

Marriage with a Disability

By Joni Eareckson Tada

My friend Sib looked at me with hopeful eyes, “Joni, I’ve been dating Jesse for some time now . . . we both love each other and feel we know one another well. Recently we’ve been talking about marriage. How would *you* advise me?” Having worked among people with disabilities for more than 15 years, Sib could be considered an expert. But this wasn’t about her profession—Jesse was a spinal-cord injured quadriplegic in a wheelchair, and he was asking Sib to be his wife.

I cannot recall my exact words, but I wasn’t very encouraging. At the time, I had been married to Ken for 10 years, and there were pretty rocky moments. I wondered, *Does Sib understand what she’d be getting into? Any marriage has its challenges, but add a disability and it’s doubly challenging.* To make a long story short, Sib and Jesse have been happily married for 20 years, have a 17-year-old son, and work together in ministry.

Nevertheless, I recently asked Sib what she would say if someone approached her now and asked about marriage with a wheelchair. She thought for a long moment. “I wouldn’t be very encouraging,” she said with a wry smile.

There is much sacrifice and compromise that happens in order for two to truly become one in marriage. Add a serious disability, and the odds are not in a couple’s favor. Yet there are marriages, including my own, which have survived and even thrived as couples learn to lean on Jesus Christ. He is that third strand of the rope which we are told, in Ecclesiastes 4:12, is not easily broken.

Eyes Wide Open

I meet plenty of young girls in wheelchairs at Joni and Friends’ Family Retreats, and virtually all of them express a deep desire to marry. For some of these girls, happiness in a wheelchair seems elusive; they seem to believe a wedding ring will somehow fulfill what their disability has denied them. These girls know that Ken and I have enjoyed a successful marriage for nearly three decades, and they are anxious to follow in my tracks. It’s the same with young men who have a disability—they seem to be looking for assurance that able-bodied girls will find them attractive; that they are “marriageable.”

However, when I sense that a young person with a disability, whether male or female, is looking at marriage as the “end all be all” I know something’s lacking. If I believe that this person is struggling with self-image, or is restless with the status quo, or is dissatisfied with God’s plan, I challenge him to seriously examine the lordship of Christ in his life. Only when a person is happy with God and his purposes, is he ready for marriage—able-bodied or not. Only when Christ is Lord does a person with a disability have the necessary resources to genuinely *love* someone else, to pour out his or her life into someone else.

Love is best expressed in marriage through selfless giving. The problem is that most disabling conditions naturally force a person to think of their own needs first: “I need someone to help me get up in the morning and go to bed at night... I need someone to help me with shopping and transportation and medical appointments... someone to assist me with toileting routines... to help adjust me in my wheelchair, etc.” A physical impairment clamors for one’s undivided attention, often breeding a “me first” attitude. Self-centeredness is a huge barrier to developing a healthy, loving relationship. It’s the exceptionally mature disabled person who is able to look beyond the pressing needs of his or her own condition and be free to focus on the needs of the other.

Join me for a moment in taking a look at a more complete picture of love in 1 Corinthians 13 as paraphrased in *The Message*:

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have.
Love doesn’t strut,
Doesn’t have a swelled head,
Doesn’t force itself on others,
Isn’t always “me first,”
Doesn’t fly off the handle,
Doesn’t keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn’t revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

Because selfishness has a way of twisting the truth, one doesn’t always see it in one’s self. You’d swear that your actions and motives were pure (Hebrews 3:13). Thankfully, a disability can be an advantage here—it “magnifies” selfishness so that it can be more readily identified and dealt with. That’s important before entering marriage!

When couples dealing with a disability ask for marriage advice, I also point them to Philippians 2:3–7. Nothing reveals true maturity quicker than passages which challenge us to put others first and to do nothing out of selfish ambition. Marriage is not to be viewed as “a relationship where I get my needs met.” Rather, it should be, “I’m in this marriage to meet the needs of my spouse.” To enter a relationship with the goal of getting your needs met sows seeds of destruction.

As with typical couples, the person with a disability and his or her companion need to discuss their individual expectations for the marriage. Love and attraction can be powerful, hypnotic forces that must be weighed against the realities of what will be required of the spouse without a disability, especially if that person will be serving as a caregiver. A disability can sometimes foster “trapped feelings” in the spouse who is a caregiver. There’s the psychological pressure of your marriage being “a-typical;” the occasional social isolation, and the dreariness of a day-to-day routine. There will also be the inevitable sexual limitations due to a disability as well as financial strains to consider.

Many disabled people rely on U.S. government benefits. When they desire to marry, they quickly discover the stipulations on disability benefits and marriage. In many states their individual support benefits are jeopardized when they marry. I hurt for those who long to be married, yet are thwarted by marriage disincentives within Supplemental Security Income (SSI) regulations.

Joni and Friends is working alongside advocacy groups to address unfair marriage disincentives. We want to help change these Social Security regulations. It is unfortunate that this deterrence to marriage is built into the regulations, penalizing mainly the elderly and the disabled. I am reminded of Isaiah 58:6, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free.” The Christian community has a challenge here. If we indeed believe these regulations place extraordinary and unfair hardship on the elderly and people with disabilities, we are called to do all we can within our power to untie the cords of the yoke. Perhaps a church can pool resources to offset the combined income formula, thereby assuring a financial safety net for a couple affected by disabilities who marry.

The dreamy haze of attraction begins to dissipate over time for all couples, so it is critical to take enough time in dating and during engagement to experience as many of the day-to-day struggles of living with a disability as possible. I recall several months after Ken and I began dating, I developed a pressure ulcer which forced me to be bedridden for two months. Ken cleverly devised all sorts of adaptive aids, including an art easel which could be positioned over my bed so I could paint. He even became familiar with emptying my urine-bag on the side of my bed. While I was bedridden, Ken was able to get a realistic picture of my behind-the-scenes care. Observing his creativity and patience, as well as his lack of squeamishness with my limitations, assured me that this was a man who could handle my quadriplegia in marriage.

When it comes to questions about sexual intimacy or the challenge of day-to-day routines, some couples feel they must “test the waters” before they marry. When Ken and I were dating, we had lots of questions about these issues and more. Some people encouraged us to go away together for a weekend in order to satisfy our natural curiosity, but we knew that would be the wrong path to take. As followers of Jesus, we understood that my quadriplegia did not give us a special dispensation to relax the rules about sex before marriage, let alone other questions of modesty. Yes, it would mean entering marriage with many unanswered questions and lack of experience, but that was okay—we knew we’d be forced to rely more on God and his resources. And on our wedding day, Ken and I knew our morally pure relationship meant having God’s blessing and favor.

Different Roles

In 1976, long before I ever met Ken or married, I was interviewed by *People* magazine. I was quoted as saying that if a man ever asked to marry me, I hoped I would love him enough to say no because of all that marriage would entail. That was then. Thankfully, when Ken and I married, both of us could rely on God, a much higher Power than us, to guide us through the certain pitfalls and cobweb of questions. We understood that it boils down to trusting God and believing he had brought us together. We did not need to fear the unknown for 1 John 4:18 assures us that “perfect love drives out fear.”

Mike and Renee Bondi had been engaged for almost a year when she became a spinal cord injured quadriplegic through a bizarre accident, just weeks before their wedding day. While many of their friends and family expected the marriage to be called off, Mike never waned in his commitment to marry Renee. One day, shortly after Renee’s accident, Mike visited his fiancé in the intensive care unit. When she quipped, “Well, honey, I guess now we’ll get all the good parking spaces,” he knew she was still the exceptional woman he’d fallen in love with. Mike reflects, “I realized that even though Renee’s body was broken, her mind wasn’t. It was the same person with the same sense of humor that I had fallen in love with before.”¹

Their circumstances, however, were very different and Renee initially struggled with her role as wife while she was so dependent on Mike. She pushed him away, feeling as though she did not deserve his devotion. “What kind of wife can I be?” Renee admits wondering. She was experiencing the conflict couples feel when faced with the typical roles husbands and wives assume in marriage: husbands work outside the home, and wives spend their day housekeeping; husbands do yard work and wives do all the shopping;

husbands pay the bills and wives primarily take care of the children, etc. Disability can upend those roles, many times leaving the spouse with the disability feeling unworthy or frustrated at not being able to do “normal” things to serve their partner.

I felt the same way when Ken and I first married. The challenge was to come together as a couple to discover what would make our marriage “work.” In our house, Ken does most of the cooking and shopping. In turn, I am entirely responsible for managing my medical supplies, appointments, attendant care, and wheelchair maintenance. It’s one way I can “contribute” to our life together. And although I cannot cook an omelet for Ken or fold his towels, I invest my time in other activities of value. I encourage and cheer him on, pray for him, safeguard his reputation, listen to him when he’s hurting, appreciate his friendships, applaud him and push him out of the house occasionally to go fly fishing with his Bible study buddies. Ken even tells me that *these* are the contributions to our marriage that he treasures the most.

Eventually Renee Bondi was able to employ the same creativity as she and Mike explored things she *could* do. She realized that part of a loving relationship is *accepting* the affections and service of your spouse. To refuse that affection and service was not a sign of humility, but pride. To their great joy, Renee eventually gave birth to a son, Daniel. Today, many years later, Renee and her helper are able to drive Daniel to his baseball games and school outings—there’s no need to worry about her role as a wife and mother!

God’s Power Released Through Weakness

A disability can actually be an asset in marriage. Second Corinthians 12:9–10 is God’s reminder that a significant impairment can be the very stage on which his grace and power show up best. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” It requires faith (and major effort) to put this into practice, but a disability can provide built-in reliance on God and his grace—a reliance that might not come as readily with couples that lack a disability.

Before I became injured and was still on my feet, one of my favorite hobbies was gardening with my mother. After we married, I asked Ken if I could “borrow his hands” to help me garden in our backyard. We spent plenty of Saturdays pruning roses, aerating soil, and planting pansies. Ken learned a great deal about plants and different types of soil. I, in turn, vicariously enjoyed “using a rake and clippers” through my husband’s hands. To me, it was a revelation that God should use my weakness and inability (and Ken’s strength and ability) to bring us into a closer bond of unity and oneness. A friend observed this and even wrote a song about it:

*God gave us hands, a gift of love to share.
Hands that can hold, and help, and hug, work perfectly as a pair.
Left and right, together they can be wonderful tools,
But mine can’t be used ‘cause they have forgotten how, for now.*

*May I borrow your hands, mine don’t work so well, but yours will do just fine.
May I borrow your hands, they can work for me, they can be mine for a time.
Helping one another, like a sister and a brother.
May I borrow your hands they can work for me, together we’ll do just fine.*

With Christ firmly at the center of a marriage, a disability no longer needs to be a liability, and has great potential to be an asset! A disability in marriage not only serves as a litmus test for selfishness, quickly exposing hidden self-interests, but it fosters unity. Jesus says in John 15:12–13, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Marriage will constantly have one “laying down his life” for the spouse.

A Support Network

The church can and should be helping couples with a disability during every step of their courtship and marriage. From premarital counseling that ensures both Christians are making the commitment with their eyes wide open, to hands-on acts of service which provide some relief for the able-bodied spouse. Often, a disabled person will already have his or her network of support firmly intact before marriage, but if not, then it should signal caution! When it comes to disability, a couple simply cannot “go it alone.” Church members can be a lifeline for families living with a disability, and help can also be found through community resources.

The fact is *every* couple living with a disability needs a support network! I employ several friends to help me get up in the morning and go to bed at night—I call them my Get-Up-Get-Down Girls. Some of my helpers opt not to receive reimbursement for their time, but assist me as personal ministry. These girls are not necessarily trained care attendants; they are simply women who understand what my needs are, and want to give a hand by helping me exercise, bathe, dress, get in or out of my wheelchair, brush my hair, put on make-up, etc.

However, the relationship is not all one way. I want them to understand their high calling as servants of the Lord (who just happen to be helping me). I view their service from the perspective of Colossians 3:23–24, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” I make it a special point to remind them that when they help someone like me with a disability, they are actually serving the Lord. And rich will be their reward in heaven because of their heartfelt desire to meet a practical need (Matt. 25:34–40). This is why I don’t mind asking for help. I do so, knowing that when people assist me with my needs, they are increasing the joy and reward of their eternal estate.

A support network will continue to grow and be strengthened if people keep this important focus. If not, a support network can quickly implode from lack of vision and weariness. Hebrews 12:2–3 has a great prescription for anyone who loses heart in their service. The passage tells us to fix “our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (emphasis added).

My husband Ken has the same perspective. Whenever he begins to feel weary or tired, he reminds himself that his work is for the glory of Jesus Christ. When Ken is focusing on the Lord, he may feel weary, but his work need not be wearisome; he may feel tired, but his efforts need not be tiresome. Christ himself set the example, teaching the disciples that he did not come to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:26–28).

One final word on a support network, whether it’s employed caregivers, volunteers, or the able-bodied spouse who helps: it is extremely important to express *gratitude*. A couple with a disability will be drawn together through gratitude. Nothing quells love quicker than an ungrateful spirit. However, once again, a disability can be a bonus, reminding a couple of the importance of saying “thank you” often—and meaning it! A network of caregivers will be strengthened as a couple affirms their support, commends their efforts, and frequently expresses gratitude.

Prayer

When newlyweds dealing with a disability in their marriage ask me about daily disciplines, I always point to prayer. In a marriage, it is prayer that keeps the door open to much needed grace from God. When there’s a wheelchair, white cane, or walker in the marriage, prayer is more urgently needed.

I often say to the newlywed with the disability that she (or he) can do no finer, no more exalted work on behalf of her spouse than to pray for him. Like we’ve already established, a couple with a disability needs *help*. So when the psalmist says, “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my *help* come?” he

answers his own question with the words, “My help comes *from the LORD*, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1,2, ESV, emphasis added). A wife is not sufficient comfort for a husband. A man is not sufficient provision for a wife. A stronger Hand must come to his or her aid.

Prayer will soften any rough edges in marriage. Prayer will prevent a spouse from keeping a “tit for tat” list. Prayer will keep one from harboring a record of wrongs. Prayer will remind me to protect my loved one’s reputation. It will cause your expectations to be realistic. It will help your love cover a multitude of other’s sins. Most of all, prayer will safeguard Christ’s preeminent position at the center of a marriage.

Together...for Better or for Worse

As with any couple, Ken and I are growing together through the gristmill of everyday life in marriage. A few years ago, I contracted a bad cold and it moved quickly into my chest. After two solid nights of constant coughing, Ken rushed me to the hospital. I’m glad we acted. The emergency room x-rays showed that my lungs were seriously congested. Ken has written about our experience:

The next day, Joni’s doctor diagnosed her with double pneumonia when they saw that both lungs were filling with fluid.

Those nine days in the hospital were extremely difficult for my wife. I have to admit, they were difficult for me, too. I felt so helpless, unable to do much for Joni except to press on her abdomen which enabled her to “get” a good cough. (The nurses kept laughing, saying that they were going to charge me for “wife abuse.”) I stayed at the hospital every night, making sure she had someone to be her “muscles” when she needed help breathing. Finally, they sent her home. We were so relieved to be home! Quadriplegics like Joni have limited lung capacity, and many don’t live through such an ordeal. This is why we are praising our Great Physician, the Lord Jesus for replenishing Joni’s strength. Obviously, God has much more work for her to do. And God has much more work for me to do, too. In the near future, my wife and I will celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary. For all these years, we’ve shared a marvelous ministry and mission together. And please underline that word *together* because I have a new appreciation for what that word means. You see, Joni and I were never more “together” as a married couple than when she and I were battling against her pneumonia in the hospital. One would think that a feeling of togetherness would best happen over a candlelight dinner or a romantic vacation. But isn’t it just like God to strengthen our unity, deepen our commitment, and breathe fresh romance into our marriage through, well...dealing with pneumonia in a hospital?!

Joni and I were talking about it the other night. I am stronger when I help her, as I support and stand beside her... plus, she is stronger when she’s “wheeling close” to me, praying for and encouraging my efforts. It’s a perfect picture of Ephesians 2:22, “And in him you too are being built *together* to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (emphasis added).

Yes, my wife and I have many more tasks to tackle, many more travels to take, and many more prayers to offer before the Throne. Until the Lord takes one of us home, we are a team together. We take our lead from Psalm 34:2–3 where it says, “Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name *together*” (emphasis added). I’m not pretending that we are “experts” when it comes to marriage advice, but I will say this to any couple going through tough times—it’s amazing how God always reveals himself to us when we come together, needing him desperately. It’s amazing that when we are at our lowest, and feeling like we can’t go on, the Lord always shows up. And Jesus, the Breath of Life, showed up at Joni’s hospital bedside every day and every night. And we both—we both together—drew on his grace. Our marriage is richer and better for it.

I’m looking forward to many more days of life together with my quadriplegic wife. She’s a gem! And I can’t wait until heaven when we will see the eternal results of our work as we’ve exalted his name *together!*

I agree with Ken. We're in this marriage *together*. And we're grateful that my wheelchair keeps binding more tightly the ties that draw us to each other *and* the Lord. For those of you who will be supporting and offering counsel to couples with a disability, I can say in hindsight that although marriage is hard I would again point to 1 Corinthians 13, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (v. 13).

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Notes

1. *For Better or For Worse*, Joni and Friends TV Series.

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.