



*Disabled at 17 in a diving accident, Joni Eareckson Tada found the courage to live as a quadriplegic by relying on the unfailing love of God*



## Blessings Out of Brokenness

*by: Barbara Dickson*

July 30, 1967 had all the qualities of an extraordinary sun-drenched summer day. For Joni Eareckson, an athletic, bubbly 17-year-old girl, the day was perfect. Happy and grateful for God's blessings, she looked forward to a bright future—college, love, a fulfilling career, marriage and children. It was the kind of day that Joni wished would never end.

That evening as the sun set in glorious hues of orange and red, Joni (pronounced "Johnny" after her father), dove into the murky waters of Chesapeake Bay and broke her neck. The break paralyzed her from her shoulders down.

**Sharing a smile**  
Through her ministry, Joni touches the lives of children like Abbie (above)

Unexpectedly, this day had, in just a few seconds, turned Joni's world upside down and changed her life forever. Joni says in her autobiography titled *Joni*: "In those particular 60 seconds was compressed more significance than all the millions of minutes marking my life prior to that instant."

Breaking her neck led to breaking her heart, her faith, her dreams and her will to live. Her diving accident began a heart-wrenching struggle—with life, with God and with paralysis.

Joni recalls: "How I wished for strength and control enough in my fingers to do something, anything to end my life." Tears of fright, fury and futility splashed onto the hospital floor beneath her, as she lay suspended face down for weeks in a Stryker frame. The tears only added to her despondency because she could not wipe them away.

"I desperately wanted to kill myself. I couldn't move anything except my head. Physically, I was little more than a corpse. I had no hope of ever walking again. How I prayed for some accident or miracle to kill me. The mental and spiritual anguish was as unbearable as the physical torture."

As a vibrant teenager who loved horseback riding and swimming, and didn't sit still for long, Joni would now sit for the rest of her life. Her ability to walk had ended and she was forced to begin a new journey—a spiritual pilgrimage that took her through dark, desperate places.

Joni remembers thinking: "Who or what is God? What's the use of believing when your prayers fall on deaf ears?"

She had prayed for healing. She had believed with all her heart that she would walk and use her hands again. No healing came.

Joni recounts reading Romans 8:28 where it says: "... in all things God works for the good ..." Joni asked: "What good? Where? When? Had not God, if there was a God, turned His back on me?"

She sank into a deep depression in the long months of rehabilitation following the accident. She wanted to believe in God, but she had nothing to hold on to. "How can a loving God, if such exists, allow this desperate situation?" She remembers praying: "God, either You exist, or You don't. If You don't exist, then I don't see any logical reason for living. Why should we go on fooling ourselves?" She issued a frantic plea, a petition of utter despair. "God, You've got to prove Your existence to me!"

By the summer of 1969 Joni had

resigned herself to the extent of her spinal cord injury. She recalls: "I was going to be forever dependent on others for every physical comfort or function." Every morning she would have to rely on someone to get her up, exercise her, bathe and dress her, brush her teeth and wash her hair.

That same summer she met Steve Estes, a 16-year-old paperboy who radiated faith, trust and a love for God. Within 10 minutes of meeting him, Joni challenged his core beliefs when she smiled bitterly and asked: "So, do you think God had anything to do with my breaking my neck?"

After Steve recovered from Joni's directness he told her that if she would trust God instead of fighting Him, she'd find the answers she so desperately sought—if not in this life, then in the next.

Joni says she learned through long talks with Steve that "suffering drives us to our knees in weakness and frailty. And that's just where God wants us." One of Joni's favourite Bible verses became 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."

Driven to prayer because she had nothing else, Joni discovered that God could be trusted. She recalls: "As I began to pray and depend on God, He did not disappoint me."

Romans 5:3-5 states: "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us ...."

Joni began to hope again. She saw God "working in my life to create grace and wisdom out of the chaos of pain and depression." Joni says that if we accept all

"As I began to pray and depend on God, He did not disappoint me"

Sharing her gifts  
Joni reaches out to the physically challenged in Cuba and displays her skill as a mouth painter



Her diving accident began a heart-wrenching struggle—with life, with God and with paralysis

Sharing in ministry  
Joni with husband, Ken



things from God “we are freed from the constant agony and anxiety of wondering, worrying and desperate searching.”

In hindsight, Joni discovered that those fragile seconds in Chesapeake Bay over 36 years ago were destined to not only change her life forever, but were the beginning of an incredible adventure, a joy ride.

By giving up her search to find answers and giving in to God, she came to see her wheelchair as a tool, and not as a tragedy. She remembers: “For the first time in my paralyzed life, it was indeed possible for the wheelchair to be an instrument of joy.” She could use the chair to reach people, to speak with those who were suffering. She was in a unique position where individuals wanted to hear what she had to say.

Today, Joni is founder and president of Joni and Friends (JAF) Ministry, a ministry that serves as a beacon of hope and encouragement to the world’s estimated 600 million disabled people, celebrating its 25th anniversary not long ago. She is a renowned international speaker, skilled mouth painter and artist and accomplished singer. Joni has authored 30 books, including bestsellers such as *A Step Further*, *When God Weeps* and *Heaven, Your Real Home*. She released her

latest book *The God I Love*, in July 2003. In the book Joni intimately recounts her amazing journey with quadriplegia, and how her deep love for God grew out of her broken life.

She shares her life with Ken Tada, her husband of over 20 years.

Joni’s latest mission? To move JAF from founder-based to ministry-based, passing the torch from Joni to a perpetual ministry that will comfort generations to come. A new International Disability Centre will open in July 2004 in Agoura Hills, California, U.S.A., encompassing all JAF programs including scholarships, training, family retreats and Joni’s weekday radio broadcasts that are heard on over 850 radio stations worldwide.

Isaiah 40:31 states: “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Joni looks to the day when she will “stand up, stretch and dance” in Heaven. Until then, she marches ahead, single-minded in goal—to glorify her heavenly Father’s name from the vantage point of her wheelchair, her tool of joy.

Visit Joni’s Web site at [www.joniandfriends.org](http://www.joniandfriends.org)

## Bridging the distance

**Q:** What are the biggest obstacles for a physically disabled person? Most people might assume the biggest obstacle is lack of access to programs or facilities, but not so. It’s really the attitudinal barriers that exist. Many jump to negative assumptions about people with disabilities, approaching them in the context of their handicapping condition and expecting very little from them. If a disabled person is in a wheelchair, immediately he is defined as “wheelchair-bound.” We forget that these people have hopes, dreams and interests just like everyone else. God has allowed them to experience a disability for His good purposes and He has a special design for their lives.

**Q:** How can the Church best minister to the physically disabled? It’s always good to look at a person through the eyes of the Lord Jesus. Some disabled people may seem off-putting—they may

drool or talk in a guttural tone. Many Christians feel embarrassed and tiptoe in wide circles around such people, leaving it to more gifted believers to reach out and minister to them. Most people don’t feel very well trained; they also don’t want to find themselves in an awkward situation, possibly embarrassing the disabled person.

What most people don’t realize is that the disabled person will gladly bridge the distance and help an able-bodied person understand his condition—if that person will only be willing to reach out. That makes it possible to see beyond the drool, the twitching head, the gnarled hand or wheelchair to see the disabled person for who he really is.

Christ always addressed the disabled in some way. Sometimes He healed their conditions, sometimes not. But He never ignored them. The condition comes with who I am; so if you want to ask me out to lunch, you may have to cut up my food or put a special spoon in my hand. Perhaps I need a ride to church or some house-

keeping chores done. There are many practical ways to address the needs of the disabled, but it all starts with asking.

**Q:** What advice would you give to someone who is physically disabled and losing hope?

First, let go of your hope that you will be healed in this life; that may not happen. Sometimes false hopes—running from one healing service to the next—can be more demoralizing in the long run than anything else. Next, spend time praying and reading God’s Word. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. If the opposite of hopelessness is faith, then get into God’s Word and boost your faith. When you pray, don’t merely petition God; listen to what He has to say to you. If you are not involved in a church, find one. God never meant for any of us to suffer in isolation; that’s why He created a spiritual community. We need to be plugged into that community, where people can be the hands and heart of the Lord Jesus to you.

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