

## Modern Christians we can admire: Joni Eareckson Tada

My aim is not to give a biographical account but to use notes from her writings to gain an insight into what we can admire about Joni Eareckson. “Isolated by itself what is a minute?”, asks Joni. “At the age of seventeen I had already ticked off 9m of them. Yet in some cosmic plan THIS single minute was isolated; into these isolated sixty seconds was compressed more significance than all the millions of minutes marking my life prior to THIS minute.’

As a teenager, Joni Eareckson Tada as she now is, loved life. She enjoyed riding horses, loved to swim. In the summer of 1967, in a single minute, that all changed. She writes:

“In a jumble of actions and feelings, many things happened simultaneously. I felt my head strike something hard and unyielding. At the same time, clumsily and crazily my body sprawled out of control. I felt no pain.”

While swimming with friends, Joni dived into Chesapeake Bay, Maryland USA not knowing how shallow it really was. For the next two years Joni struggled through rehabilitation. She struggled through depression and desperation. She struggled with life, with God, and her paralysis. That dive resulted in a severe spinal cord injury, paralyzing her from the shoulders down, without use of hands or legs. “Before that time,” she says, “I didn’t even know what you called people like me – physically-challenged, mobility-impaired, differently-abled.”

“There I was lying in the hospital bed in the summer of 1967,” she reminisced afterwards, “desperately trying to make ends meet, desperately trying to turn my right side down emotions, right side up. In my pain and despair, I begged my friends to assist me in suicide.” This seemed the only solution. Many disabled people she knew then and knows now have a tough time finding life worth living. She sought a final escape, a final solution, through assisted suicide, begging her friends to slit her wrists, pump her with pills, do anything to end her misery. She writes that she could not face the prospect of sitting down for the rest of her life without use of her hands or legs. Her hopes had been dashed, her faith shipwrecked.

Her friends gave her good biblical reasons why all this had happened but it didn’t help. It was later that a particular friend showed her a possible answer to the question about who is in control. He pointed Joni to Jesus on the Cross, to the Acts 4: 27 -29:

For indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together in this city with the Gentiles and the people of Israel against Jesus, your holy Servant, whom you made Messiah. They

gathered to do everything that you by your power and will had already decided to happen. And now Lord take notice of the threats they have made, and allow your servants to speak your message with all boldness.

Now she began to understand the parallel between what happened at the cross of Christ and her own disability. "I began to see," she said, "that in my paralysing accident, Heaven and Hell participated in the exact same event, but for different reasons. When I took that reckless dive into shallow water causing me to become a quadriplegic, no doubt, the devil wrung his hands in delight, thinking to himself, "Aha, I have now shipwrecked this girl's faith. I have dashed her hopes, ruined her family, destroyed her dreams and I am going to make a mockery of all her beliefs in God." However we have an all wise, powerful, loving God who reaches down, and wrenches out of horrible evil, positive good for us and glory for Himself." "I am convinced," she continues, "that God's motive and purpose in the accident was to turn a head strong, rebellious kid into a young woman who would reflect something of patience and longsuffering, get her life values turned right side up and have a lively optimistic hope of heavenly glories above; still a mystery, but now a mystery with direction.'

She claims: "nobody is glorifying suffering. God does not think that a spinal cord injury is a great idea. There is no inherent goodness in cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis, brain injury, stroke, heart disease, manic depression but God reaches down to what seems like a terrible difficulty and wrenches out good. In Romans (8:28) Paul writes that all things can fit together into a plan for our good and His Glory."

From that moment Joni never looked back. She continues to share her faith, experiences, feelings and emotions through her books, talks, music, interviews and paintings. These have inspired countless people, motivating them to find Jesus. She shares, God's purpose in her accident – her change in life values, her development of patience, endurance, tolerance, self-control, steadfastness, sensitivity, love and joy. She writes: "those things didn't matter much when I was on my feet but, boy, they began to matter after I began living life in a wheelchair. I began to see this is what made me a truly peaceful person and what real beauty was all about. Being made somebody special, somebody significant, way down deep on the inside and beginning to share that with smiles and encouragement to others."

In 1 Corinthians 15 she finds enormous comfort. She can't wait for the day when she is given her brand new glorified body, when she can stand up, stretch, dance, kick, do aerobics, comb her own hair, blow her own nose, and what is so poignant, she notes, is that she'll

finally be able to wipe her own tears, but won't need to, because Revelation tells us that God will personally wipe away every tear. "I look forward to that day," she says, "Heaven is the reality; when you have your heart fixed on Heaven you live life better down here on earth."

My wife, Helen introduced me to Joni. As a teenager she went to see the film 'Joni' when it was screened in a local cinema. She was inspired and so was I. My admiration for this modern day Christian stems not just from ordinary Joni's extraordinary faith but the way she has shared this faith with others, everywhere, and in doing so, broken down so many social, psychological and theological barriers and prejudices.

Joni Eareckson is now 62. She married her husband Ken Tada in 1982 and became Joni Eareckson Tada. She founded Joni and Friends in 1979, an organization to minister to the disabled community throughout the world and this became the Joni and Friends International Disability Center in 2006. During rehabilitation, Joni spent months learning how to paint with a brush between her teeth. She is now an internationally acclaimed mouth artist. She has written 50 books. Her internationally best-selling autobiography "Joni" and the feature film based on it have been translated into many languages. She has served on the National Council on Disability and the Disability Advisory Committee to the U.S. State Department and serves, in an advisory capacity, for many disability organisations. She has many honorary degrees and gained awards for her writing, painting, and speaking. She has spoken at countless rallies, conferences, events, concerts and interviews for newspapers, magazines and TV shows. She has encouraged thousands and thousands and thousands of people all over the world to follow Christ. After 43 years of being paralyzed she was diagnosed with breast cancer in June 2010. After surgery she is positive about the future.

In her autobiography she noted what she said in a speech to 1600 young people in Chicago:

"Wouldn't it be exciting if right now, in front of you, I could be miraculously healed, get up out of my chair and on my feet? What a miracle! We'd all be excited and praising God. It'd be something we could confirm for ourselves. We'd actually see the wonder and power of God.... But far more exciting and wonderful in the long run would be the miracle of your salvation. You see, that's more exciting because that's something that will last forever. If my body were suddenly and miraculously healed I'd be on my feet another thirty or forty years; then my body dies. But a soul lives for eternity. From the standpoint of eternity my body is only a flicker in the time span of forever."