

Season 6 | Episode 9

## Meet Quadriplegic Pastor Joel Vander Molen

### Joel Vander Molen

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Crystal Keating:

This is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast and I'm your host Crystal Keating. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship and practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. As you listen, visit [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast) to access the resources we mention, or to send me a message with your thoughts.

Today I'm joined by Joel Vander Molen, who, after surviving a car accident as a child, has lived as a quadriplegic since the age of three. Although Joel encountered many health and physical challenges, he continues to follow the Lord and lives a very full life. Joel is a part-time pastor and preacher, while also devoting his time to mentoring other individuals and families impacted by paralysis, and operates his own tech business, VMT, as a web developer.

Joel is here today to share a bit of his story, I can't wait, and testify to God's faithfulness as he's relied upon the Lord and also shed light on how the church can be a better support to people living with paralyzing conditions.

Welcome to the podcast, Joel. It's so great to have you on the show today.

Joel Vander Molen:

Thank you. It's great to be with you.

Crystal Keating:

It's so neat how we got connected. We knew about you before you knew that we knew about you because you are connected with this wonderful organization called the Christopher Reeve Foundation. And if you recognize that name, you'll remember that Christopher Reeve played the part of Superman in the movie long, long ago, and he had a spinal cord injury.

He started an organization dedicated to supporting individuals living with spinal cord injuries like himself, and especially assisting newly injured paraplegics and quadriplegics. So we were delighted to find out you have been mentoring other people who are paralyzed and also prayerfully looking for opportunities to share the good news of Jesus with them, Joel.



It's such an amazing combination. Our ministry hears from people who are paraplegics and quadriplegics, and they often want someone who's gone before them. And so you're mentoring these people and helping their families. I'd love to hear how you started mentoring other quads. And what are some of those relationships like for you?

What kind of questions are they asking you? What kind of support are you sharing with them?

Joel Vander Molen:

Sure. I've been with the Christopher Reeve Foundation for probably 15 years, I would say, at least. And before that I would hear about someone whose son or child was injured and got a spinal cord injury. And I would maybe try to help them through Facebook or just my family would through phone calls, as technology and contacts changed over the years. And so I just continued that as I got connected with the Christopher Reeve Foundation. So, what each one talks about really, it's different from case to case.

One common thing that I get asked about is my breathing method. My injury level is C2/C3, which means I'm unable to breathe on my own. But instead of a regular ventilator, I now use something called a diaphragm pacemaker. That's an implant that gives my diaphragm an electrical stimulation every few seconds.

And that is what tells me to breathe. I get people asking about that, and what it takes to switch from the regular ventilator to this system, or any recommendations for help with it, or that kind of thing. But then also just general help. Where do I start?

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, I think that's the most common question we get as well. I'm newly injured. Where do I begin? What do you tell people who are asking that question?

Joel Vander Molen:

With them, I try to encourage highly that they connect with any kind of spinal cord injury groups like Facebook or, say, through the Christopher Reeve Foundation or the United Spinal Association or anyone that they can connect with mentors, myself being one, but I prefer more than just me.

And with now social media, there's a lot of problems with it, but there's also opportunities that we can help connect people as well. The big thing, especially for adults, is getting assurance on: Can I live? Or is this the end of my life, that I'm just destined to sit here forever or what?

Crystal Keating:

All of those practical resources are so important, because in the midst of crisis, it's really disorienting. Who do we go to? There's so many options out there. But when you get talking to a person who's newly injured, the questions go way beyond, "Who's going to be my caregiver?" to "Is this going to be my life?" What are some of the conversations where you feel like you can really speak into their sense of the emotional side of being newly injured?

Joel Vander Molen:



It depends greatly on the person. If they talk about having any kind of faith of God and that they bring it up first, then I can go from there as well.

Crystal Keating:

Joel, I'm so curious about your parents and your community. It sounds like you didn't allow being a quadriplegic to stop you from living. What kind of drive or mentality have you had to have as you've walked with God through the years that has pushed you forward? There's seasons of discouragement, but overall, how have you been so fruitful in your life?

Joel Vander Molen:

I have had the blessing to grow up in a Christian home. My parents knew at the very beginning that God had good plans for me. Again, when I was initially injured, my doctor said that I needed to go to a care facility, that someone at my age and injury would never work well in the general community because I would always be sick and having problems.

But right away, my parents fought that, and I guess won with the doctors, and I got to come home, their regular home, and had caregivers at first, 24/7. And thankfully, God had prepared us for that, that my dad's employer had very good insurance that allowed caregivers and everything that we needed. That was looking out for us before we even knew it.

And they always encouraged me to do things. Again, in starting school, I went with "regular classes." I was you know, the only kid with a disability in my class and definitely in my school. I lived in a city of 10,000 people and went to a small, private Christian school. There's 40 people in my class at that point.

So, it was just me, but I learned, too. I worked with some of the other kids in my class and over the years, writing with my mouth and just having a marker or a pen directly in my mouth, and did writing assignments along with the other kids, just learning as I did with my peers and adapting as I needed. And Dad working on things as I needed as well,

Crystal Keating:

Wow, so your family was very involved, which I think is so important for any of us, especially if you have a life-changing accident. And Joel, you know here at the ministry we do a lot of outreach, but we also receive a lot of inquiries from loved ones of friends and family members who have survived, like you, a serious accident and sustained a spinal cord injury.

And, of course, many of the family members don't know where to start. They want to help. Your family, obviously, was all hands on deck. And you can see God's hand through that. I'd just love to hear how you would encourage these families. Not just the individuals, but like, how do you encourage the community to come alongside of them?

Joel Vander Molen:

There are many ways. One that I would say is to make sure to provide support for whoever the caregivers are. If it's a young person, say a child that's injured, and the parents are the primary caregivers, try to make time that the parents can get time to themselves, even if it's just staying in a separate room, if that's all the case can be. I'm very fortunate that I have both my parents, and they're committed to each other, but unfortunately, when a young child has a disability that



is severe, it's frequent that either mom or dad will take off. And so I've worked with a lot of kids that they only know their mothers or their dads are very infrequent visitors.

Get support for parents so that they can support each other, but also help with caregiving if possible, to learn some of the simple cares, say, something as easy as helping someone eat. If they eat by mouth, you can easily help give bites and other things like that just to give a little bit of a reprieve.

And also in helping with the community. I would say that making sure businesses are barrier-free for wheelchairs, that there are areas that you can park, especially with large vans that need a lift or ramp that comes out the side and that kind of thing. And those are areas that people definitely can help but don't always think of.

And maybe make a regular routine, like, when I was young, my grandparents would help one night a week, because we didn't have enough night care, so they learned to do everything that I needed, and they would do one night a week, and as well as some of my parents aunts and uncles, and that kind of thing as well.

Crystal Keating:

I think there's a bond that's created between the person being cared for and the caregivers, if they're approaching it in love. And what a neat thing to be able to spend that time with your grandparents and other family members.

I will say, and Joni has said this, the care can be really intimate, Joel. Right? Toileting routines, catheter changes, dressing, hygiene, bed, bath. It's pretty vulnerable. How do you as a man, process through all of that when people are seeing you and touching your body?

Joel Vander Molen:

I had the advantage of starting young. As a three-year-old, I really didn't think of such things.

Crystal Keating:

Sure.

Joel Vander Molen:

At that age, you have mom or whoever helping you take a bath or whatever it is. It's the way life is. Throughout the years, I just grew into it as being part of what I needed for life.

And I've had a few male caregivers over the years and it's nice having a guy around. But as I've told some people, it's like I had multiple moms with me over the years. Some of my caregivers I've had for many years, such as the gal that's with me now, she's been with me over 20 years. My other main day person is, she's off right now for a medical leave, but she's been with me for 17 years and, it's not very common for that to happen.

And I'm very blessed that I generally have most of my hours covered, so I have pretty, usually anyway, I have every night covered with someone and five days a week that are covered during the day. So it allows my parents to do their own thing, to work or whatever they need. And especially as they're all getting older and the problems of age start to creep in that it's good that we have support from so many people.



Crystal Keating:

That's a great way to look at it. You must be very flexible and patient. What about for people with paralyzing conditions who didn't become injured as a young child?

I'm actually specifically thinking about a call I took years ago from a young man who was newly injured and he felt very self-conscious about people caring for him. And he felt like a burden. I mean, I would say that's probably the resounding sense for people with spinal cord injuries.

"I don't want to be a burden to my family and my friends." And how do you break out of that? I heard you say something really good, that these people are here to help you survive and thrive. Like how would you encourage someone who's genuinely feeling like, I've always been the helper and now I need to be helped.

Joel Vander Molen:

I have definitely felt that same feeling at times as well, especially like after college, that I did not find work, so I had to move.

I had lived basically on my own for about three years in my own apartment and I had to move back home with my parents, and definitely had feelings of, yeah, being more of a burden again. For those in that situation I say a lot to look to scripture that God provides people that we need.

He knows what we need before we even ask it.

Crystal Keating:

And people who are listening, I just, in my heart, am praying a prayer of faith for you to hear what Joel's saying and to ask God for that kind of perspective, for his perspective because this is not easy.

Joel Vander Molen:

That is a good reason also to connect with different support groups, or different groups of like-minded or like-injured people that you can talk about different things that relate to each other, and that's a big one again, of not feeling like a burden.

Crystal Keating:

We need one another, we especially need the church, and I know Joel, you've felt such a passion to preach and a burden to encourage the church specifically. I want to hear about that. How were you given this opportunity to share messages, not just at your own church, but other congregations in your area?

Joel Vander Molen:

I got out of college, I saw that my local grade school did disability awareness, and I did some inquiries and found out that the whole segment was watching a half-hour long video by Joni, actually. And I'm like that's okay, but I can probably do better in person than a video.

So I spoke with second graders about serving God with a disability and different types of disabilities and this has now been my 20th year of doing that. And I go to a number of grade



schools in the area talking to them about disabilities and serving God. And I tell you, some of the most challenging or surprising questions come from eight- and nine-year-olds.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, they do.

Joel Vander Molen:

I like young kids without filters. Several years after starting that, I also added on college classes that I speak to any type of medical discipline that they're studying.

And then, about the same time, I started with a couple of local Gospel outreach groups that did street evangelism type things and with encouragement from some of my friends from that. I went ahead and got what's called my license to exhort.

And the Christian Reformed Church, which is my denomination, that allows a lay person to be a substitute preacher, basically. That was 2017 and since then I've gone around to several different churches in my area and I've been preaching about eight times a year or so. And a big part of what I do at church in every sermon that I try to preach and make sure to emphasize the Gospel. So we know that we have sin in our lives, but we don't really think about it much. If we have ever told a lie or a little white lie it's still breaking the ninth commandment. And we read in Revelation that all liars will have their part in the lake of fire.

And Jesus said in Matthew 5 that if anyone has held hatred towards someone, it's the same as murder. Know that with quadriplegia and any type of injuries, that if it was caused by someone else, that the person who was injured may hold a lot of hatred or angst against that person. But we are commanded that we need to forgive them, that we have made mistakes in our life as well, and Jesus will forgive us if we repent or turn from our sins, and come to him alone, not by works.

And looking at the other commandments of not taking God's name in vain, that's a big one that we hear a lot in TV or movies and can let it slip from our mouth, but God says that anyone who does that will not be held guiltless. These are what I emphasize that we need to be very careful and to cut sin or any temptation for our life, but that no matter what we have done, that if we turn from sin and confess them to God, that we will be saved.

He's promised that he will forgive us, and that no matter what we experience in this life, you can say lifelong as a quadriplegic, that the problems we have will be as nothing in heaven. The problems that we have now, be it the years of pain, will be nothing compared to eternity, and hell, for those that choose to reject God's offer of free life.

So that's what I preach on and I vary it depending on the congregation, but that is what God has called me to do.

Crystal Keating:

What a neat opportunity to bring the good news of Jesus, that he's the one that restores our relationship with God so that we can have life so that we can live in love because life, I don't know about your life, but it hasn't gone as I planned and there's disappointment at the very least, but trying to make sense of where is this all going? And God is our hope. He is our hope and that's where we all have to come to a place of saying, okay, I may not be able to make sense



of my quadriplegia or the pain I'm experiencing or the cancer diagnosis or a family member passing away unexpectedly, but I can be assured that with him one day all of these things will be made right.

All of these things will be healed. We will be together again. My body will be restored. Your body will be restored. You won't be reliant on a breathing mechanism and sin will be eradicated. And Joni would say that's the best part, right? A clean heart.

Joel Vander Molen:

Yep. I remember that whatever situation we're in, we're always being a witness as well.

So even if we end up in a place like a nursing home, that this is the only place we can get care, it's very easy to get depressed, but you can still be a witness to the caregivers around you. And if at all possible to get set up with a computer that you can write or help others.

And it may take some adaption and you will need to be assertive. But it's still possible to serve God wherever you're at and I have to remind myself of this sometimes as well.

Crystal Keating:

That's so true. That's so true. What a good word. Okay, Joel. This has been such a great conversation as we end our time together, I want to ask you one more thing about how the church can come alongside people impacted by disabilities, people with paralyzing conditions people who use wheelchairs. What can we do as a family of God to better communicate the hidden, invisible love of God in tangible ways? What would you say?

Joel Vander Molen:

Often when someone receives a diagnosis or injury, there's a lot of support for the person. Or family right away as far as, say, visits or food deliveries or fundraisers or that kind of thing. However, in the case of a spinal cord injury, remember that things don't go away.

That often what you're doing at the beginning especially for high level injuries, they keep going for months and years and sometimes decades, so to not forget to help to offer support for more long term. But then as far as churches itself, things like decreasing barriers to access of church buildings, having ramps or elevators or that kind of thing.

I know that in my area, we have a lot of churches that meet in buildings that are quite old, but a lot of them have still been able to get elevators in so that you can get access, and then maybe having areas that, if you have pews, to maybe shorten a couple of them, so that someone with a wheelchair can sit and not be sticking out in the aisle.

Those are just things that make it more welcoming and I've had some churches say we don't have anyone with a wheelchair that comes to us. So why would we need to do all this? And I say because you don't have all that you can't get anyone with a wheelchair so it's a catch-22, as well.

Crystal Keating:

Joel, this conversation has been so great, and I know our listeners will benefit from the encouragement shared, and if they want to learn more about your story, you wrote a memoir. What's it called, and where can people find it?



Joel Vander Molen:

It's pretty simple. The main title is "The Quad Life" then the subtitle is "Unexpected Times Abound, but Reliance on God is a Must." And that is just available on Amazon and locally as well, but Amazon is probably the best, the easiest place to get it. And that was also all written by mouth stick.

Crystal Keating:

That's amazing. That's amazing. And memoirs are so great. As I was reading it, you really brought me to where you were. Your description is so great. Our listeners have a lot of resources right now. They can check out Joel's book. You can also come to our website, [joniandfriends.org/church](http://joniandfriends.org/church). For church training resources. Joel mentioned a couple of ways to make your church more accessible. Here at Joni and Friends, we want to help churches welcome and embrace people with disabilities. All people should have the opportunity to know Jesus and be discipled and I know that is the heart of God.

Joel, thanks again for joining us on the podcast today. This conversation has been great.

Joel Vander Molen:

You're very welcome. Thank you for having me.

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