

SHARING *Hope* THROUGH HARDSHIP

Thank you for sharing God's love in word and deed with children and families struggling with disability all over the world—like Abel from Guatemala!



March is  
*Disability*  
**Awareness Month!**

# from the heart

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;  
I will remove from you your heart of stone and  
give you a heart of flesh.”

EZEKIEL 36:26

**I**t was the summer of 1967, just a few weeks after my high school graduation, when I took a random, reckless dive into the shallow waters of the Chesapeake Bay. My forehead thudded against the sandy bottom, snapping my head back and crunching my fourth-cervical vertebra. I had severed my spinal cord. And my doctor said, “Joni, you’re going to be paralyzed for the rest of your life, without use of your hands or legs.”

When the doctor’s words slowly sank in, bitterness began to take root. I hissed at heaven, saying, “God, I can’t live like this. I won’t live like this.” I knew I couldn’t end my life physically, so I was tempted to end it emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. My self-pity literally became suffocating. Dark and morbid thoughts were worse than my paralysis, and so, somewhere along the line I whimpered, “God, if I can’t die then please show me how to live!” It was the most feeble, faint-hearted prayer I had ever offered up, but it’s all it took. Immediately, God put Christian friends in my life who opened the Bible to help “show me how to live.”

It was around that time a friend, Steve Estes, shared ten little words that changed my life: God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves. Yes, God permits all sorts of things he doesn’t approve of. Like the cross of his own Son, Jesus. He hated what happened that day on Mount Calvary, but he permitted it to accomplish something that he loved, something that he prized even above the gruesome death of his own Son: the something that he loved was salvation for a world of sinners. I learned to look at my spinal cord injury the same way. God took no delight in my broken neck; he hates suffering; but through it, he accomplishes the lovely “something” he’s after: “Christ in me, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

The world is full of people with disabilities who will never have the chance to leave their bedrooms. They need to see that Jesus is their Answer, too! It’s why at Joni and Friends, we love declaring and demonstrating the Good News of Jesus whenever and wherever we can. The plight of suffering people is easy to ignore, that’s why Jesus commands us in Luke chapter 14 to “invite the poor, the



God brought me Christian friends like Steve Estes to point me to the Bible and show me how to live. *Who is he calling you to encourage today?*

crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.” Jesus is saying that of all the people you might ignore or neglect, do not neglect people with disabilities. They need the love of Jesus in a huge way. That command in Luke 14 is for me, personal. My heart breaks to think that the suffering disabled people endure here on earth may only be a dark omen of worse suffering to come in an eternity without Jesus Christ! So, at Joni and Friends we tell people with disabilities that “sin kills, hell is real, but God is merciful, he can save you, and Jesus is the Way!”

Countless thousands have yet to hear this astounding message, and I cannot bear that they’re being forgotten by others. Joni and Friends will never forget them. Our teams will keep giving the hope-filled news that through Jesus, the weak and vulnerable can escape from hell and have a home in heaven, a purpose for living, and the power to be “more than a conqueror” (Romans 8:37). Yes, there

are more important things in life than walking or using your hands. The most important thing in life is knowing that God has removed your heart of stone and given you a new heart. Oh, friend, help us keep sharing the heart-transforming Gospel so that the world’s weakest will gain a new heart in Christ. Thank you for remembering people like me—people with disabilities—during Disability Awareness Month and every month!

# Mobility Wrapped in the *Gospel*

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

JOHN 10:10

Our *Wheels for the World* team simply fell in love with eleven-year-old Abel, who has Down syndrome. His big eyes and bigger smile melted our hearts, but then our hearts broke when we found out that Abel also has congenital heart disease.

Heart defects occur in approximately 50% of babies with Down syndrome. Abel's condition is so serious that whenever he overexerts himself, he faints. Without a wheelchair of his own, Abel's opportunities for an abundant life were extremely limited. And though his father works in local agricultural fields, he only earns six dollars a day. Affording a wheelchair for Abel was an impossible dream.

But we surely know that with God, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26)! Our wheelchair mechanics and seating specialists got right to work fitting Abel for his very own wheelchair while his loving mother cared for him and his baby brother, who waited patiently on her back. And by the time his family left our *Wheels for the World* outreach event in Guatemala, Abel was perfectly positioned in his new seat of dignity and mobility, and his mother was equipped with the Gospel in her heart.



Through your love and faithfulness, now Abel can live life to the full each day, joining his family on outings without fear of fainting!

March 21<sup>st</sup> is World Down Syndrome Day. The date for World Down Syndrome Day—the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the third month—was selected to signify the uniqueness of the triplication of the 21<sup>st</sup> chromosome, which causes Down syndrome. Like Abel, all people with Down syndrome are uniquely and wonderfully made in the image of God. Join us in celebrating our brothers and sisters with Down syndrome on March 21<sup>st</sup> and *every day!*

“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

PSALM 139:14

# Halftime Respite Nurtures Special Needs Families with the *Love of Christ*

“I pray that you... may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

EPHESIANS 3:17,19

“Getting a break is not easy for the parents of children with special needs,” explains Karen. “You can’t just leave your child with anyone—you need to find someone who understands the challenges of disability, and who knows what to do in a medical situation.”

Karen and Chad have two children: seven-year-old Claire and Eli, who is ten years old and has spina bifida and hydrocephalus. “It’s hard for any couple to find time to focus on their marriage after they have children,” says Karen. “But that dynamic is compounded by disability and medical needs. Plus, having a child with medically complex special needs brings added financial strain.”

That’s where our *Halftime Respite* program comes in! “*Halftime Respite* benefits our whole family,” says Chad. “It shows Eli that there are other children just like him. It shows Claire that she’s not the only one who has a sibling with special needs, and it gives us time to make our marriage a priority.”

During *Halftime Respite*, children with disabilities and their siblings enjoy three hours of Christ-centered fun while their parents receive the gifts of time and rest knowing that their children are well cared for.

“The volunteers here are very loving and caring. I trust them completely,” says Chad. And Karen agrees. “I love that this is a Christian environment. Our children are nurtured in the Lord, and God’s presence is part of the whole event,” she says.



Eli loves playing games and he loves people! “He loves life!” says his mom, Karen. And at *Halftime Respite*, Eli and his sister experience the joy of having fun while meeting new people and feeling God’s love. *Thank you for loving families living with disability during Disability Awareness Month and all year long!*

# Bringing People with Disabilities into the Body of Christ

## From Missouri ▼

Bryan and Cheryl were told that their chances of having children together were slim, but two years after they got married, God blessed them with their first daughter, Sophia. And two years after that, God blessed them again with their second daughter, Sonya.

“Ten minutes after Sophia was born, we learned she has Trisomy 21, better known as Down syndrome,” says Bryan.

Bryan and Cheryl were shocked. They weren’t prepared for that kind of news, not to mention all that came with it. “Throughout that first day, doctors gave us confirmation after confirmation of Sophia’s Down syndrome. Later that evening, a cardiologist confirmed Sophia also had an AV canal heart defect,” says Cheryl.

Bryan and Cheryl faced their new world of disability alone and unprepared. “We had no experience with special needs or Down syndrome,” they explain.

The isolation, fear, and uncertainty Bryan and Cheryl

feel living with disability is exactly why *Family Retreat* exists, and it’s just what their family needed. At *Family Retreat*, their hearts were encouraged and their relationship with Christ was strengthened.

“The staff and families at *Family Retreat* have become our closest friends,” says Cheryl. In fact, Sophia met her best friend at *Family Retreat*. They live in the same area, share a similar diagnosis, and now attend the same church. Sonya, who was served by our *Family Retreat* sibling ministry as a child, has now served at two *Family Retreats* as a buddy to a disabled child. She’s made life-long friends with whom she stays in close contact and has grown in her walk with Jesus. She loves to mentor others because of what she’s experienced through *Family Retreat*.

Meeting with other couples in similar life circumstances has been an encouragement to Bryan and Cheryl and strengthened their marriage. *Family Retreat* brings families closer together and closer to Christ!



Sophia is a true daughter of the King of all Kings, Jesus!

## From the Northwest ▼

Antony and Irina were excited but nervous when they brought their four-year-old son, Jamie, to our *Washington Family Retreat*. They wondered, “Will our family be accepted? Will the staff and volunteers know how to respond to Jamie’s needs as a person with cerebral palsy? Will the retreat site be wheelchair accessible?”

Their nerves were calmed immediately upon arrival. “What was most noticeable right off the bat was the overwhelming hospitality and support and welcome that we felt coming into *Family Retreat*,” says Irina. “Everybody was very gracious—accepting us and accepting our son. Everyone was there for us. They chose to be there for us, and that was an overwhelming feeling in the very best way. It brought us to tears as we were driving in.”

Antony agrees wholeheartedly. “We all loved the daily worship time—especially Jamie, who loves music! The talent show was another thing we enjoyed as a family. And most of all, we were thrilled that every activity was adapted to meet Jamie’s needs. He was included in everything! The arts and crafts, the food, the amazing little coffee shop that they had for us... Everything was a highlight!” says Antony.

“Plus, as a faith-based organization Joni and Friends supports us spiritually,” continues Antony. “At *Family Retreat*, we got the respite that we all need. Jamie gets to have fun, and we get encouragement from other families that feel that same way. We came home knowing that there are families around who we can see year-round as we wait for the next *Family Retreat*.”

Thank you for holding families like Jamie’s together—not just at *Family Retreat*, but all year long. Your love and prayers are making an eternal difference in the lives of families living with disability! What a wonderful way to celebrate Disability Awareness Month!



“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

MATTHEW 25:40

## From Knoxville ▼

Chris and Kayla had a two-year-old son, Holston, when they found out they were having twins—an extremely rare set of identical twins known as mono mono twins. Chris and Kayla knew from the beginning that theirs was a high-risk pregnancy.

Their girls came into the world prematurely, and their lives as parents of medically complex children began. After two short weeks, their daughter, Teagan, passed away. And Morgan spent 122 days in the NICU before coming home.

Once Chris and Kayla brought Morgan home, their family faced the new reality of visits with specialists, therapy sessions, and medical appointments that resulted in feelings of isolation and grief from missing a typical parenting experience. Around 18 months old, Morgan was diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

Chris and Kayla realized that Joni and Friends could offer something that their family was desperately missing—connection with others who could relate to their journey of raising a child with disabilities. They eagerly signed up for *Marriage Getaway* where they connected with other couples and shared about challenges, victories, medical providers, treatment

options, and many similar struggles. They were encouraged by the pastor's teaching, the time with other couples, time together to reconnect, and the reminder that they were on the same team. Kayla recalls, "We left that weekend recharged and committed to finding a way to maintain connections with others on similar journeys." And they decided then that they would do whatever it took to go to *Family Retreat* the next summer.

*Family Retreat* was five days of being able to say "yes" to all the activities that their children wanted to do. They didn't have to make choices based on what was accessible for Morgan's equipment. Holston's volunteer buddy gave him undivided attention, something that is very rare in his life. Their whole family returned home feeling encouraged and refreshed. "For the first time in a really long time our family didn't feel like a burden to others," says Kayla. "And we didn't feel invisible. Joni and Friends does an excellent job of creating space for relationships among families to grow. They make the invisible feel seen, the isolated feel connected, and the weary feel rested. Joni and Friends puts the focus squarely on those who are normally pushed to the side."



Chris, Kayla, and their children—and their volunteers—found a place of belonging through Joni and Friends!

## From Pennsylvania ▼

When Mel and Joyce had their first son, Joyce had a feeling that something was wrong, and her mother's intuition was correct.

"There were times I felt concerned that Jerry's progress was slow," said Joyce. "Each time I expressed my concern to our rural family doctor he would lean back in his chair and say something like, 'Oh well, he'll probably be short for his age,' or, 'He'll never be the president.'"

When Jerry was three and a half years old, Michael was born. Joyce knew right away that Mike's development was more 'typical' than Jerry's. Even though Mike had the ability to run ahead of Jerry, who waddled back and forth, they usually would walk hand in hand as buddies up the hill to the barn. They sang together and played together. Their beds were side by side, and they would talk and giggle themselves to sleep.

The family eventually discovered that Jerry's disability was a genetic issue. When they told their geneticist a third child was on the way, he strongly encouraged an amniocentesis to know if the unborn child had the same genetic condition as Jerry. Knowing the risks of amniocentesis, and also knowing that God is the creator of all life, Mel and Joyce trusted the Lord with their baby and refused the amniocentesis.

Three months after newborn Melody came home from the hospital, the family's dreams once again came crashing down—Melody had the same genetic disability as Jerry and would be profoundly disabled. Joyce remembers crying to God, "I was completely trusting

in you to give us a healthy child." But she also recalls clearly hearing his answer, "If you were trusting in me then, why aren't you now?"

Soon after the family celebrated the birth of their fourth child, Matthew, a healthy boy. But later that same year, at the age of sixteen, Jerry passed away. Melody, who never walked or spoke a word for 20 years but was an equal member of her family, passed away in 1998. Their brothers Mike and Matt experienced the death of their siblings at a very tender age but they both realized that Jerry and Melody's lives were not wasted.

After getting married and starting a family of his own, Mike and his new family started volunteering at *Family Retreat*. "*Family Retreat* truly was a slice of heaven for us. We received as much as we gave! The Gospel is so much more evident in difficulty than in plenty. We have witnessed miracles, saved marriages, peace after heartache, and life after loss at *Family Retreat*. Only God can do this, and he gets the glory!" says Mike.

Mike is now our Joni and Friends Pennsylvania Area Director. Through the lives of his siblings, Jerry and Melody, God set the course for Mike's future.

“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

JEREMIAH 29:11



Mike (on the far left) and his whole family enjoy serving at *Family Retreat*!



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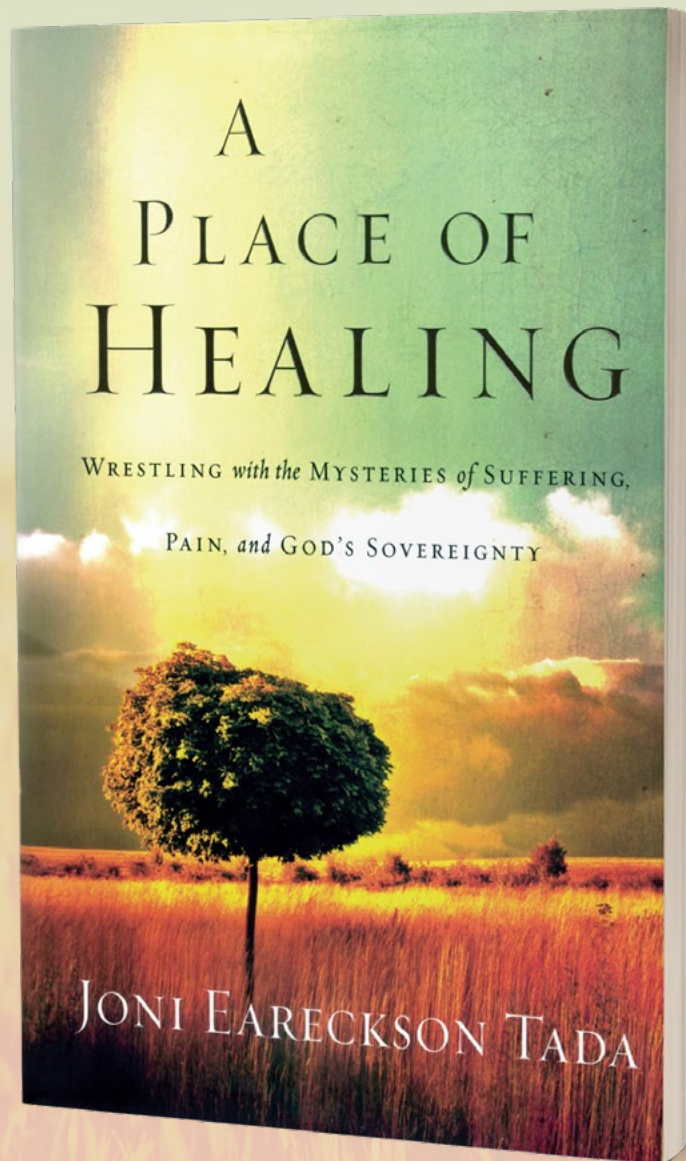
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