

God's Story of Disability: The Unfolding Plan from Genesis to Revelation

By Dr. David Deuel

God has a story. From Genesis to Revelation, salvation history displays the plans of God's heart, his mission. The story includes disabilities, because disabilities play pivotal roles in God's mission to bring people to himself. Familiarly, his glory and our worship are at the very center. Although entire books have been written on small details of disability in Scripture, the entire story from creation to eternity needs to be told. It is, at heart, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and a basis for praise. In our study, we explore the Bible's perspective on disability as it develops in salvation history.

Although references to disability are scattered throughout Scripture, perhaps surprisingly, the topic does not appear prominently. In fact, when compared with many other matters, the Bible offers little to say directly about disability.¹ One reason is that God wove his heart's concern and tender care for those with disabilities into the fabric of society. It did not stand out because it was commonplace. But Scripture also gives us encouraging insight into God's provision for people with disabilities whom he loves.²

God Gave Us a Beginning Without Disability (Genesis–Exodus)

1. In the Beginning, There Was No Disability.

When God's created couple, Adam and Eve, first willfully disobeyed him, sin entered the world and brought pain, suffering, disability, and even death with it (Gen. 3:1–24). Scripture calls this painful reality "the curse" (Rev. 22:3). It is very important to remember that people have disabilities because of the curse on all creation. Even the animal kingdom has disabilities.

2. As Creator, God Assumes Responsibility for Disabilities.

Responsibility means that God is not just the cause, but the upholder, enabler, and final rescuer of people with disabilities. Now that is responsibility! This perspective differs considerably from simply blaming God for disability, which would be serious error. When Moses wanted to explain to God why he was incapable of serving him due to some inability in his speech, the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Exod. 4:11).³ This verse not only addresses God's role in disabilities, it also sets the stage for his provision *through* his people.

Although greatly disappointing, it is important to survey the disability perspective of other people in the ancient world before we focus on God's people. Among Israel's neighbors, perspectives on disabilities varied considerably. Treatment ranged from completely rejecting and mistreating people with disabilities to worshiping them. Sadly, rejection was the norm. Most babies with disabilities were left to die by exposure shortly after birth. If they survived they were treated as outcasts and consigned to a miserable life of begging, prostitution and in general, being taken advantage of. Usually, they suffered a premature death.

It was anyone's worst nightmare.

The other extreme for persons born with a disability was that they might be worshipped as supernatural beings due primarily to their abnormal behavior or appearance. At least one Egyptian king with a disability was worshipped for having a condition that left him disfigured. Rather than a poverty-stricken social outcast, he was pampered, but still an outcast. Whether rejected completely or worshipped, people with disabilities were not accepted. Both the rejection and the worship resulted from an incorrect understanding of what caused disabilities. In the early period which some call 'pre-scientific,' those who rejected the one true God did not understand the true causes of disabilities. The ancients typically blamed disabilities on sins or offenses to their gods. With this reasoning, people with disabilities or their parents suffered because of something they had done wrong.

God's people differed considerably from their contemporaries in their understanding of the causes of disability and their treatment of persons with disabilities.⁴ Although most did not understand disabilities from scientific perspectives any better than their neighbors who rejected God, they reasoned that God cared about all people, disabled or not, and so should they. In fact, God was so concerned about people with disabilities that he asked his people Israel to help those not able to help themselves. From the earliest days of God's people, his focus was on seeing the entire community grow spiritually to become committed worshippers.

3. As God's Creatures, We Groan with Pain and Sadness for Disability to be Healed.

Disability is a high price of living in a sin-cursed world. Paul reminds us that all creation, including people with disabilities, "groan" in suffering as we wait for perfect redemption (Rom. 8:19–25). Regardless of how blessed we appear, we are all still in pain this side of Heaven. But we also know that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). That calling includes disability.

God's Gracious Law Makes Provision for Disability (Exodus–Deuteronomy)

1. God's People Need Protection by His Law.

People with disabilities were considered part of the larger group called "the needy" or "the afflicted," and linked with vulnerability and poverty. This included the mentally challenged who were judged by their loss of self-control.⁵ The group encompassed those who might pass in and out of disability status several times in their lives and acknowledged God's sovereign hand was involved in giving and removing the disability. In fact, everyone entered this category sooner or later if they lived to old age.⁶

2. God Tells His People in His Law to Care for Those with Disabilities.

This included punishing those who oppress individuals with disabilities and rewarding those who rescue and assist them. God's Word describes compassion for the people with disabilities within the charter of Israel. For example, "You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:14). Notice that obeying this command is an expression of fearing God. One law places a curse upon the one who mistreats a person with a disability: "Cursed is he who misleads a blind person on the road. And all the people shall say, 'Amen'" (Deut. 27:18). The mistreatment of a person with a disability was deserving of severe punishment. That is because God loves them and cares for them.

3. Job and David Follow the Law by Caring for People with Disability.

Scripture presents them as righteous for their faithfulness. In declaring his innocence before his accusers, Job explained to them that he had kept God's law, which required compassionate treatment toward those people who were disabled. He said, "I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame" (Job 29:15). This meant he had helped those who were sight-impaired and unable to walk without difficulty due to their disabilities. In so doing Job compassionately participated in God's plan for persons with disabilities, as did others like him.

Similarly, King David assisted Mephibosheth, a young man who was unable to walk because he was dropped as a baby (2 Sam. 4:4). His father was Jonathan, a friend to whom David had pledged his faithfulness. David kept his commitment by showing compassion and caring for this young man: “So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate at the king’s table regularly. Now he was lame in both feet” (2 Sam. 9:13). Notice that David not only offered basic care to Mephibosheth, he brought him to his table as one would a family member. This was more than kindness.

God’s Prophets Promise Future Hope for Disability (Isaiah–Malachi)

1. God Will Establish the Persons with Disabilities Whom He Has Afflicted.

When we look at passages which deal with future things, we once again find that people with disabilities became recipients of God’s healing—in part because he demonstrates his greatness through healing them. “In that day, declares the Lord, I will assemble the lame, and gather the outcasts, even those whom I have afflicted” (Mic. 4:6). This passage reminds us that God assumes responsibility for disability. It also assures us he will heal them. Other passages show us God’s hand of kindness in restoring persons with disabilities: “The LORD opens the eyes of the blind . . .” (Ps. 146:8).

Some passages look forward to a great and future day when God will right all wrongs and reverse the effects of the curse (Rev. 22:3). This grand event is described in terms of God restoring sight and hearing: “And on that day the deaf shall hear words of a book. And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see” (Isa. 29:18).⁷ Again, “Behold I am bringing them from the north country, And I will gather them from the remote parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame” (Jer. 31:8). In beautiful poetic language befitting the occasion of final healing, “Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy, for waters will break forth in the wilderness and streams in the Arabah” (Isa. 35:6). And finally, “I will make the lame a remnant, and the outcasts a strong nation, And the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on and forever” (Mic. 4:7). God’s future plans for persons with disabilities offer healing and comfort now.

2. God Will One Day Deliver Persons with Disabilities from Oppressors.

God seeks retribution for violating the laws against misusing people with disabilities. God promises to rescue people who are disabled from those who take advantage of them. “Behold, I am going to deal at that time with all your oppressors, I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth” (Zeph. 3:19). The shame spoken of is not only due to sinning against God, but also to inexcusable social rejection and mistreatment of people with disabilities. For all those who have abused God’s children with disabilities, God warns of justice and punishment.

Jesus Offers Hope and a Way for Disability (Matthew–Revelation)

When Jesus came to Earth, in addition to dying on the cross for sin, his mission was to repair the effects of the curse and fulfill what the law commanded. He revealed what wisdom prescribed and the prophets had predicted for persons with disabilities. As his commissioned agents, we continue the work he began. Yet many are surprised to discover that part of God’s plan for people with disabilities was to not only glorify Jesus, but also to minister to others—not just *in* their disabilities, but *because of* them. How do people with disabilities minister to others? The simple answer is they serve others in many ways, but first in their need. Seems ironic, doesn’t it? Their needs provide opportunities for individuals or groups to serve God through caring for them. How does this work?

1. People with Disabilities Allow Jesus to Show Compassion, Bring Glory to God, and Demonstrate that He Is God's Son, the Messiah.

- A. *Jesus Had Compassion on People with Disabilities.* “And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed him” (Matt. 20:34). And again, “*And moved with compassion*, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I am willing, be cleansed’” (Mark 1:42, emphasis added). The Bible calls these miracles “the mighty acts of God” or “the works of God.” When questioned about the purpose of healing a blind man, Jesus responded that it was “in order that *the works of God* might be displayed in him” (John 9:1–3). In Jesus healing persons with disabilities, God’s mighty acts are personalized and put on display for all to see in the perfect example of personal compassion and fair treatment.
- B. *Jesus Brought Glory to God by Healing Persons with Disabilities.* In response to Jesus’ exercising compassion by healing people with disabilities, the multitudes praised God. They glorified God because Jesus showed compassion to persons with disabilities as part of God the Father’s will. “Large crowds came to him. They brought blind people and those who could not walk. They also brought disabled people, those who could not speak and many others. They laid them at his feet, and he healed them. The people were amazed. . . . So the people praised the God of Israel” (Matt. 15:30–31, NIRV).⁸ When Jesus healed people with disabilities, it brought glory to God.
- C. *Jesus Demonstrated that He Is God by Healing People with Disabilities.* One day, when John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was God, the Messiah, Jesus pointed immediately to his miracles on behalf of those who needed help as proof: “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Luke 7:22). The fact that disabilities are included with fatal diseases and harmful poverty demonstrates that Jesus, as God, desires to restore those affected by disabilities along with all other devastating effects of the curse. The end result is “creation-quality” conditions. Tim Keller said it well in his book, *The Prodigal God*, “Jesus’ miracles were not so much violations of the natural order, but a restoration of the natural order. God did not create a world with blindness. . . .”⁹

2. People with Disabilities Give Jesus an Opportunity to Correct Wrong Ideas About God's Love and Human Suffering.

Myth: *God Does Not Love People with Disabilities.* This notion is a carryover from pagan beliefs. But the Bible makes it clear that a disability is not God’s disapproval or punishment upon individuals who are disabled. He allows disabilities for his intended purposes; to bring glory to himself, spiritual growth in people with disabilities, and ministry opportunity and blessings for believers who serve the disability community.

Myth: *People with Disabilities or Their Parents Sinned Against God.* One example of this wrong idea is a question that someone asked Jesus regarding whether it was a person with a disability or his parents who sinned. Jesus responded “neither” and explained that the disability existed “in order that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:1–3). Jesus’ explanation is clear. The disability was there so that he might heal that individual. While on the one hand this was a specific instance, a general principle lies behind it. God allows some people and not others to be disabled in order to accomplish his purposes.

Myth: *People with Disabilities Lack the Faith to Be Healed.* Some people believe that if a person has enough faith, he or she could be healed. This is not taught in the Bible, but is based on a misunderstanding

of Matthew 17:20 and 1 Corinthians 3:2 which seem to indicate that nothing is impossible with enough faith. Instead, the Bible teaches that we must pray as those who submit their wills to God and if it is God's will, he can heal a person's disability. This happened during Jesus' earthly ministry and on a few other occasions in the Old Testament and the early church. Most would agree it could happen today. But it has always been done for the glory of God, and often for the growth of the individual. Many people with disabilities have great faith and live victorious Christian lives. In fact, their faith may be stronger than able-bodied believers *because of their disability*.

3. People with Disabilities Allow Fellow Believers to Demonstrate God's Love and Faithfulness.

Jesus prioritized spiritual needs but did not neglect physical and cognitive needs. This should be our role with persons with disabilities. In Acts 6:1–6 we read how Deacons in the Early Church also served as role models for all believers in assisting others, especially widows. It is estimated that a widow was about 60 years old on average, and most likely had the common disabilities brought on by aging. With great confidence that God can use us, we should consider our mission and motives:

A. *Our Mission: How Can We Serve Persons with Disabilities?* We began this study by saying that God's story in Scripture is about his mission on earth. Our mission, which must be consistent with his, should begin with evangelizing and discipling people with disabilities (Matt. 28:18–20). This two-stage process should always be our first priority. People with disabilities need to be in Jesus' Church learning and growing. Compassionate treatment and mercy ministry should be woven into the fabric of every thought and deed pertaining to disability, not treated as an additional component of disability ministry or, worse yet, pitted against evangelism and discipleship as it often is. Once we have prioritized spiritual matters, we must address what might prevent someone with a disability from participating in the Christian life and avoid several pitfalls.

- We must consider how to lead people with disabilities to Christ. We must not appear to place conditions on our love for them. This is easy to do. For example, we must not let unbelievers think we won't trouble ourselves with them if they do not become a Christian. This is manipulation and it is wrong.
- We must help people with disabilities to grow spiritually in the best way possible. We must not cause those who claim to be Christians to think that unless they grow spiritually in conduct, we will treat them like children by punishing them or ignoring them.
- Finally, we must provide opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in all aspects of church life. They must be enabled to fully engage in worship and have an opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts (1 Pet. 4:10). In short, we must see to it that every aspect of the local church experience is realized in their lives.¹⁰

B. *Our Motives: Why Should We Serve People with Disabilities?* Believers should serve God out of both fear and love for him. There is no contradiction here. Motives are complex. It might help if we understood some of the direct and indirect reasons God gives us for caring for persons with disabilities. Hopefully, we can then serve with purer motives. The following motive list is ranked from the weakest to the strongest.

- *Because We All May Be Disabled Some Day.* In Ecclesiastes 12:1–3, Solomon talks about the "difficult days" referring to end of life issues. Statistics remind us that at some point in our lives more than 70% of us will not be able to climb a flight of stairs. Most of us will become visually and hearing-impaired to the point where we may not be able to see or hear at all, or at least we'll require glasses or hearing aids. These are *disabilities*.¹¹

- *Because Our Eternal Rewards Will Be Based on Serving Selflessly.* In Luke 14:12–14, Jesus instructed a group of Pharisees and a dinner host about humility. “When you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12–14). Here Jesus struck at the heart when he said, in essence, this is the best kind of service because people with disabilities were not expected to repay. God keeps a record of our good and bad deeds. Solomon summarized, “The end of the matter is this; fear God and keep his commandments for all must give an account of every deed” (Eccles. 12:13–14). The Bible calls believers to humble ourselves and serve God for heavenly rewards.
- *Because We Must Help the Weak.* The apostle Paul says our faith will work itself out in our love toward other people. “In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner [supporting Paul] you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35). We come to understand the word “weak” as it is used in other contexts, for example, “And a great multitude was following him, because they were seeing the signs which he was performing on those who were sick” (John 6:2). But we must be cautious in defining what actually helps any individual.¹²
- *Because God Has Empowered Us to Love Well.* We thank God for whatever measure of healthy bodies and minds he has given us. Out of our thankfulness we consider how we might help people whose bodies and minds do not work well or work at all. The world of a person who has a disability is often physically difficult and emotionally painful. For those with mental disabilities the situation is sometimes even more difficult.
- *Because Believers with Disabilities are Part of the Body of Christ.* One of the most worthy reasons for serving people with disabilities is that it is the right thing to do. Whatever responsibilities and privileges fall to all believers in the body of Christ, they also are due to those with disabilities. We may even find that those with disabilities can do certain things better than more able-bodied and able-minded believers.
- *Because Believers with Disabilities Serve Uniquely.* Perhaps most importantly, people with disabilities can minister in incredible ways. In fact, they can minister as effectively, if not more so, than their sisters and brothers in Christ who do not have disabilities.¹² Their physical or mental disability, in God’s hands, becomes a ministry blessing. This brings new insight to Paul’s challenge that all believers in the Body of Christ have gifts the Church needs (1 Pet. 4:10). He was not excluding people with disabilities. We are blessed to have them as part of our individual and collective Christian experience.

The Bible, by treating people with disabilities as part of the assembly in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament, shows us clearly that people with disabilities are just people who happen, by God’s sovereign plan, to have disabilities. They are not another category of persons, but people with a wide range of unique abilities. If we desire to submit to biblical teaching, we will treat all individuals as one of us and give assistance where it is needed.

We would be remiss if we did not conclude by recapturing the spirit of the prophets who saw disability as ultimately glorifying God. Our greatest blessings in service will come through being a blessing to others with disabilities and being served by them. God’s story began in a disability-free paradise with a tree. That is where it ends and reopens for a new and endless disability-free eternity. Jesus entered our sin-cursed

world and brought healing through his death. No wonder John says in the final chapter of our Bibles, “And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. And there was no longer any curse” (Revelation 22:3). There will no longer be any disability.

Not every story finds a happy ending. But for those who love people with disabilities and those loved by them, the ending could hardly be better—perfect bodies, perfect minds, and perfect fellowship with God, whose story includes disability.

Recommended Reading

Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences by Saul M. Olyan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature by Rebecca Raphael (Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 2008)

This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, (Leiden: Brill, 2007)

Forms of Deformity: A Motif-Index of Abnormalities and Disabilities of Human Form in Traditional Jewish Literature by Lynn Holden (Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 1991)

The Blemished Body: Deformity and Disability in the Qumran Scrolls by Johanna Dorman (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit, 2007)

Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story by Jeremy Schipper (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2006).

Notes

1. Disability terms are low frequency and vary with the translation: Blind (*KJV* 82, *ASV* 79); Deaf (*KJV* 15, *ASV* 16); Dumb [= mute] (*KJV* 29, *ASV* 31); and lame (*KJV* 66, *ASV* 70).
2. This study follows the contours of the disability theme, and begs a more detailed study of Genesis-Revelation and the theme's development.
3. All Scripture quotations in this paper, unless noted otherwise, are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. It is significant that the Hebrew words used in this passage that translate “mute”, “deaf”, and “blind” are specially marked with a grammatical pattern indicating physical disabilities. C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995): 21.
4. Historical studies include Harry A. Hoffner, “The Disabled and Infirm in Hittite Society,” *Eretz Israel: Archaeological, Historical, and Geographical Studies 27* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2003).
5. Olyan, *Disability*, 62.
6. Interestingly, although the Bible lacks an equivalent term for our English “disability” it presents a perspective on disability that is consistent and pervasive. While it is true that the disabled were sometimes treated as ritually unclean (Lev. 21:18; 22:22), it seems clear enough that this had to do with the transmission of disease or the perception of unblemished perfection in didactic symbolic gestures. See Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*. These small and potentially confusing aspects of disability pale in significance and scope when compared to the Lord's heart for people with disabilities seen throughout Scriptures.
7. We must be cautious in using Isaiah's and other writers' language for sometimes he refers analogically to spiritual disabilities (spiritual blindness, etc.).
8. *The New International Reader's Version* has sensitively rendered the language of disability in this passage.
9. Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 2008): 112
10. Those who would lovingly help those with disabilities must consider how love is best applied. To love is not to develop a dependency, which robs an individual of dignity. See Glenn J. Schwartz, *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement* (Lancaster, Pa: World Mission Associates, 2007): xvii.
11. The 2000 U.S. Census found that 19.4 percent of the population is affected by physical or intellectual disability. For a challenge to rethink how we define, categorize, and view disability from a Christian perspective, see Deborah Creamer, *Disability in Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Academy, 2008).
12. See, “Surprised by Disability: Why the Parts of the Body that Seem to be Weaker Are Indispensable,” *Christianity Today* (October, 2008) www.christianitytoday.com/2008/09/surprised-by-disability/

About the Author

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