Well, on many a night when I feel discouraged, even now, what, more than 50 years later, I lean on Jesus. It's all about Jesus. Second Corinthians chapter one says again that these things happen that we might not rely on ourselves but on Jesus. So rather than cave into fear or complaining, sometimes I lay in bed and I just, I just quote the Lord's Prayer.

If my mind is so confused that if I'm in such pain, I can't even put two words together, at least I know the Lord's Prayer, or I quote Psalm 23. I'll whisper it out loud into the dark. The Lord is my shepherd. He's my shepherd. He makes me lie down in a pasture. It doesn't feel very green, but I'm gonna believe he's making me lie down for a good reason.

You just gotta lean on Jesus, friends. You just can't give the devil a foothold. You gotta fight for your joy. You gotta fight for your contentment. And remember, it's a good fight. The Bible says so. So, press on. For me, paralyzed leaning on Jesus, I know that here's a savior. He understands what it means to be paralyzed because he was nailed on that cross.

He could not move. He gets it. He understands when I can't move. Jesus the most God-forsaken man who ever lived leaned on God through his own suffering and he did it so that we might never, ever be forsaken by the Father in our suffering. First Peter chapter two, verse 21 says, “Christ suffered for you,” leaving, get this, leaving you an example, an example that you should follow in his steps. And just like Christ pressed on, we press on knowing that all our reflections, all our abuses, all our pain, and disappointment, force us to turn our hurt heavenward. And maybe what Satan intended for evil, like my broken neck, you know what, God intends things for our good, like, um, okay, here's an example.

Okay. I do not sleep well. Okay. Pain usually wakes me up two or three times a night, and of course, being paralyzed a quadriplegic, I cannot move to reposition myself. And right there, it's the perfect storm for discouragement. It's Satan's trap at 2:00 AM or at 4:00 AM he set a trap.

In that dark, miserable hour, Satan thinks that he's got me cornered, that he's got my back up against the wall because as far as he is concerned, my unyielding pain and no sleep and total paralysis and again, and inability to move to help myself. He thinks that's the perfect setup to get Joni depressed and get her doubting her savior.

But uh uh, in the middle of the night, I press on. Paralysis and pain provide the perfect platform for me to turn it Godward and start praying for others, others who I know hurt far worse than I ever will. That dark hour becomes a platform for effective and powerful prayer for others who suffer, and at 4:00 AM Satan absolutely hates that I am praying.

What do you know? He runs hightailing it out of the bedroom. He despises it. I am not focusing inward but instead am focusing Godward. Satan despises that I am praying for people whose disabilities are far, far worse than mine.

I pray for people who must drag themselves through the dirt for lack of a wheelchair. I mean, how could I possibly complain when there are so many across the globe who are suffering so much more than I do? I pray for children who suffer, for those whose suffering under the weight of hopelessness. It's like I say to myself, Joni, get your eyes off yourself and onto others.

Do not look inward, look outward, and look Godward. And so, in the middle of the night when I am in bed awake and in pain, what do you know? Satan's end becomes God's means. Because those prayers, oh my goodness, do they have power before the throne. God looks down and he sees that they are sacrificial. He sees that it costs something to offer up those prayers.

I mean, it tells God. He looks down and says, oh my goodness, this lady must mean business. Look at her praying, despite all that affliction not complaining. We, we got work to do up here. We, we better, we better work through her prayers. Isn't that great to choose prayer over whining and feeling sorry for myself?

It is what gives any petition power before God's throne. Friends, it's the way you press on. If the devil thinks he has me cornered at 4:00 AM in bed and in miserable pain, he cannot rub his hands in dark, satanic delight for very long. For his evil purposes become God's delight in transforming the world.

Oh, my goodness. I am in partnership with God to help transform the world through my prayer. When you press on through the hardships you have, you are able to say with the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians, chapter four, nothing can daunt us, although we are handicapped on all sides. We are never frustrated.

We are puzzled, but never in despair. We may be persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone. We may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out because every day it says we experience something of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. So that, now get this, so that we might know the power of the life of Jesus and these bodies of ours.

Did you get that? Every day we experience something, we're supposed to experience something of the death of Christ, something of his suffering and pain so that we might also experience the awesome life of Jesus Christ.

You know, it was Charles Spurgeon who said, "If the waves roll against you, it should only speed your ship toward the port. Because you gain by loss. You become strong through the weakness. You grow spiritually in sickness, and you live by dying. You are made rich in all losses." Isn't that wonderful? I love Spurgeon because you know, it shows that all things in themselves are not necessarily good.

There's no inherent goodness in terrible affliction, whether a broken neck or a broken heart or your broken home. But again, what Satan may intend for evil, God intends for our benefit. For there is no circumstance, no trouble, no testing that can ever, ever touch you until first that trouble has gone past God and then it has gone past Christ, and then finally right through to you.

And if it has come that far, it has come with great purpose. I think it was Alan Redpath who said that, and I believe it. And I have learned to believe it because I have pressed on and leaned into God turning all heartache and hardship, Godward. Such simple disciplines they are, but they open the heart to being able to comply in tribulation.

It is a great grace to be able to welcome a trial and say again with Spurgeon and quote, he says the Lord, what do you know? The Lord must be teaching me some deeper truth that I have not yet learned. Oh, through this suffering, he, he, he is about to give me some closer acquaintance with himself that I have not yet experienced.

He's about to work in my heart, some, some new grace, which has never been there before. That's faith that can stand the test. Oh, friends, God wired this world to be difficult. It is so hard. It is such a battle. It is such a fight to stay content, but as I said, it's a good fight. The cosmic stakes are just too high to turn inward when hardships happen. Heaven is too real, and hell is too horrible to just drift through life. Ugh uh, you just can't drift or complain through life. I mean, think of it, every drastic obedience down here on earth is an opportunity to stretch your eternal estate and make it larger.

Every time you trust God through a hardship, every time you, you, you, you press on, you are increasing your soul's capacity for worship and service and joy in heaven. It says in the Bible, yes, there will be those who are greater in the kingdom and those who are lesser. Do not be lesser. Trust God more. I don't want you to get to heaven and, and look in in the rearview mirror and back on earth and think, why didn't I pray more?

Why didn't I trust? Why did I not press on through my suffering, believing God's promises? Oh, friend, as I said, heaven is too real. Hell is too horrible. Let's press on cause God has given us much work to do; the work of praise and prayers to offer up, the work of sharing the gospel with more people, your neighbors, your friends.

Passions to reign in. That's hard work. Habits to break. That's a lot of work. Press on. There are hurting individuals to comfort the church, to strengthen sin, to confront hope, to give doubting people missionaries to support, neighbors to reach for Christ and so much more. We've got so much to do.

Oh yes, I do long for Christ appearing. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. I am looking forward to the soon return of my savior. But the Lord longs for many, many, many, many more people to come to repentance and believe in him. So, until that day when he comes back, and I can jump up out of this wheelchair, I am heaven-bent on pressing on and striving to reclaim earth's territory, which the devil would like to think is his. I'm reclaiming it for Jesus Christ. I'm working hard to reclaim earth for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, -- and I hope you'll join me. Live courageously then through your afflictions. Strive to take hold of the call, press on and just make sure you pray and work to bring as many people with you to heaven as you possibly can. Friend, press on.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, we have much work to do, but I hope you're encouraged to press on. At Joni and Friends, we know there are so many people with disabilities who still need to hear the Gospel, and we'd love for you to help us reach them. That's Joni's heart as she celebrates another milestone birthday.

Will you celebrate with Joni by giving in her honor? Your gift of \$73 for her 73rd birthday or any amount will provide hope and hands-on help for people living with disabilities around the world. You can go to [Joniandfriends.org/birthday](https://joniandfriends.org/birthday) to give in Joni's honor. That's [Joniandfriends.org/birthday](https://joniandfriends.org/birthday), and we also have a link available in our show notes.

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