

SHARING *Hope* THROUGH HARDSHIP

Love in *Action*

God used you to put this smile on Kofi's face!
Read his story—and so many more life
transformations—inside!

“Defend the weak and the fatherless;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.”

PSALM 82:3

from the heart

“The Lord has established his throne in heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.”

PSALM 103:19

In a world marked by uncertainty—where trials test our character, faith, and resilience—Christians need more than quick answers. They need practical wisdom rooted in the Word of God.

When I broke my neck under the weight of a reckless dive, the resulting paralysis forced me into a serious study of God. Before that, I was content to wade ankle-deep in things of the Lord. But not after my accident. I wrestled with questions about the goodness of God and his control over suffering. Lying in bed completely paralyzed, I fought off depression with hard-hitting words, *"Let me get this straight, God... when bad things happen, who is behind them? Is it you or the devil? Did you permit this paralysis, or did you intend it? If you're so loving, why be so mean to your children?"*

That was 58 years ago. And not once in those years has God been mean. What's more, he has satisfied my questions with an intimacy, softness, and sweetness of fellowship with my Savior which I wouldn't trade for anything. Not even walking.

The fact that my life is nestled safely under God's overarching decrees is, to me, the best of comforts. And God has shown me that when accidents happen, it is okay to call them “accidents.” Even the Bible does.

To be sure, when babies are born disabled, when whole populations starve, when young girls break their necks, God weeps for his world “for

he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone” (Lamentations 3:33).

Simultaneously, the Bible insists on another truth. When these things happen, God has not taken his hands off the wheel. He is sovereign. God considers these awful—and often evil—things as tragedies and takes no delight in misery. Nevertheless, he is determined to steer suffering in such a way that it accomplishes his own ends.

Those ends are often a mystery. We simply don't have all the facts on this side of eternity. So when we cannot understand God's ways, we turn to the encouragement of Psalm 62:8, *"Trust in him at all times... for God is our refuge."* As John Piper once wrote, “God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them.”

I know that when suffering sandblasts me to the core, the stuff of which I am made is revealed. When my pain presses in on all sides, out may come complaints, or envy, or self-centeredness and spiritual apathy. But when I put sin behind me, I can be better bonded to my precious Jesus.

Does this mean God was happy to see me take that dive into shallow water? No way. He may work all things together for my good, but that does not mean that my life-altering injury is good. God permits all sorts of things he doesn't approve of.

Besides, how God allowed my accident is not the point. The point is that suffering has taught me to “be done with sin.” To put behind me the



I didn't see it way back then, but now I understand that God has given me a message honed and shaped through decades of suffering. And I love sharing that message with you in these newsletters!

peevish, small-minded, self-focused “Joni” I was, and to grow into the “Joni” he has destined me to be through years of quadriplegia (1 Peter 4:1).

I am not saying it's easy. Actually, it's getting harder. These tired bones are thinner from decades of paralysis. But as I celebrate my 76th birthday this month, I know that the core of God's plan is to rescue me from sin, even up to my dying breath.

In short, one form of evil—suffering—is turned on its head to defeat another form of evil—our sin—all to the praise of God's wisdom! Is the cost too great? Not when you consider that *“this light and momentary affliction is preparing*

for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

One day God will close the curtain on suffering and sorrow. Until then, let's trust God in our afflictions knowing that, “God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves.” And God is accomplishing what he loves in our lives—Christ in us, the hope of glory!

God's Grace in Ghana

The moment Ailah stepped through the doorway of his home, Kofi's face lit up. At first he froze, then burst into laughter, squealing with delight. Though non-verbal, the sixteen-year-old's joy spoke volumes. He reached for Ailah's hand. It was his way of saying, "I've missed you..."

Joni and Friends intern Ailah served as Kofi's buddy at our *International Family Retreat* in Ghana, and a week later she made special arrangements with his mother, Julianne, to visit him at home. Julianne savored the in-person reminder that her son is deeply loved, not only by our Joni and Friends team, but by Jesus.

Kofi and Julianne navigate life alone most days. When Kofi was three years old, his father left, unable to cope with the strain of raising a child with a disability. In their community, and throughout Ghana, disability often gets misinterpreted as a curse or punishment:

grounds for rejection and shame.

While an extended family member provides a roof over their heads, Julianne and Kofi live in oppressive isolation. Julianne has always carried Kofi where they need to go. With no access to medical necessities like a wheelchair—let alone physical therapy, school, or place to belong—daily living is a struggle.

But when they attended our *International Family Retreat*, Kofi and Julianne stepped into a place of total acceptance—where the hardships of disability lead to compassion and community instead of the all too familiar rejection.

"I learned that Kofi loves to smile and laugh," says Ailah. "Whenever I would sit with him, he would hold my hand and just look at me and smile. He laughed with joy when the kids pushed his wheelchair. He was so excited to be with other kids. And he loved bubbles. He had a blast popping them."



For Julianne, the retreat brought refreshment in ways she never expected. Seeing her son cared for as never before, she found the freedom to join other moms in prayer, braid hair with new friends, and rest among people who understood her and her son.

As retreat ended, Julianne expressed her gratitude and amazement with the love she and Kofi received through the Joni and Friends community.

When Julianne and Kofi set out for home after the retreat, the goodbyes hit hard. Kofi still didn't have a wheelchair of his own, and going back to the harshness of daily life looked daunting. Just like Kofi didn't know Ailah would soon come to visit him at home, Julianne didn't know that a *Wheels for the World*® team would arrive two weeks later to provide a custom-fitted wheelchair for her son.

Today, Kofi's smile shines as he sits upright in his wheelchair, encountering the world with dignity and confidence like never before. For

Julianne, whose back no longer aches from carrying Kofi, the wheelchair means new freedom, especially to attend church. And among God's people, she and Kofi can find their place of belonging in God's family, now and for eternity!

At Joni and Friends, we prepare interns like Ailah not only with practical skills, but with the love of Christ—so that families like Kofi's receive more than medical care. They encounter the hope of the Gospel.

"No one has ever looked at my son the way you have. You treated him with love and kindness. You're going to be someone we never forget."

— Julianne



"God sets the lonely in families..."

PSALM 68:6

Finding Fresh Hope in *Jesus*

Born with Down syndrome and a heart murmur, Donovan's life has been shaped by profound hardships.

At eight months old, Donovan began learning to walk, only to lose his progress when he needed open-heart surgery. From there, his setbacks continued. Donovan's muscles atrophied as he recovered from surgery. And by the time he tried to walk again, weakened muscles caused him to injure his knees and hips.

Doing their best to comfort and care for their little boy, Donovan's parents, Naomi and Oscar, recall carrying him around the house in a blanket, guarding his vulnerable body from further damage. When Donovan lost the opportunity to receive the physical therapy he needed to recover strength, his cycles of regression continued, and his family's discouragement turned to despair.

When they came to our *Wheels for the World®* outreach in Mexico, they needed an infusion of hope and a wheelchair that would fit Donovan's frame well enough to allow his hips to heal. After being warmly welcomed by our trained physical therapists and mechanics, the family discovered that they had come to the right place—not only to meet Donovan's physical needs, but to ease their strain and quench their spiritual thirst.

Throughout the seating process, our volunteers enjoyed discovering Donovan's interests, likes, and dislikes. They also discovered that while he has developed scoliosis, doctors believe his spine can heal to some extent once the issues with his hips get addressed.

As Donovan's fitting ended—with him smiling in his new wheelchair—our team shared the Gospel with his whole family, offering an invitation into the local church. While going to



church would be new for them, they welcomed the idea of a follow-up home visit from a member of the congregation.

Now, with his new wheelchair and the support of the body of Christ, Donovan's family has discovered new hope through their hardship, and a welcome into God's family.

October is Down Syndrome Awareness Month! If your church is looking for ideas on how to welcome families living with Down syndrome, visit us at joniandfriends.org today! We'd love to help you develop or expand your disability ministry.

When you include families like Donovan's in the life of your church, you authenticate everything the Bible says about how much God cares for people living with Down syndrome. Your church can be a beacon of hope—embracing people with Down syndrome all year long!



Donavan's parents watched intently and asked detailed questions as their son's wheelchair came together, including a gel cushion to protect his hips, proper support for his back, and an overall stable fit. Donovan enjoyed the fitting process, too, smiling and interacting with his new straps and hand grips.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

1 JOHN 3:1

Happy 76th Birthday, Joni!



Joni has traveled the world sharing the Gospel and encouraging people struggling with disability. This photo captures her 1991 visit to Russia and the time she spent with spinal cord injured patients in a Moscow hospital.



During her interview on WOLC in Easton, Maryland, Joni received surprise birthday greetings from local students. Today, Joni's radio ministry reaches over one million listeners worldwide every week!



Our first *Wheels for the World* restoration shop was established in the Buena Vista Correctional Facility in Colorado, and of course Joni made sure to visit the inmates and thank them for their partnership in ministry.



"I never imagined that Jesus would birth an international disability ministry through my affliction," says Joni. Yet that's exactly what he did! And here Joni shares Christ-centered hope through hardship at *Family Retreat*... something she loves doing every day and every chance she gets!



Family Retreat: A Place of Belonging

From the Northwest ▼

Sparrow lives with DDX3X syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that has left her nonverbal and dependent on a wheelchair, with complex developmental and physical needs. For Jon and Lauren, raising Sparrow and her three siblings, Titus (15), Iris (11), and Ralph (9) requires grit, creativity, and steadfast dependence on Jesus.

Beyond the sometimes-grueling rhythms of life with disability, challenges like denials from insurance for essential medical equipment often hit like rogue waves. “Sparrow outgrew her wheelchair, gait trainer, and stander all at once,” says Lauren. “We got denied for all three. It became the year of fighting.”

Like most special needs parents, Lauren and Jon desperately crave moments of rest and rejuvenation.

And that is exactly what they found at *Family Retreat*!

“We do all the lifting for Sparrow—physically and emotionally. Just knowing someone else will lift for a few days... that’s a gift,” shares Lauren. And Jon’s response to seeing volunteer buddies for all four of his children?

“It blew my mind,” says Jon. “*Family Retreat* isn’t just about Sparrow. Joni and Friends thought of all our kids.”

Difficulties continue to press in on Sparrow’s family. But, like Joni Eareckson Tada herself, when the suffering gets hard, they lean all the harder into Jesus. And he continues to provide, through you and through Joni and Friends!



Jon and Lauren named their daughter Sparrow, entrusting her to the God who watches over every sparrow and clothes the lilies of the field.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?
Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.”

LUKE 12:6

From Mississippi ▼

When Victoria brought her daughter, Taliyah, to *Family Retreat*, she couldn’t imagine the transformation about to happen in her heart and family.

“Taliyah is my super kid,” Victoria says proudly. “She’s been through so much, but she keeps going.” Taliyah lives with Treacher Collins syndrome, chronic kidney disease, and other medical complexities.

Victoria wants to foster Taliyah’s confidence and independence, but she also holds her daughter close. So on the first day of *Family Retreat* when Taliyah met her volunteer buddy and confidently turned to her mom and said, “Bye!” as she walked away—it hit Victoria hard.

“I sat on the porch and cried,” says Victoria. “We had never been apart besides school. It was overwhelming, but it was the beginning of something new for both of us.”

While Taliyah thrived, making new friends and enjoying new independence, Victoria found herself surrounded by support, respite, and true connection. She especially appreciated spending time with one of the other moms.

“She sat and talked with me like she had known me forever,” Victoria recalls. “She answered questions, shared wisdom, and made me feel like I had a second mom. Those conversations and moments mean more to me than I can explain.”

“How good and pleasant
it is when God’s people
live together in unity!”

PSALM 133:1

Victoria and Taliyah returned home with a new community that felt like family and the security of knowing they are not alone. Victoria’s message to you says it all:

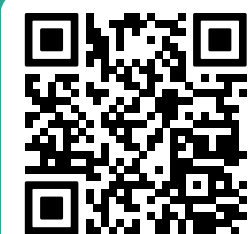
“Thank you for all you’ve
done and all you continue to
do—for giving families like
mine experiences we may
not otherwise have, simply
because our kids have
different abilities.”



Taliyah (in the green shirt) and her friend, Lundyn, (here with their buddies) made new friends and had exciting new experiences at *Family Retreat*.

**Bless your loved ones &
share the love of Jesus!**

Your gift given **in honor** or **in memory** of a loved one brings the hope of the Gospel to people living with disabilities worldwide! View your loved one's name on our online Tribute Wall at joniandfriends.org/tribute or by using this QR code!



Advent Scripture Cards



Prepare your heart for the birth of our Savior Jesus with these elegant Advent cards featuring 25 pieces of artwork by Joni Eareckson Tada on one side and hand-selected Scriptures on the other. They are perfect to display in your home, tuck into a card, or deliver to a friend to share the true meaning of Christmas!

\$14.⁹⁹

*100% of proceeds go directly to
advance ministry to children and families living with disability.*

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