

## Trading Control for God's Grace

*By Doug Mazza*

Exhausted, I tried to find a comfortable position in the chair that had been my primary residence for three days. The heart monitor nearly drove me insane as the green digits indicated a heart rate in excess of 180 beats per minute. My son Ryan, who had yet to reach his third birthday, was fighting for every breath following his tenth brain and skull surgery brought on by a rare chromosomal imperfection that had deformed his skull, pushed his eyes nearly out of their sockets and disrupted his upper respiratory system even before he was born.

For a moment, I concentrated on what it felt like to be hugged by Ryan. Despite his deformities, his brain was developed to its full size and he had a normal potential intellect for his age. So somehow, through all of the pain and suffering, surgeries and seizures, this little boy had acquired a sweet personality. In spite of his developmental delays, Ryan would race on his hands and knees to greet me when I'd get home and call his name. He always stretched out his somewhat deformed jaw into the warmest most grateful smile I had ever experienced. But that night in the hospital, it all seemed to be coming to an end. The doctor's words three days earlier kept ringing in my ears. With a hint of tears in his eyes, he and a nurse had sat me down in the children's playroom, locked the door and said, "There comes a time when medical science has done all it can do and for Ryan I'm afraid that time is now. I don't see how he can live longer than two or three more days."

So there I sat with a few family members, living between the resignation of impending loss and the hope of a miracle. I knew that my pleadings with God sat on a thin spiritual resume. I believed in God. I even believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. I just didn't know what that had to do with me. Certainly, I didn't have a personal relationship with him—nothing that could be considered intimate. I believed that God surrounded the world and did with each day whatever it was he mystically decided. Like lots of people, there were times when I called God into my presence—especially when I was in a tough spot—so I could ask something of him or, maybe stated more correctly, try to negotiate with him. And he seemed like a pretty reasonable God to me, usually willing to do things my way. Just the kind of God many of us want . . . available on demand!

You see, I was a guy who had to be in control. I was on the corporate fast track, knocking off promotions at will, stepping ahead of my peers, and doing it all years ahead of my time. I received a lot of feedback from the world affirming that my strength was all I needed. But Ryan had completely thrown my life compass off kilter. Like every situation I encountered, I had put myself in charge of his recovery, which was turning out to be the biggest failure of my life. I had exhausted every effort and had no other place to turn with this enormous painful problem. My pleading prayers were going unanswered, my ability to manage, shattered. What possible purpose could the life of this child have? I had been offered all of the bumper sticker wisdom and pop Christianity phrases from all manner of people who, frankly, just didn't know what to say. So far, the only role I could see us playing for good was that other people were grateful they weren't us!

Three days after my meeting with the doctor Ryan was clearly struggling. I couldn't even imagine where the strength to keep up the fight was coming from. I was alone with him about 4:00 that afternoon. He had been in a coma, completely non-responsive for about 12 hours when he began to stir. I rose from my chair and leaned forward. He rolled his head toward me, struggled to open his eyes and recognized me as our eyes met. His eyes penetrated me in a way that has never happened before or since and I will never forget it. He reached for me with what strength he had left, but a soft cloth was wrapped around his wrist and pinned to the sheet, protecting the arterial cutdown, which was feeding medicine into his little body. A look came over his face and I knew exactly what he was thinking: *Daddy, help me! Help me! You're the one who said I would be ok. You're the one I trust; I don't know any power above you.*

And my heart broke. It broke because in that moment I knew I had never actually had such authority, and now I had only moments to make things right. I got down close to my son's ear and for the very first time, I said to him, "Ryan, I can't help you anymore. Jesus Christ is going to take care of you now." With that Ryan slipped back into his deep sleep, and I slipped down onto my knees on the floor clinging to the side of the bed, in a complete emotional collapse.

I now know there were a couple of reasons for that collapse. First, there was the obvious emotion of the moment, which anyone can understand. But there was another reason for that collapse. Have you ever carried something that was unbearably heavy as far as you could possibly go—maybe just a little further than you thought you could—and then released it? If you have, then you know the collapse that follows. I had carried the full weight of being in charge of Ryan from the moment he was born. That day in the hospital, for the first time, I had unwittingly, in faith, released the most important thing in my life to the living Christ. I could feel the weight being lifted off my shoulders. I believe that in that moment of crying out to the Son of God, Jesus Christ stepped forward and lifted that sinful cross off my shoulders and took it upon his. Years later after reliving that moment over and over again, I believe that Christ communicated the equivalent of, *"I was wondering when you were going to invite me into this problem, when you were going to turn to me and ask me to take control."* And by his enormous grace, he did, and I could feel it. Obviously, I was still my son's father, but I had finally let God take his rightful place as the one in charge.

In that moment, I learned that God is not going to "elbow" his way into our lives. He wants to be invited in. The one thing God will certainly allow you to be in control of is what you are going to do with his Son, Jesus Christ. Accept him or reject him? Invite him in or send him away? His grace requires no secret handshake or classroom time. His grace is immediately available upon your surrender to him. He'll meet you where you are, do the heavy lifting and, with your willingness to receive him as your Lord, provide the mentorship in your life to develop a deep personal relationship with him. That step? Well, that step is called *faith!* Faith requires release. God does not want half of your problem or half of your prayer. Sometimes we hang on to our issues, fears, problems and needs, as though they were a favorite worn out old shoe. Jesus wants a relationship with you. If you give him all of you, he delights in giving you all of himself. He is saying, *"Let go."*

As I sat on the floor at the hospital, nurses came to me and urged me to go home since they expected Ryan to make it through the night. I left the hospital that day a very different man.

Once at home, our family all fell into an exhaustion-induced sleep. At about 10:00 pm the phone rang. As I forced myself awake, I stared at the phone, unwilling to answer it and audibly responding, "No!" to each of five rings since I knew who was calling. The intensive care nurse said, "I don't know exactly how to explain this, but we moved Ryan's arterial cutdown from his wrist to his ankle. I was doing some paperwork and heard a noise behind me. He was standing up on the bed smiling at me!"

How could that be?! Hours earlier, he was literally on his deathbed. Now, as I arrived at the hospital, I found Ryan, exhausted from his ordeal but lucid and awake. After all the prayers, all the pleading with God, I wish I could tell you that I immediately stopped and thanked God for his miracle. I didn't. I was relieved, glad for our good fortune and ready to get to the next step of Ryan's recovery. But that moment of releasing Ryan to Christ combined with the later image of him awake and pain free haunted me for a long time without

ceasing. I knew something very important had happened. But friends, faith is a journey, and God is patient.

In time, I returned to church to see what God had to say about such things. I sought God's Word as a stranded man seeks water in the desert, not sure he'll find it but hopeful with every desperate step. And God did not disappoint! On the journey, I found this in Matthew 11:28–30, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

That was strength for another weary step. On the journey, I learned the meaning and value of a personal relationship with the Living Christ; the Christ that defeated death through his resurrection; the Christ that desires a relationship with me (and you) on a personal level; the Christ that walked across the room and lifted the cross of despair off of my shoulders in Ryan's hospital room that night. My questions were simple, "Lord, I want to know what the truth is about you. If you are who you say you are, tell me plainly. And if you are a God of love, how do I get close to you?" And then one day, there it was, direct, crisp and definitive! BAM! Christ had anticipated my questions, knowing they are the questions of all humanity. The words exploded off the page, as though they were three-dimensional. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well" (John 14:6–7a).

In God's time and with his constant faithfulness and patience, the Lord drew me to himself, and I gave him control. He put his arm around me and proved to me that there is only one source of power . . . and it's not in my flesh. Was I in charge in corporate America? No, I had responsibility, but it was only by God's authority.

Any power that we attain by our own works is doomed to be hollow and empty, because it's built on shifting sand. We are all differently-abled. Flawed—yet loved by a merciful God. The only real power we'll ever have is offered as a gift and is free for the asking from Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the purpose of accepting our sins and burdens.

Allow me to quote from our inspiration at the Joni and Friends International Disability Center, Joni Eareckson Tada. Someone asked Joni, "How could you trust a God who would leave you in a wheelchair for 30 years?" She replied, "I could not trust a God who didn't know what suffering was, who didn't know what I was going through. You couldn't convince me to trust in him . . . But that he wrote the book on suffering . . . and he called it Christ . . . relieves me. Because I look at the cross and I see God, beaten, bloody, dried sweat, hammering hatred, flies buzzing . . . I see a God who understands and empathizes. He is worthy of my confidence, he is worthy of my trust and he is worthy of my faith."<sup>1</sup> When we refuse to turn our burdens over to God completely, we don't put him in charge—we dishonor him. We're telling Christ that he died in vain. Instead, we must set aside our earthly pride and say, "Lord I turn this problem, my disability, my burden over to you." Only then do we glorify God and allow him to show us the way through. We will become empowered by the Holy Spirit, the same awesome power whose resumé includes creating the universe. You too can be empowered by a living, loving God that was willing to send his Son, to endure as much pain and suffering as this world has to offer. Christ demonstrated in the most graphic way that he understands our pain, and he also demonstrated the ultimate victory! He promises to show us the way out of all our troubles if we turn them over to him, yield control and seek his will in all situations.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13 we read, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." When you trust him completely to bring you through, that light you see at the end of the tunnel is not a train coming at you; it's Romans 8:28, where God tells us that, "...in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to his purpose." I've discovered that all of God's promises are available to all of God's people all the time. And, in the end, he promises us victory, over death forever. Now that's a contract!

Every day I give thanks to the Lord for my son Ryan, who continues to be a blessing in my life. For reasons only the Lord knows and will someday reveal to me, as of this writing Ryan has celebrated his 34th birthday! He's barely five feet tall, weighs just 100 pounds and he's blind. Ryan doesn't speak, is fed through a tube and cannot sit up without being braced in his wheelchair. But he knows my voice and listens

carefully when we read the Word of the Lord. And smiles the whole time I'm reading. I'm never closer to God than when I am with Ryan.

God answered my angry prayer of, "Why Lord, why? Why the pain? Why the suffering in this little child?" He can handle our questions; he has broad shoulders. For me, God's answer has become, "I love your son, even more than you do. He is my child, too. I created him. I have cried with you when you sought my comfort. If you have faith in me, I will use Ryan's life as your inspiration and your body to work for my special purpose, for in Ryan I see only beauty and innocence made for eternity, not the broken shell that you mourn."

Christ did not seek out the healthy, the beautiful, or the physically talented. Christ sought out the disabled. He constantly hung out with the crippled, the blind, and the disenfranchised of all types. He touched the untouchables and blessed those that ministered to them.

Before entering Jerusalem for what Jesus knew would be the last time, he gazed out over the city and wept. He wept for an imperfect humanity. He wept because what he saw was a condemned world that did not include a single person without an imperfection, without some kind of disability. And he wept because he loved them all! He knew that he would go to the cross to have heaped upon him the full burden of our disability and imperfection, and to leave behind the promise that through our faith in him we can all achieve eternal healing! And that message from the Lord has given me comfort in the life of a child who I thought had no purpose.

While Jesus, the very Son of God, was on Earth, he gave us clear and direct instructions in Luke 14 regarding evangelizing people affected by disability. In Luke 14:21–32 he tells us to,

"Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. . . . Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full." (Luke 14:21, 23, NIV)

Christ said his Father's house is not full without the praise music that is the hum of a wheelchair, or the tapping of the red tip cane, or the singing of the developmentally-disabled voice. So there is more to be done. At Joni and Friends it's why we wake up in the morning—to acknowledge that God is indeed sovereign, that all of us regardless of our disability are made in his image exactly as he intended. Our mission at Joni and Friends is "To communicate the Gospel and equip Christ-honoring churches worldwide and to evangelize and disciple people affected by disability." Is God calling you to disability ministry? Maybe your part is to simply invite a person with a disability to church. Then you will be able to say, "Yes Lord, I did my part to ensure your house was full!"

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1. This statement was conceived in a conversation between Joni Eareckson Tada and Dr. Peter Kreeft, whose insights on the cross of Christ helped shape Joni's early thinking.

## About the Author

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**Doug Mazza** is the former President and Chief Operating Officer of Joni and Friends, having served the ministry for 20 years before he retired in 2019. He oversaw a period of tremendous growth in the ministry, firmly establishing the organization as an authoritative voice on Christian outreach to the world's disabled population. Prior to joining Joni and Friends, Doug built a distinguished career in the automotive industry. As the American Senior Executive for American Suzuki Motor Corporation, Doug wrote the marketing plan that successfully launched Suzuki automobiles in this country. He later joined Hyundai Motor America to serve as Chief Operating Officer. Doug also served in the U.S. Army from 1970 to 1972. Doug and his wife, Lorraine, have five adult sons, including Ryan, who is severely disabled. The wheelchair ramp in the Joni and Friends International Disability Center is named Ryan's Run in honor of Ryan Mazza.