

Joni Earekson Tada

By: Jason Limbaugh

Many of you will (or should) be familiar with the life and ministry of Joni Earekson Tada.

Joni was paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident when she was in her teens. She came to Christ as a result of her injury and has glorified God, living as a quadriplegic for many years. I received a note from Living Waters this afternoon saying that Joni has been diagnosed with breast cancer - so, first and foremost, pray for her recovery.

But here is what I really want to say...

The first thing we, as people of faith, often experience with this kind of news is a sense of dismay. "God, how could someone who has been this faithful to You, and already endured so much have this happen to them?" To a large degree, such feelings are right. They are born of compassion. Empathy is a godly emotion, and in our day it is in short supply. We have entered the time prophesied by the New Testament in which people are "without natural affection" for others.

Yet, in another way, our feelings might be based on an age old misconception. That misconception is that faith in God should be an antidote to the possibility of real tragedy and suffering...that faith in Jesus Christ should close the possibility of life getting too grisly. Sure, God might allow some limited suffering to come into our experience to test our faith or grow us up, but certainly he wouldn't allow "too much" tragedy to be stacked against us. Oh, the multitudes who have lost faith due to what they felt was the allowance of unjust suffering by what was supposed to be a "God of love."

Many evangelicals like to poke fun at Joel Osteen types and talk viciously against his message of "your best life now." But those same evangelicals have their OWN version of Osteen's message. It's called "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Out of one side of the mouth we say, "Well, the Bible never promises Christians a bed of roses." But out of the other side, "Are you hurting, dissatisfied, and without hope? Then come to Jesus and find peace, joy, love, and happiness!!" All one need do is take stock of the pain and suffering visited upon any normal congregation in a year to surmise the following: either God doesn't exist and the Bible is a lie or we've missed something in the message of scripture.

The Bible does say, "God is love." It also says that, "The kingdom of God is a matter of love, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit." As one who does have Pentecostal/Charismatic leanings, I also believe in the real possibility of divine healing and the desire of God to have us well in our bodies.

Yet, I am also aware of the book of Hebrews, which tells us, "We do not yet see all things made subject to Him, but we see JESUS..."

The point of the faith has never been and will never be our personal satisfaction and happiness. There is only one "Alpha and Omega," only one "beginning and ending." The point was, is, and will eternally be Jesus Christ and His glory. The promise is that one day He will "wipe every tear from our eyes." But until that time, we live in a very fallen world. A world where people get paralyzed in accidents. A world where cancers come. A world where sons and daughters die in car wrecks. A world where people lose their jobs in the middle of financial crises. And if we can avoid the many opportunities for ruin that life will hurl at us, there is not a single one who can avoid the breakdown and eventual death of our bodies through age.

Will you believe anyway? That is faith. It isn't that God is seeking to visit disaster on His children. That would be a gross misrepresentation of what I'm communicating. And, yes, we can live in expectation and hope that our prayers will find an answer. At the same time, we need to understand that God is not simply going to suspend reality for us at every turn. He hasn't done this for His people in the past, He never promised such a thing, and it isn't part of our experience now.

Ready your faith. It is inevitable that our lives will be touched by deep tragedy. In that day, it is important that we not be propping our faith up on empty maxims and unrealistic expectations. And if our hope is ultimately for a life that is just a little less tumultuous and open to pain than those who don't believe, that is precisely what we are doing.

But if our hope is in Jesus...if our hope is in His righteousness, period...if our hope is in eternity and the resurrection of the dead to everlasting glory...then nothing this life can throw at us will cause us to stumble.

Don't presume you've arrived. Reflect, consider, and adjust.