

A Biblical View on the Sanctity of Life

By Joni Eareckson Tada

The first time Dan Pollock and I bumped wheelchairs, I was taken aback by the severity of his paralysis and his thin, frail body. Dan was born with a significant neuromuscular disease, and some people have said that he'd be better off dead than disabled. But Dan is full of life. It troubles me when people say he's suffering needlessly or that he is imprisoned in his body. Such phrases allege to be compassionate but reveal a fundamental fear that actually means, "I would hate to live like that."

The last time I visited with Dan, it was on a rainy afternoon. He was resting inside his transparent iron lung due to a recent heart attack that had forced him to spend more time lying down. Through the plastic cylinder I could see how scoliosis had severely bent his small body. I positioned my wheelchair so I could see him in the mirror above the cylinder.

"Joni," he said, "I used to think I wouldn't want to live like this. But time always changes a person's ideas about life and how valuable it is. And now I don't think of my iron lung as a life-support. It's just my lungs and not 'extraordinary care' or 'heroic treatment.' For me, it's normal. That's why I don't like the phrase 'quality of life.' Most people would say my life lacks any quality—that it's not worth the cost or effort for me to live. But in this iron lung, I can pray. I can witness to others. I treasure my friends and family. And that makes me very happy. It gives my life meaning."

You can understand why Dan Pollock detests the phrase "quality of life." Such terminology reflects an outsider's assessment of how a patient's life-meaning is impacted by a disease or disability. Many people look at Dan and think, "Who would want to live in such a condition?" But their evaluation is highly subjective. They look at Dan and impose on him their own ideas about pain, discomfort, inconvenience, cost, and what they believe makes for a happy life.

At our core, we are predisposed to our own self-centered values, and we have no right to place those standards like a template over a person like Dan. We cannot judge another's "quality of life" based on our one-sided prejudices. We need the biblical worldview to supplant our preconceived notions about life and its value. We need to give up our subjective criteria and accept an objective, transcendent worldview that ascribes true life-worth to someone like Dan.

Sanctity of Life

Dan's experience shows us that no matter how physically or mentally debilitated a person may be and no matter how young or old, people should be treated with respect and dignity. But on what basis do we ascribe human dignity? Genesis 1:26 has the answer: "Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us.'"

Each of us is an image-bearer of God. As such, human beings are utterly unique in the realm of God's creation. Because humans are the only ones created in God's image, we have dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:28). We are like no other creature that God has formed, and although we do not bear God's physical image, we bear more of a resemblance to him than we do to apes that have hands and feet like we do!

God is Spirit, and we carry his imprint—he has impressed upon our nature the reflection of his likeness. Although sin has badly tainted his image within us, we nevertheless are human beings who not only possess volition but also have virtues such as compassion, courage, and an innate sense of what is good and right. We have an immortal soul, and we were made to glorify and magnify the Lord.

As image-bearers, we are all equal. This is so critical to how we relate to people with disabilities. My friend Trillia Newbell writes, "Understanding our equality as image-bearers changes everything about our human relationships. As image-bearers, we should view others as God views us. One way the Lord identifies us—and I'd argue this is the most important differentiation—is as either in Christ or not in Christ. C. S. Lewis said it best when he wrote in *The Weight of Glory*: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these things are mortal. Their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."¹

This is the true biblical worldview on life. *This* way of seeing fellow human beings is what constitutes life-value. *This* is what makes our lives so precious. And so we treat the elderly, the marginalized, the unborn and newborn, and all people with disabilities with the same care and tenderness we would reserve for any representative of God on earth.

"Sanctity of life" means that human life is sanctified by God, separate and set apart from the rest of his Creation. The sanctity-of-life ethic stands in utter opposition to the quality-of-life ethic. One is objective and based on absolute truths; the other is subjective and based on people's biased values. The sanctity-of-life ethic informs how we think about people with disabilities and how we relate to them. Life is a God-given gift, and people deserve not only the respect but also the necessary treatment that sustains their life (Gen 1:26; Deut 30:19b–20). Life is the most fundamental and irreplaceable condition of the human experience, and it should be safe-guarded at all costs.

The Slippery Slope

Ten years ago Terri Schiavo, a severely disabled woman living in Florida, was starved to death—US courts upheld her husband's decision that, in effect, Terri wouldn't want to live this way, and so her life supports were removed. Many empathized with the court's decision, stating that Terri was not mentally capable of expressing her wishes. As I sat in my wheelchair outside the hospice facility where Terri was dying, I knew it was a watershed moment that would jeopardize the lives of all Americans with disabilities.

Now a decade later, it happened again—but this time, the patient was, without question, totally competent. David "Chris" Dunn, a patient at Houston Methodist Hospital, was completely cognizant and had expressed a desire to live; yet hospital administrators wanted to end his treatment against his wishes. The Texas Advanced Directives Act allows healthcare providers to remove life-sustaining treatment from a patient even when doing so overrides the patient's desire and right to live. Chris's family fought on his behalf, but sadly Chris died of natural causes while they awaited a judge's decision. The family is rightly going to continue their case challenging this unjust law in Chris's memory.

What happened to Terri Schiavo has opened a floodgate of abuse against the weakest and most vulnerable in our nation. What disability advocates feared ten years ago has come to pass. Although Chris Dunn was able to make known his wishes to stay alive, the hospital would have none of it and persisted in trying to end his treatment.

How Did We Come to This?

In the 23 years since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), I have watched its most celebrated ideals erode and crumble under a double standard. I had the honor of serving on the National Council on Disability when the ADA became law, and ideally, it was intended to guarantee the basic rights of Americans with disabilities. Many saw the ADA as a law which would help move society beyond the premise that one is “better off dead than disabled.” I am amazed, however, at how much people’s fears of disability have eroded the most basic of human rights, especially now that so many more people are surviving disabling conditions. And when society’s fundamental fear of disability provides the framework to legislate policy, the outcome can only result in a double standard.

First, it was assisted suicide laws. For example, people with dementia and depression have already taken advantage of assisted suicide.² And in the Netherlands, people with ALS have had their physicians administer aid in dying.³ How ironic that personal autonomy is employed to empower persons with disabilities to kill themselves rather than enabling them to live independent lives with dignity.

A double standard of rights is now being applied to the most vulnerable among us: infants with disabilities. On December 13, 2013, a couple was awarded \$50 million in a landmark wrongful birth lawsuit after their son was born with severe disabilities.⁴ Although this lawsuit was motivated by claims that the hospital and lab did not follow through with its obligation to rightly screen for a particular rare genetic anomaly, nevertheless this ruling sends a clear message that a person with a disability may not have a life worth living. This decision has put more pressure on healthcare professionals and insurance companies to test for any and every possible abnormality, thus putting more lives at risk. So while a disabled person’s civil rights are recognized under US federal law, those rights are nullified when confronted with stereotypical notions about the “tragedy” of a disabled person’s existence.

This double standard is glaringly obvious in the Belgian Parliament, which ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)⁵ in 2009 but legalized euthanasia for children with disabilities in 2014. Article 10 in the CRPD clearly declares that “Parties reaffirm that every human being has the inherent right to life and shall take all necessary measures to ensure its effective enjoyment by persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others.”⁶ The question is, how can Belgian legislators insist that people with disabilities have “the inherent right to life” yet extend a so-called right-to-die to not only adults but, shockingly, to minors who feel burdened by their disability?

It seems that the rights of a person with a disability fall under a subset of other, more significant rights—that is, the right of an individual to choose, especially if that choice involves life and death.

Incredibly, the American Medical Association has now classified obesity as a disability.⁷ How can we, with a clear conscience, widen the definition of disability to include any manner of physical condition yet ignore the plight of infants with spina bifida, Down syndrome, or cerebral palsy? We need to make up our minds. We cannot logically widen a definition of disability to include an unlimited number of conditions in order to legislate protection and then claim that it is perfectly morally permissible to prevent a person with a disability from being born or kill them once they are here. To say the least, it’s a haphazard approach to a critical social issue.

The problem with this double standard of protections is that it pits one person’s rights against another’s, making the exercise of rights nothing more than a national competition between “who is more victimized than whom.” When this happens, society splinters into groups of arguing individuals, all in pursuit of giving their arbitrary determination a showy kind of dignity by calling it a “right.”

What kind of society do we want? If we are seeking a virtuous society, then we must defend the rights of the helpless, not nullify those rights so we can justify destroying the helpless. The right to life must not be exposed to a double standard. It benefits all of us to minister to those who are hurting, not agree with them that life isn’t worth living. I fully admit that because we as the church aren’t stepping up to our calling

to defend the weak and vulnerable, we are gradually seeing each of our values—God’s values—eroding one by one (Ps 82:3). This will hurt everyone in the long run.

God is the giver of life, and he is the only one who should have the power to take it. He gave human beings the ability to develop medicine for the human good in order to help reverse the effects of a fallen world. Allowing physicians to kill patients pushes the moral limits of medicine beyond what it was intended to do.

A Word About Life and Death

Nearly five decades have passed since that fateful day when I dove into shallow water, crunched my neck, and floated helplessly paralyzed facedown in the water. I hardly ever think about that day anymore, it was so long ago. But the other day, a visitor to our Joni and Friends’ office asked, “Didn’t you panic when you were in the water? Weren’t you afraid of dying?”

I had to reflect, wondering, *Did I panic? Was I frightened?* Strange as it may seem, even though I was helplessly floating face-down in the water, I had no fear. Although I knew that water was about to flood my lungs, a deep and powerful peace held fear at bay. Psalm 68:20 says, “Our God is a God who saves! The Sovereign LORD rescues us from death.” This verse means that our sovereign Lord is in the business of saving lives.

Albert Barnes once explained it well when he wrote, “All that pertains to deliverance from death, all that prepares for it, all that makes it easy to be borne, all that constitutes a rescue from its pains and horrors, all that follows death in a higher and more blessed world, all that makes death ‘final,’ and places us in a condition where death is no more to be dreaded—all this belongs to God. All this is under his control. He only can enable us to bear death; he only can conduct us from a bed of death to a world where we shall never die.”⁸

As it turned out for me, my sister Kathy rescued me before I began to drown, which tells me that, yes, God will rescue you, but often it’s at the last second. You will be delivered, but with absolutely no time to spare. His grace will uphold you, but sometimes it’s not ministered until you come to the absolute end of yourself. Yes, I survived that diving accident, but by the skin of my teeth.

And it’s why, to this day, Psalm 18 means so much to me where it says, “The ropes of death entangled me; floods of destruction swept over me. The grave wrapped its ropes around me; death laid a trap in my path. But in my distress I cried out to the LORD; yes, I prayed to my God for help. He heard me from his sanctuary” (Ps 18:4–6). Only God knows the countless times you and I escape death every day.

So thank God for his sovereign protection over your life. Whether you have a broken neck or broken arm, God blankets you with his protection. And when your time does come to leave this earth for the next, God will rescue you, just like he always has. In the meantime, rest assured that your times are in his hands, and that is the safest place to be. In the meantime, share this Good News with everyone you know who has a disability!

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Notes

1. Trillia Newbell, “Bearers of God’s Image,” *Tabletalk Magazine*, November 1, 2014.
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7. Kim Lyons, “Is obesity a disease, or merely a condition?” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 16, 2013, <http://www.post-gazette.com/business/legal/2013/12/16/Obesity-a-disease-or-merely-a-condition/stories/>.
8. Barnes’s Notes, Electronic Database Copyright © 1997, 2003 by BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.

About the Author

Joni Eareckson Tada is a global Christian stateswoman and an internationally renowned advocate for people with disabilities. She is the Founder and CEO of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, a nonprofit organization with a worldwide outreach to people with disabilities and their families. A diving accident in 1967 left Joni, then 17, a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. Since then, Joni’s wisdom and influence have been shared with the world through Christian books, the media, speaking, and her service in disability advocacy. She served on the National Council on Disability under two U.S. Presidents; during her tenure, the Americans with Disabilities Act was drafted and passed into law. Joni has also served on the Disability Advisory Committee to the U.S. State Department. Her driving desire is to see every person with a disability find hope, dignity, and their place in the body of Christ. Joni and Ken Tada have been married since 1982.