

Season 6 | Episode 1

# Joni Eareckson Tada and Crystal Keating Welcome Stephanie Daniels to the Podcast

## Joni Eareckson Tada

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Crystal Keating:

Hi friends, I am so thrilled that the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast has returned for season six. Friends, I am truly amazed at what God has done over the past five seasons to encourage listeners and myself through our conversations with people who in the midst of their sufferings have found hope and joy in Jesus.

It has meant the world to me to be with you on the podcast. And now I see God doing a new thing. This season, I'm excited to bring my friend Stephanie Daniels on board to join our conversations. Just as I help Joni and the Joni and Friends Response team answer calls and messages that come into the ministry, Stephanie responds to messages on our Joni and Friends social media accounts.

And I love how she's always ready to share a word of biblical encouragement. Stephanie navigates challenges of disability within her own family, so she understands how important it is to give and receive meaningful Christian encouragement. As Stephanie and I team up this season to bring you new episodes, we will also be sharing some very special messages from Joni Eareckson Tada herself.

We will hear straight from Joni's heart and her learnings from what the Bible says on a number of different topics. And I can't wait for those Heart of the Founder episodes. So friends, today, let's kick off our season six with something new. Listen as Joni Eareckson Tada introduces Stephanie Daniels.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Hi, I'm Joni Eareckson Tada, and I am so glad you're here. We've got a special episode for you today to kick off season six. As the founder of Joni and Friends, I'm going to commandeer the microphone for just one day so I can introduce you to my good friend, Stephanie Daniels.

So let's meet Stephanie.

Stephanie Daniels:

Hi, Joni. Good to see you.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

And it's good to see you, too. Thanks so much for being here. And Stephanie, thank you for all that you do for Joni and Friends. Briefly, tell our friends listening a little bit about your background.

Stephanie Daniels:

Well, I am a native Texan. My passion is worship. I love to lead people in worship and just entertain the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

So Stephanie, Joni and Friends is no ordinary workplace. What gives you a heart for working in disability ministry?

Stephanie Daniels:

When I grew up, I just breezed through life and disability was not on my radar. It wasn't until I graduated from college, I got married and I started to notice white spots on my body, then realized I had vitiligo. Now, I really loathed that part of my journey. And I came to a place where I said, Lord, please take this away. And if you don't take it away, help me be okay with it and help it bless other people. God, let it bring glory to your name.

And so, when I got to that place, I realized that that helped me grow empathy for people with differences. Because I realized I was different. It gave me a sensitivity to people living with disability.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Oh, thank you so much, Stephanie, for opening up about your personal experiences. And having an experience with disability, that gives you the wherewithal to comment with some authority, right?

Stephanie Daniels:

My father lost his vision completely when I was 16. So he's been blind now for about 30 years. And my mother was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's. So that has been extremely devastating to my sister and I. And on the other side, my husband, he and I had the opportunity to serve my late father-in-law who recently passed and he had stage four lung cancer and was living with the results of a stroke. So paralyzed on one side and just really struggled to do everyday things. So we're very familiar with disability.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

And I bet you're very familiar with caregiving, aren't you?

Stephanie Daniels:

I feel like we've been thrust in even more to this world of caregiving, but what I am learning is how important encouragement is in that season.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

My husband would say the same, Stephanie, as he cares for me.

So what do you see as being your work's greatest impact? Again you spent a lot of time on social media on behalf of Joni and Friends, what's been the impact?

Stephanie Daniels:

Joni, I think it's getting to encourage people when they are just in a really dark place. I get the opportunity to point them to Jesus.

We point them to Scripture and we get to pray for them. And I feel like the people that write in, they're not expecting it. That's what's interesting to me is people don't always expect that, but they, even in those comments and those interactions, they are enriched and encouraged and it's really beautiful to get to see that.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

I so appreciate that you use Scripture. I know that the word of God is, oh my goodness, it is the foundation of my life. It's the wellspring of my life. Scripture means a lot to you as well. Any favorite Bible verses that have been bubbling up in your heart to encourage you lately?

Stephanie Daniels:



I'm thankful that you and Ken take us all through the Bible chronologically each year. This is my first year to get in on that. And when life started "life-ing" a couple months ago, I fell off a little bit, but it's okay. Because I picked back up. But one of the Scriptures that I came across, it was Exodus 2:25 and it's talking about when the Israelites are crying out to God.

They're in captivity. They've been crying out and the 25th verse says, "God saw the people of Israel and he knew." And that just so blessed my heart because oftentimes, we think that God is a God that's tucked above the clouds and he's in his realm and we're down here just doing the best we can, and that maybe he might lift up the clouds and kind of peek and say, "Okay, they're still there. They're doing okay." But no, he's not. He's a God that's intimately connected with us. He sees where we are and he knows where we are. He knows our hearts and he's moved to act on our behalf.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Absolutely. And I must say, thank you, Stephanie, for joining Ken and me on our Through the Bible in a Year reading.

That's great. I'm always discovering something new from God's Word every year that we do that.

Stephanie Daniels:

Okay, Joni. I've appreciated all these questions, but now I feel like it's my turn. I have questions for you.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Oh boy. Okay. I'm not, not real prepared, but go ahead.

Stephanie Daniels:

All right. Okay. Well, can you tell me just a little bit about the Heart of the Founder series? What inspired it?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Stephanie, I'm not a young chick anymore. What can I say? I am going to be 75 years old in this wheelchair and maybe some of our listeners can hear the age in my voice.

And so as I get older and as I continue to beat the odds and the statistics of how long persons who have spinal cord injury should live, as I continue to outlive those stats I'm realizing that I need to record what's on my heart, the heart of the founder. Why I started this ministry, what does the Bible have to say about respite, caregiving, disability, self image when you're in a

wheelchair. What does the God of the Bible say about depression and healing, discouragement, getting your church involved in your family's needs? We decided to have me sit in front of a camera and just share what is on my heart.

And so I have done that. I have looked into the camera and talked about faith and how you can get your faith to grow. I've talked about memorizing scripture. I've talked about depression and what are some good guidelines and signposts in Scripture to help you get up out of that miry pit that sometimes we all find ourselves in.

I've talked about divine healing and why is it that God does not heal everybody and respite and the need for caregivers and trained caregivers. So I'm really excited about this series and I think we're going to be sharing some of those insights here on the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast in the future.

And boy, am I honored and privileged to know that.

Stephanie Daniels:

Joni, I'm so excited just to hear you say all of the things that you're going to cover in this new series, because I feel like it's things that these coming generations need to hear, and you are such a voice of hope. So I'm excited for what you're going to share with us all.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Me too.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes. So 2024 marks the 45th year of ministry for Joni and Friends. So when you think back to how the ministry started, what does this milestone mean for you?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Oh my goodness. I never ever did I think, Stephanie, what, 57 years ago now lying in a hospital bed that one day God would use the thing that I despised, a broken neck, that it would end up being the very thing God would use to kickstart a worldwide ministry. I never would have dreamed that.

And Stephanie, I just wanted to be a good steward of the influence that God had given me globally through the Joni movie and the Joni book.

And so I structured Joni and Friends to effectively respond to the questions that people were asking me through letters. Questions like, Joni, how did you get up out of depression?

Joni, what about miraculous healing? What do you say to faith healers? It was a little overwhelming at the start, Stephanie, as you can imagine. Thousands of letters. And there I am with my sister and my mother at the kitchen table, answering these letters by hand.

And I realized, you know what, we've got to go a big step further. So I moved to California rented office space with the royalties that I had received from the Joni book and beside answering letters, we started going around the country and just educating churches on how they could begin outreaches to families struggling with disability in their communities. That's how it started. And, oh my goodness, now, Stephanie, you know what we're doing, right?

So many Wheels for the World outreach trips and Family Retreats & Getaways, nationally, internationally. Who would have dreamed it? Who would have thought it? But definitely, this is God's ministry, wouldn't you agree?

Stephanie Daniels:

I completely agree. It feels like this train is on the tracks and it is moving full speed ahead and it can't be stopped.

And it makes, it really makes me want to worship. When I think about where you started and just the purpose that your life and the accident and everything has just been steeped in for the glory of God. It's so wonderful.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

And I guess that's why I'm grateful for my disability, because I need help. I need to engage in relationships. I have to ask people, I have to ask friends in my church for help. And I would just encourage our younger listeners to find a church in which the Word of God is taught in a way that you can apply it practically each and every day.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's so beautiful. I really love your heart posture, that neediness for the power of God, and for Jesus to just be your sustenance throughout your journey.

It's so beautiful. I want that for me. I'm sure other listeners do as well.

Joni Eareckson Tada:



Stephanie, real quickly, you said earlier that what I was sharing, it makes you want to worship. And that's what I do a lot with my own experience. I will say, Oh, Jesus, you're so good to me. I saw you work in my husband this morning when he was really irritated, and I prayed for him, and you answered and you gave grace.

You are to be blessed and praised. I mean, I do that all the time. I sing it. I say it. I worship the Lord because of something that I've seen him do. And what you were saying about my heart is to just in some way glorify God and what he's doing through my life and the lives of people around me.

So I resonated when you used that word worship. Sorry, I got you off the track, Stephanie.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's okay. No, I love it. Cause just that little blurb you just sang, you did it with soul. So, I'm sure Jesus really enjoys hearing from you. I'm so sure. Joni, what's so inspiring about you is that while you can't walk physically, it's obvious how closely you walk spiritually with Jesus and hearing you. I wish I could be a fly on the wall in the room with you and Jesus, just hearing those conversations. Can you talk a little bit about how your suffering has deepened your faith?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Oh, my goodness, this is supposed to be a brief podcast, and I think that would take so much time. My suffering has deepened my faith in that I oh, I praise him, I bless him for this strange gift, this wheelchair. What a strange gift it is, but it is so priceless, it's so precious. It's just given me a reliance on Jesus, a leaning into him of such depth and urgency that I just don't think I'd have such intimacy with my Savior were it not for the suffering, the hardship, the affliction.

It has cut gashes in my heart through which God pours grace upon grace upon grace. And I guess that sentence right there sums it up. It really has cut gashes. It's hard, no doubt about it. It's painful. And at times I feel so overwhelmed by my quadriplegia and chronic pain and aging with it all.

But the gashes that are ripped into my heart and soul, so to speak, they are ways of letting in more grace and stretching my soul and making it bigger. My faith is bigger. I believe more because of my disability. I have more faith than did I not enduring this disabling condition. I've got more joy and it's a deeper kind of joy, a more profound kind of joy.

But basically, yes, you're right, Stephanie, my faith has grown, and our faith is a gift of God. It is a gift. And we can exercise it, and it gets bigger, but it is suffering through which the exercise really produces gains in our walk with Christ. So again, I'm just speaking off the top of my heart right there, but I think that sums it up.

Stephanie Daniels:

It's so rich what you're sharing. It's really something to admire in you. I love that.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Suffering comes at us in all shapes and sizes. And I imagine our listeners have their own struggles. I know that many of our listeners are mothers of children with disabilities.

Some have disabilities themselves. I know many of our listeners deal with chronic pain. So it comes at us in shapes and sizes and degrees. The point is not to ask for more suffering, but just to suffer well with what he's given you to suffer. Yes, you don't need anything more. You can learn all these things we've been talking about by stewarding your own suffering well.

Stephanie Daniels:

Well, Joni, the Heart of the Founders series, it really records wisdom from hard fought battles that you've endured over 56 years as a quadriplegic.

So, if you could go back and talk to yourself in those first few months after your accident, what would you tell or what advice would you give to young Joni?

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Oh, my goodness. I would tell young Joni not to be afraid of the future. You know, Stephanie, I met a young man in the rehab center, he was a paraplegic in a wheelchair, and he was new to me, I had not seen him before. He had come to the rehab center for a checkup, and I said to him when we met, I said, "How long have you been in your wheelchair?"

And he said, "Eight years." Eight years? How do you do it? I was overwhelmed with the idea. Eight years in a wheelchair. I was afraid I'd live that long, that I'd have to be in a wheelchair that long. Wow. The possibility of it frightened me. Sure.

And I think I would tell young Joni not to be afraid. Of all the commands in the Bible, the most frequent command is do not fear. I think it is mentioned 360-some-odd times. Do not fear. Do not be afraid. And why would we be afraid? We've got a great God who sent his son to be ripped to shreds and impaled on a cross like a slaughtered piece of bloodied meat, all because of love for us, and how could we doubt his intentions?

Of course, if he died for us, he's going to have his best intentions. For his plan for our lives, so I'd say do not be afraid. And now, 57 years later, I look at that young man who was paralyzed for



eight years. Oh my goodness, never did I think I'd get here, but I have. And it's because of his wonderful, wonderful intentions in my life.

Stephanie Daniels:

I'm so thankful for God's intentions for your life and that he's kept you and strengthened you. Now, I know so many people, they share it on social media that they are praying for your strength and just for you to keep going because what the Lord allows to pour out of you is so beautiful and encouraging.

So I know young Joni would have really received that well from you. I'm sure. Well, what's in your heart? The heart of the founder. When it comes to the next 45 years when you think about Joni and Friends and in the body of Christ.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Of course, my heart is to see every disabled person find hope and dignity in his place in the body of Christ.

So I pray that the body of Christ, 25, 40, 50, 100 years from now, will embrace families that struggle with disability and see these families as individuals who love the Lord Jesus, who have gifts to share, ways to strengthen the rest of the body and also to see persons with disabilities in the church as individuals whom we can serve and support and encourage.

I just would love to see the church begin to look a little less Emily-Post-picture-perfect, all normal and rigid and right and regulated, and a little more messy with I don't know, kids with autism and kids with Down syndrome running up and down the hallways. I just picture the church looking a little more messy and real, and families that hurt and struggle, not just with disabilities but other issues of life.

I pray they find a welcoming place in the body of Christ.

Stephanie Daniels:

Oh, Joni, what a beautiful vision that you have cast before us today. Lord Jesus, just let it be so as we work to build the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Joni Eareckson Tada:

Absolutely.

Crystal Keating:



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