

Foreword by JONI EARECKSON TADA

DISABILITY
— & —
THE GOSPEL

HOW GOD USES OUR BROKENNESS

TO DISPLAY HIS GRACE

MICHAEL
S. BEATES

Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace

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Foreword

Before You Begin

Back in the mid-1960s when I first embraced Christ, I would tell people it was all about Jesus, but I had no idea what that meant. Sure, Christianity was centered on Christ, but mainly he was the one who got my spiritual engine started. As long as I filled up on him every morning during my quiet time, I was able to putter along just fine.

Things changed dramatically in 1967 after I crushed my spinal cord in a diving accident that left me a quadriplegic. I was frantic and filled with fear. *Oh God, I can't do this. I can't live like this!* This time I needed the Savior urgently. Every hour. Every minute. *Or else I'll suffocate, God!* Suddenly, the Bible with all its insights about suffering and weakness became the supreme thing in my life. I spent hours flipping pages of the Bible with my mouth stick, desperate to understand exactly who God is and what his relationship is to suffering. It didn't take long to find answers that satisfied. When it came to my life-altering injury, nothing comforted me more than the assurance that God hadn't taken his hands off the wheel for a nanosecond. I discovered that a right understanding of God's hand in our hardships was critical to my contentment. I also discovered how *important* good theology is.

Fast-forward more than three decades to the worldwide ministry I now help lead at Joni and Friends—a ministry to people with disabilities who anguish over the same questions I once did. As I travel around the globe, I hear, “What does the Bible say about my child who was born with multiple disabilities?” and “Why does God allow so much brokenness in the world?” My heart aches because these people often hear only silence (or experience rejection) from the body of Christ. Sadly, the church is ill equipped to answer the tough questions about God's goodness in a world crumbling into broken pieces.

When it comes to suffering, I'm convinced God has more in mind

for us than to simply avoid it, give it ibuprofen, divorce it, institutionalize it, or miraculously heal it. But how do we embrace that which God gives from his left hand? I have found that a person's contentment with impairment is directly proportional to the understanding of God and his Word. If a person with a disability is disappointed with God, it can usually be traced to a thin view of the God of the Bible.

Now you understand why I believe a "theology of brokenness" is desperately needed today—a theology that exalts the preeminence of God while underscoring his mercy and compassion to the frail and brokenhearted. It's why I am so *excited* about the book you hold in your hands!

Disability and the Gospel provides exactly what the church needs today. I first met the author, Michael Beates, at a Reformed theology conference in 1992, and then, in the summer of 1993 at a family retreat that our ministry holds for special-needs families. Mike and Mary brought their five children including Jessica, their daughter with multiple disabilities. We struck up a conversation one afternoon and right away, I *liked* this man. I learned about his love for Reformed theology and his passion to preserve the integrity of God's Word—yet he didn't come across aloof and academic. Mike explained that years of raising his disabled daughter had softened his edges—here was a student of God's Word who didn't live in an ivory tower but in a real world with real pain.

I could wax on about Michael's theological background, teaching experience, and degrees. But what I want you to mostly know about him is his zeal for Jesus Christ and his deep desire to reach families affected by disability with gospel hope—it's why he's helped us deliver wheelchairs around the world to needy disabled people, serving with us in Africa and Eastern Europe. As our ministry grew, I realized we needed someone like Mike to serve as a watchdog, helping to keep our theological underpinnings secure. So I asked him to serve on the International Board of Directors of Joni and Friends in 2000.

And I wish I could adequately express how happy I am about his new book, *Disability and the Gospel*, because there are thousands of families like the Beates family and millions of people like me whose disabilities force hard-hitting questions about God and the church:

What does a pastor say when disability hits a family in his congregation broadside? How do Christian education directors respond when autism becomes a serious matter in the classroom? How does the church get engaged with issues that impact our culture, like physician-assisted suicide? What does it take to get a congregation to recognize its weaker members as “indispensable”? In short, how do we grab the church by its shoulders and shake some sense into it about “glorying in our infirmities”?

This excellent resource by Michael Beates gives solid answers to tough questions like these and more. It is my heartfelt prayer that you will take the insights in *Disability and the Gospel* and use them as a guide and resource for your church family. And don’t be surprised if you see a sudden outbreak of heaven-sent power ripple through your life and the life of your congregation—for God’s power *always* shows up best in brokenness. And you don’t have to break your neck to believe it.

Joni Eareckson Tada
Joni and Friends International Disability Center

Introduction

I will never forget that day in the summer of 1982. Toting our three-month-old daughter to the doctor because she was sick, the last thing my wife, Mary, and I expected was that our lives would be changed forever and our souls indelibly marked with the wounds of pain and dreams that died. Our daughter Jessica would eventually be diagnosed with a unique “chromosomal anomaly”: at conception, or within the first few cell divisions, something occurred with her eighth chromosome and this, along with other physical anomalies (maybe related, maybe not), meant that she would go through this life disabled, seriously and profoundly, unable ever to talk, walk, or care for herself in a meaningful and self-determinative way.

Our daughter Jessica did not die, and though there have been times we thought she might, she is still here as I write this in 2011. But in all honesty, I will admit to you, it would have been so much easier in many ways if she had. That is not something you can say out loud in most churches, but it is the brutal truth. Perhaps you have suffered some severe degree of brokenness, whether physical or otherwise, or you care for someone who has. If so, you may know what I am talking about.

The death of a newborn child, while excruciatingly painful, is also graciously final. People move on. Granted, they are never the same, but still necessarily they move ahead. But the brokenness of lifelong disability leaves many people in a state of what some have called “chronic sorrow.” And too often, the Christian church in the West communicates to people that sorrow and brokenness are conditions we expect people to overcome and conquer. People should get past such places in their experiences. But the hard truth is some of us, by God’s difficult providence, find ourselves facing brokenness day in and day out with no prospect of a significant change in the situation. In fact, though you walk on with Christ, by faith, often with gritty devotion and hard

work, not only does the situation not get better or go away, but too often it gets more and more difficult with every passing year.

Perhaps you live with a debilitating and deteriorating condition. Maybe you suffer from chronic sorrow related to deep and abiding emotional trauma. Some have the burden of caring for a spouse or child with paralysis. Many face the long battle with cancer that threatens death. Still others live in the aftermath of the death of a loved one. As I write this opening chapter, I have received another call from a good Christian man, hearing that his dear friend has suddenly been taken from this life by an auto accident. And in my little church, this is not the first or even second time we have been touched by such loss this year. The pain and sense of confusion can be palpable at times because so many people we know and love live so much of their lives in the midst of this pain.

If there is no prospect of improvement, if the dawn seems like it will never come, perhaps you feel like Job when he said in chapter 3:

Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
whom God has hedged in?
For my sighing comes instead of my bread,
and my groanings are poured out like water.
For the thing that I fear comes upon me,
and what I dread befalls me.
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest, but trouble comes. (3:23–26)

How do we square this experience with the teaching of the rest of Scripture? And how should the church community respond to such circumstances? These were the questions I began to ask as a young idealistic graduate student in theology almost thirty years ago. These questions, and others related to it, still nag me when I am alone in the car or mowing the lawn. And our predictable responses in the church also nag me. Why do we in the evangelical church in the West demand that everyone be “normal” and look the same? Why do we as a culture try so hard (and succeed so well!) at hiding people with disabilities from our everyday view? Why do people with visible and invisible brokenness often feel as though they have to hide the problem in order to

join God's people for worship? And finally, and perhaps most importantly, what answers does the good news of the gospel give us for these questions, and how does the gospel give us hope in these situations?

As I asked these questions over the years, I began to realize by simple observation that people with disabilities are almost universally absent from the congregations of most American churches. In 1 Corinthians 12:14–27, the apostle Paul describes the church using the metaphor of the human body. He said that “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (v. 18). Some parts he describes as weaker but indispensable and others as less honorable and less respectable but treated with special honor and greater respect (vv. 22–23). Certainly on one level Paul is describing people with disabilities, broken people, as part of Christ's body, the new community. And his description of the Christian community should be understood as normative, as what we should see when we walk into church.

Statistics from many sources number Americans with disabilities at over forty million people. This is approximately one in every six citizens. Add to this number people whose “brokenness” is relational and emotional, and this category may include almost every other person in the pew. But even a casual survey of most American congregations shows that these weaker, indispensable, and especially honorable members are, for the most part, simply not there. Or, if they are present, too often they are either separate from others (and I realize that this may be necessary in some cases) or they hide their brokenness behind masks of false happiness and superficial normality.

Those with visible disabilities certainly are not represented proportionally to their numbers in the general population. Long ago now, in 1983 (long before the Americans with Disabilities Act), Joni Eareckson Tada wrote, “Ten percent of our population is severely disabled. (That's a flat figure, including impairments of all sorts.) So theoretically, on any given Sunday, a pastor ought to look out over his people and see ten percent who are limited—the deaf, the blind, people in wheelchairs—whatever.”¹ This has not changed since Joni wrote it twenty-five years ago. In fact, as technology improves, more and more people with disabilities are able to survive for longer periods, so perhaps even more should be present in church.

Let's be clear: such people have not been purposely excluded from the church. And we know that most church members and leaders would certainly affirm that broken people and people with disabilities are welcome at their particular church. But those who live with disabilities (that is, those who are disabled and those who live with and care for someone who is disabled) will testify that, though American culture generally is becoming more aware of and responsive to the needs and abilities of this disabled segment of society (especially since the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990), in many subtle ways people with disabilities sense a lack of welcome from the church. Nancy Eiesland agrees, writing:

The history of the church's interaction with the disabled is at best an ambiguous one. Rather than being a structure for empowerment, the church has more often supported the societal structures and attitudes that have treated people with disabilities as objects of pity and paternalism. For many disabled persons the church has been a "city on a hill"—physically inaccessible and socially inhospitable.²

My own family lives with disability. We have been to churches where we have had to carry Jessica's wheelchair over obstacles or up steps to get inside. We have experienced the quiet stares that betray an unspoken discomfort with our presence. Many years ago when she was young, we heard nursery workers and Sunday school teachers actually say, "You're not going to leave her here with us, are you?" And, of course, well-intentioned but theologically obtuse believers have sincerely asked us if we had confessed the sin in our lives that must surely be responsible for her affliction.

Too often people in the church, while accepting and loving all people, lack the initiative or the insight to provide simple measures that would make the church community more complete, satisfying, and welcoming for those who live with brokenness. People don't know the needs because they don't ask or take the initiative to find out. Our situation is nearly paradigmatic for myriad other families with whom we have spoken—families whose disabilities span a wide spectrum from the obvious wheelchair people to those with much more subtle but just as demanding marginal issues of brokenness.

The problem is that Christian people generally have an inadequate understanding of God's role in disabilities. This lack of understanding leads to closed doors for people with disabilities even after the handicapped spaces are painted in the parking lot, dipped curbs are cut, and ramps are built to the front entrance of the church. But the more vital problem is that the Christian community generally tends to keep people with disabilities marginalized in the church. Stanley Hauerwas (with Bonnie Raine) has written:

While ethical imperatives of the Gospel seem clear and have never been forgotten by our churches, the direction which they might offer us as community members has not surfaced as a compelling rationale for caring for our handicapped members or for cherishing as an achievable goal their total integration in our community.³

Why has God ordained some to be disabled, weaker members? How does such design reflect his sovereign and loving care for his people? And if the church should contain weaker and less honorable members, just as he has intended them to be (1 Cor. 12:18), then why are people with disabilities painfully absent from most American congregations? By Paul's definition of the church, most churches today are incomplete without people with disabilities. This is fundamentally a gospel-related problem that must be addressed.

How can the church embrace people with disabilities more biblically and more effectively and thus live the gospel more fully before the watching world? We must set out to destroy some dangerously outmoded concepts about people with disabilities and how they must be treated. We must revisit our deeply ensconced cultural assumptions about what it means to be "normal" as opposed to what it might mean to live for years in a state that must be considered "brokenness." We must strive to replace wrong-headed (even if sincere) thinking in these areas with biblically based, culturally relevant, redemption-oriented understandings of people with disabilities and brokenness in the church in America. Such a reassessment is critical if the church is ever to model more closely Jesus's vision in the Gospels and Paul's vision in 1 Corinthians.

I set out in these pages to look at what the Bible says about bro-

kenness generally and disability specifically. Then I want to consider a bit of what the sages have said through the years since the church began—some of it is profound and encouraging, some of it is simply shameful and embarrassing. But once we have this base of Bible and history upon which to build, we can develop principles and outline a gospel paradigm that will help believers individually and churches corporately first to embrace their own brokenness and then equip them to embrace those more physically and visibly broken around them.

I am not a person with a disability in the traditional sense, so I cannot speak as one who has borne the experience through lifelong social rejection and barriers to progress. My experience with people living with disabilities generally remains painfully limited. Yes, I am a parent of a profoundly disabled child now thirty years old. And yes, we adopted a couple of kids (both about twenty years old now) who have their own challenging situations from birth. And yes, my work as a member of the International Board of Directors at Joni and Friends and my association with local disability networks has widened my experience a bit. But the varieties of disabilities common in our communities (and thus the experiences related to those disabilities) are broad, and I have interacted personally with only a small slice of the spectrum.

Also, I recognize that the field of medical ethics, which touches on this area, is in a continual state of flux. It seems that new discoveries and advances bring new blessings and curses with each passing week. As such, it has become nearly impossible to keep up with the information and even to a large degree the rapidly changing nature of the issues being addressed.

I am not by any stretch of the imagination an expert either in disabilities or in the nature of the gospel. But all that being said, let's explore together some important verses, passages, and themes in the Bible so that we can begin to adjust our thinking. We want to have the mind of Christ, so we need to see what God has said through the Scriptures of the Old Testament, through the life and words of Jesus in the Gospels, and through the Holy Spirit speaking by the apostles in the Acts and Epistles.

Then let's look at some history so that we can avoid mistakes

made before. There are ancient and modern voices that can bring us wisdom, warn us against error, and help us hear the cry of those, even today, who yearn for deep and accepting fellowship with God's people.

Finally, let's revisit these hard questions and ask how we can live under God's grace in the power of the gospel, even if we live in the weakness of disability and brokenness of soul.

PART 1

THE VOICE OF GOD

In the ancient Hebrew texts we call the Old Testament, we find revelation that informs our understanding with respect not only to who we are as people but also to how God sees us. We also begin to see a pattern of God showing favor to the broken, the weak, and the outcast—indeed surprisingly often using such subjects for his own purpose and glory. We will consider the Old Testament texts according to their traditional Hebrew divisions: the Law, Prophets, and Writings. In the Law (also called the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses) we will look at passages in Genesis through Deuteronomy. Then we will consider the Prophets. In this category the Hebrew Scriptures include the traditional historical books (Joshua through Kings) and the prophetic books (Isaiah through Malachi). Finally, we will look at a few passages from the Writings. This portion of the Hebrew Scriptures is a collection of wisdom and poetic books (Job through Proverbs) as well as a few others like Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, and the five scrolls (Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes).

CHAPTER FOUR

Biblical Conclusions and Reflections

Someone has said that the opposite of faith is not doubt but self-reliance. When we determine, despite massive and overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that we are sufficient and able on our own, we begin to live as if we no longer need God or faith. The truest sign of cultural unbelief is the perception that we are doing okay, that things are all right. Recognizing our essential weakness and brokenness is not a pleasant prospect, and our culture works hard to deny that reality and proclaim its self-sufficiency. Sharon Betcher agrees, writing, “What seems to the cultural eye the physical obstinacy of disability suggests rather a religious, philosophical, and/or cultural rejection, namely, an undigested or inadmissible awareness that to live will involve us, at some time and at some level, in physical and/or psychic suffering.”¹

In the 1999 film *The Matrix*, we see a cinematic illustration of this truth. When the character Neo is “rescued” and awakened, he opens his eyes to a world that is terribly ugly, broken, and dark. He learns that humanity for the most part continues to live as slaves in a computer-generated dream world of sorts, never grasping the true nature of their desperate and lost situation. At one point, early in his rehabilitation, Neo asks, “Why do my eyes hurt?” And his companion, Morpheus, responds simply, “You’ve never used them before.”² So for us, sometimes after God saves us to himself and our eyes are opened for the first time spiritually, we begin to see our brokenness and the ugliness of the world. But this is a necessary first step to embracing the hope of the gospel—renewal and reformation into the image of Christ and final restoration with God.

Our culture, too, vehemently denies humanity’s desperate spiri-

tual brokenness, and we hide our physical weaknesses. Again Betcher declares, as a person traumatically wounded in midlife, that she desires her disability to be neither “the stigmata of a saint nor . . . provocation for social taboo.”³ But with great eloquence she says that in the West “we culturally bury in crypts of silence and alienation” those who live with disabled bodies.⁴ However, Adam Nelson has written:

Brokenness seems to be a prerequisite that God demands before doing lasting work through a person. . . . [But] the term *broken* is almost always perceived as negative. Victor Frankl said, “Despair is suffering without meaning.” Brokenness helps us avoid despair when our dreams do not come true and when we suffer, because it gives us meaning when we need it most. . . . Only after we are broken in the right place can we be truly healed and experience wholeness.⁵

So we have a tension between our cultural experience of antipathy to weakness and disability on the one hand and the model that Scripture seems to unfold on the other. Our culture says, “Avoid the broken and the disabled. Hide your weakness and blemishes. Act as if they simply aren’t there.” But the Scriptures give story after story and proposition after proposition saying instead, “Understand that you—all of you in some sense or another—are broken. Stop avoiding the truth and embrace it.” For in that embrace we begin to grasp the power of God through his grace made manifest in human weakness.

THE CALL TO HOLINESS AND PERFECTION

We have seen that humanity has been created *imago Dei*, “in the image of God,” but with the advent of sin, that image has in some fashion been marred. God, however, remains transcendent and ultimately holy. The Old Testament temple ritual focused on worshiping God in an acceptable manner. As far as humanly possible, only the outwardly perfect could come before him. Whether a priest representing the people or a gift being brought as sacrifice—whatever came into God’s presence—it had to be pure, spotless, and without blemish.

This rigorous requirement could only measure the outward appearance, of course, and we saw God remind people through the prophet Samuel that while man looks at the outward appearance, God

looks at the heart. So even though people with outward blemishes or disabilities were barred from serving in the temple, they were bidden freely to worship the true God. In fact, we have seen that though God required perfection in the temple, his heart was, and continues to be, always and profoundly tender toward the brokenhearted, the widow, the orphan, the lame, the blind, and the otherwise marginalized.

We have also seen that the temple was, in a sense, a type, a foreshadowing of what will be. In the Prophets and toward the end of scriptural revelation, we see numerous promises that this earthly tent with its weaknesses and brokenness will be cast off for a new and perfect body with which we will worship God for eternity in the true temple of his presence in the fully realized kingdom.

MAN'S PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL WEAKNESS AS A THEOLOGICAL MOTIF IN SCRIPTURE

With the fall came not only a rupture in our relationship and dwelling with God, but our bodies and all creation “fell” as well. We begin to see immediately, with few exceptions, the life spans of Adam’s descendants decrease through the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11. But more subtle than that, we have noted that all the major human characters in the Scriptures are not heroes first. Rather, they are weak, marginalized, unlikely candidates for any noteworthy achievements. We also see that spiritual brokenness is often linked with physical weakness.

What we see in the narrative with regard to individuals begins to be articulated more clearly by the prophets to be applied to people in general. Isaiah 30:15, for instance, turns the world’s thinking about man completely upside down. Through the prophet, the Lord says, “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” (NIV). Repentance: turning away from self-reliance and admitting our weakness and inability. Rest: the countercultural idea of the cessation of activity, the emptying of self-reliance. And these two ideas are deeply connected to each other. If we are god in our own reality, if we are self-reliant, we are in control. In fact, this is the essence of modern living isn’t it—control over one’s circumstances? The words of

the psalmist express the same thought: “Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him” (Ps. 37:7).

Hear this truth: the heart that rests most fully upon Christ will be most strengthened to labor for him. And this is true regardless of the state of our brokenness. We must resist making self the center. We must resist living in anxiety and fear as to whether we can control our world, control others, and save ourselves. All this turns the soul away from the Source of our salvation.

So from where does your salvation come? Jeremiah 3:23 says, “Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies [or commotion] on the mountains. Truly in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.” In John 5:39–40 Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

In repentance and rest is our salvation, but the text of Isaiah 30 goes on to say, “In quietness and trust is your strength” (v. 15 NIV). Quietness, while meant as a parallel to the idea of rest has its own meaning for us. It carries the sense of being tranquil, lacking fear—and it can serve also as a parallel of shalom—peace. And what a need we have for such quietness today. But who would equate it with being a source of strength?

The principle in Isaiah 30:15 is: in quietness and trust before God we find the real source of strength to live well, to live with a realization that God is in charge. Quietness is an attitude of the heart. Repentance, rest, quietness, and trust—this last is the most difficult.

Again, just as *quietness* is a parallel with *rest*, so *trust* is intended to be a parallel of *repentance*. In fact, trust, in many ways, is the flip side of the coin with repentance. Repentance is an act of turning; trust is an act of placing yourself into the care of another.

Tradition often speaks about the three levels of faith: *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia* (the traditional Latin terms). We must have information and data (the *notitia*) in order to believe anything, and we must believe it and affirm (*assensus*) the truth of these ideas. But the apostle James reminds us that even the demons believe the truth—and are certainly not saved. The key element of faith goes beyond admitting the

truth of something. One must surrender oneself to it—place oneself at its mercy. That is saving faith, strengthening faith, and biblical trust.

In John 14:1, Jesus says to his disciples: “Let not let your hearts be troubled. Believe [trust] in God; believe also in me.” But biblical trust is difficult in an age of science, rationality, and human capability. In the eyes of our world, absolute trust is almost universally considered irrational. To admit dependence and need makes you vulnerable. And of course, the goal of so much of our modern and even so-called post-modern world is to gain control and independence from everything around us. But the search for independence and control through science and reason has led only to further frustration and anxiety at not being able to answer—at least in an ultimately satisfying way—those big questions—“Why am I here?” “What is the purpose of all this?” and “What happens after this life?” The answers to these questions are found in God through his Son, in his Word, and in community with his people, the church.

“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.” But notice carefully the prophet’s shocking rebuke at the end, “But you would have none of it!” Israel (the audience of this word from God) chose to trust in an alliance with worldly powers like Egypt or Assyria rather than in Yahweh. In his commentaries on Isaiah, at this point John Calvin said:

We ought, therefore, to turn away our minds from looking at present appearances and outward assistance, that they may be wholly fixed on God; for it is only when we are destitute of outward aid that we rely fully on Him. It is lawful for us to use the things of this world for our assistance, but we altogether abuse them by our wickedness in forsaking God.⁶

Our culture values pride and busyness over repentance and rest. But pride, self-reliance, and harder work will not save. Strength is too often measured by self-reliance and independence. Our culture says, “Trust yourself.”

Look at the good news a bit further in Isaiah 30:18–19: “Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself

to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.”

None of us knows with clarity what to expect tomorrow, next week, and next year. But as we move forward, as we are tempted to make unholy alliances with the ways of the world, we must ask God to give us grace to repent and rest in him. We need God to give us grace to cultivate quiet hearts that can hear him and faithful hearts that can trust him to lead us through whatever trial lies in our path. We find salvation in repentance and rest; we find strength, contrary to the wisdom of the world, not in human ability, but in quietness and trust in the God of Israel.

DISABILITY AS A THEOLOGICAL MOTIF IN SCRIPTURE

In the New Testament we see that while we are people with bodies sown in weakness, these bodies will be raised in glory (1 Cor. 15). Even Jesus was crucified in weakness but lives by God’s power (2 Cor. 13:4). So also, Paul continues, on our own we are weak, but we live instead by God’s power in order to serve and bear witness to God’s goodness and mercy.

We have seen that God seems to use the weak precisely so that he will receive the glory that is due him. Consider especially the subtle summary in Hebrews 11:32–40. There the writer of Hebrews, in rapid-fire manner, names many great heroes of the faith. In the midst of the long list, the writer notes that they were those who “were made strong out of weakness” and “of whom the world was not worthy” and who only together with us would be made perfect.

How contrary this is to popular American culture. At the turn of the twenty-first century and the new millennium, there began a continuing series of American television “reality” dramas exalting the “survivor.” Those who succeed and survive are the strong, and interestingly, most often the carefully deceptive. The weak, vulnerable, and expendable are always considered liabilities and are the first to be “voted off” such shows. You won’t see on a survivor show someone in a wheelchair or anyone who admits to chronic weakness of body, mind, or soul. This survivor paradigm glorifies the self-sufficient. While athletic contests

in themselves may be innocent exhibitions of strength and agility (just as classical musical symphonies are exhibitions of agility and precision of a different sort), like all good things, the delight in physical excellence in the West ends in its virtual exaltation with the temptation of despising the weak and unable. Jean Vanier, in *Becoming Human*, has written:

Those who are weak have great difficulty finding their place in our society. The image of the ideal human as powerful and capable disenfranchises the old, the sick, the less-abled. . . . There is a lack of synchronicity between our society and people with disabilities. A society that honours only the powerful, the clever, and the winners necessarily belittles the weak. It is as if to say: to be human is to be powerful.⁷

But the biblical paradigm we have seen take shape is completely different. God says he alone is perfect, he alone deserves glory; all men are broken and weak and must turn to him for the satisfaction and sanctification of their souls.

Joni Tada once related a story about seeking to buy a horse with her sister. They carefully examined the horse to discover any hidden weaknesses. She wisely wrote:

Weak spots. It's scary to think of having your weak spots exposed, isn't it? Weaknesses have a way of either raising or lowering our value in the eyes of others. In spite of all your failings and struggles, the Lord Jesus did not purchase your life at low bid. No higher price could have been paid. From his point of view, you're worth your weight in weaknesses.⁸

We have discovered that God is not only creator of man and we are made *imago Dei*, but we have seen that God is declared to be the creator of disabilities. He is also, in some profound sense, the source of brokenness and the one who has ordained to use such brokenness for his purposes, and ultimately, for his glory.

We have also seen that in Christ, all the fullness of God dwells. Christ is the final image of God in a sense, and we then, under the new covenant, are being remade into the image of Christ. This has drawn Philip Hughes to contend that the New Testament speaks of

the “Christoformity” of the believer. In his book *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*, he wrote, “Christoformity was the intention of God in the creation of man. As his origin is christomorphic, so also is his destiny.”⁹ Christ was raised and ascended bodily, living forever at the right hand of our heavenly Father. When we are raised with incorruptible bodies, we shall mirror him. Therefore, in some sense, we bodily mirror his image even now, however broken that image may be. And the process of spiritual formation—sanctification—is the Holy Spirit’s work of conforming our souls to more resemble the Lord Jesus.

Joni Tada and Steve Estes capture this thought well in their book *When God Weeps*. Discussing the meaning of suffering, they remind us of the anecdotal incident when Michelangelo was asked what he saw as he looked at a block of uncut marble. The story tells us that he responded by saying he saw a beautiful form trapped inside the rock and he considered it his responsibility as an artist to set the figure free by using his hammer and chisel. Tada and Estes then comment:

The beautiful form, the visible expression of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” is inside Christians like a possibility, a potential. The idea is there, and God uses afflictions like a hammer and chisel, chipping and cutting to reveal his image in you. God chooses as his model his Son, Jesus Christ, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Rom. 8:29).¹⁰

Our culture focuses on pleasure and we avoid pain at all costs. We flee from the concept of hammers and chisels working on our souls. In our day of pain relief, quick medical procedures, and the like, we have lost a sense of the body’s purpose to remind us of our frailty—body and soul—of our need of redemption, and of our proper God-focused longing for heaven. This is another reason visibly broken people are indispensable among us in the covenant community—they remind us that no matter how healthy the vast majority may be, none of us in this body is home! Stanley Hauerwas, in *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church*, said, “Our identity, far from deriving from our self-possession, or our self-control, comes from being ‘de-possessed’ of those powers whose

promise is only illusory. . . . Prophetlike, the retarded only remind us of the insecurity hidden in our false sense of self-possession.”¹¹ Later, in like fashion he says, “In the face of the retarded we are offered an opportunity to see God, for like God they offer us an opportunity of recognizing the character of our neediness.”¹²

And this—our “neediness”—gets to the heart of the issue. The gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone divests people of their power and of their self-sufficiency. Tradition tells us that Martin Luther, in his inimitable manner, once declared that all we contribute to our salvation is the sin. In all ways through the Scripture, human beings are the passive recipients of the grace of God. We cannot earn it or demand it, sustain it or keep it. So also, human beings (all races, genders, and classes of people) are unable to recover that which has been lost from the image in the fall. The teaching of Holy Scripture is clear that our recovery into the image of Christ, as with grace, is the work of God alone.

And just as culture works hard to bury the reality of our sin and mortality, so too often does the church. While we confess our belief in salvation by grace, we all get properly dressed and work quite hard to appear clean, healthy, and whole (too often for all the wrong reasons). True spirituality does not project an image of superiority or power or “togetherness.” Rather, true spirituality is quite ordinary and transparent in its shortcomings and weaknesses. The Lord Jesus, in his humanity, was quite ordinary and even weak. Like all of us, he was ordinarily weak as an infant in the manger and extraordinarily weak and vulnerable on the cross.

The absence of people with disabilities in the church indicates that the church has not yet grasped deeply enough the essence of the gospel; and conversely, God’s people have drunk too deeply from the well of cultural ideology with regard to wholeness and brokenness. If people with disabilities are not welcomed by the church, much less aggressively pursued by the church, it may be because, like the world around us, we would rather think we are on the way to recovery, that we are strong in Christ and healthy. We would rather not be bothered by the care that those who live with brokenness require. We don’t wish to be reminded by their very presence how much like them we really are.

But Marva Dawn has rightly charged, “There is something seriously wrong with our lives and churches if we are operating out of strength, rather than the weakness in which God tabernacles.”¹³ Indeed the charge may be made that many of our churches and Christian institutions are so self-sufficient that God is no longer necessary for all practical purposes. For if we understand the transforming power of the gospel, we know, with ever-deepening gravity, our inability, our weakness, and our brokenness. The gospel allows us the liberating freedom to admit what the world doesn’t want to hear: we are utterly unable, but our God is supremely able. Even the many positive biblical references to gifts, giftedness, and equipped servants (including everything from teaching to music to artistic craftsmanship for building the tabernacle and the temple) must be seen in the light of the fact that these gifts are from God and are intended for his glory.

In declaring our innate inability and God’s supreme ability as the giver of all good gifts, we can gather around us like-minded broken people and like-bodied broken people, together witnessing in a radically countercultural way that when we are weak, he is strong, and then he receives the glory due to him alone.

We have seen that though God created humanity for fellowship with himself, this fellowship was broken at the fall. The result is that mankind is not simply broken relationally with God. What we have seen from the Scriptures is that our brokenness profoundly affects every area of life. Stuart Govig has written:

Deep inside, most of us recognize that we “belong to our scars” as life experiences unfold. Yet we live in a society that refuses to recognize, much less respect, this insight. Television advertising pictures us as a society with little use for weakness, humility, or silence. As aging occurs, the blemishes on our hands and the gray hair on our heads become enemies to be conquered by the latest tonic. Pills are available for headaches and aching backs. Various products supposedly alleviate discontents of loneliness and illness. Rather than face the truth that each of us is vulnerable to becoming blemished, advertisers play on our hopes for preventing or eliminating pain and imperfection. Instead of learning valuable lessons about life from

persons with disabilities in our midst, we turn away and keep our distance.¹⁴

We are broken and weak in every arena of life: relationally, spiritually, physically, morally, and emotionally. The most difficult of these areas to hide is the physical. We can deny or avoid (to a point) the others, but the physical weaknesses are usually right there to see. Again, Hauerwas is articulate:

Perhaps that is why the retarded scare us so much—namely, they remind us that for all our pretension we are as helpless as they are when all is said and done. Like them, we depend on others for our lives and for simple things that make life livable. We prefer to keep our dependence hidden, however, as we are under the illusion that, unlike the retarded, we are in control of our existence. Thus we label those who are so clearly dependent as “retarded” in order to mark them off from us. To Christians, such a distinction must be particularly anathema, for the very content of revelation is to teach us precisely that we are indeed a dependent people.¹⁵

Physical brokenness reminds us we are finite, that the world is not as it should be. For this reason, the culture concentrates extraordinary effort toward hiding or avoiding weaknesses, focusing on power, building strength both tangibly through physical workout and intangibly through personality training, influence brokering, and such. But the gospel calls all people to realize bad news: we are sinful and broken people. Or as some have said, “The bad news is we are much worse than we have ever cared to believe ourselves to be.” Only by first grasping the bad news can the good news of the gospel be as good as God truly intends it to be. The good news says that though we are worse than we like to think, God’s grace is much deeper and profoundly richer than we could ever have imagined. But it is only available for those who recognize their neediness.

Jesus said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Those who know they are insufficient and unable are urged to come and find rest for their souls. This transforming power of the gospel rests upon those who know they need it, not simply to help them or assist them. The gospel in this sense is

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not simply a crutch. It is the electric-shock paddles charged to send life-giving force into dead hearts, reviving and bringing new life to dead souls.

The world may hear our countercultural proclamation of the gospel, but how much more powerful it would be were they to see it being demonstrated in churches that fulfill the Luke 14 mandate by bringing in the blind, the lame, the deaf, the leper, and any other culturally disenfranchised and rejected, broken people. Hauerwas, citing the “Pastoral Statement on the Handicapped” issued by the American National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1978, says the bishops admonish the church saying:

Handicapped people should be gratefully welcomed in the ecclesial community wherein we can benefit from the spiritual gifts and the self-realization they share with the rest of us in the Christian community, namely, that “we all live in the shadow of the cross.” That shadow reminds us that we are all “marginal” people and hence our need for mutual integration.¹⁶

In a paradoxical way, the spiritual gift of presence in weakness by those with disabilities is the strength they bring to the church. They bring with that gift a more accurate self-realization of who we all are before God. The biblical mandate is clear, but how has the church responded to the weakness and brokenness of disabilities through the ages?



Michael Beates's concern with disability issues began nearly 30 years ago when his eldest child was born with multiple profound disabilities. Now, as more families like his are affected by a growing number of difficulties ranging from down syndrome to autism to food allergies, the need for church programs and personal paradigm shifts is greater than ever.

Working through key Bible passages on brokenness and disability while answering hard questions, Michael offers helpful principles for believers and their churches. He shows us how to embrace our own brokenness and then to embrace those who are more physically and visibly broken, bringing hope and vision to those of us who need it most.

“I wish I could adequately express how happy I am about his new book. This is an excellent resource that gives solid answers to tough questions and more.”

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Founder, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“Well researched and at times provocative, Beates digs beyond the surface in search of reconciliation among the realities of suffering, disability, and the teachings of Scripture.”

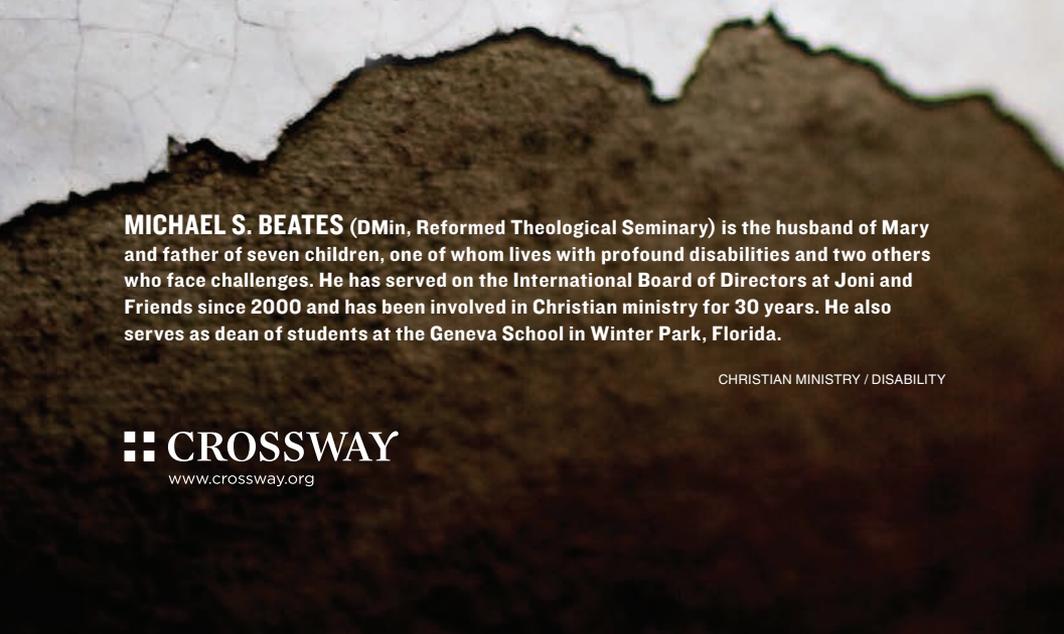
DOUG MAZZA, President, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“The church needs to be awakened to the presence of the disabled in our communities and, as Beates stresses, to the disabilities we all have as sinners in need of God's grace.”

JOHN M. FRAME, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*

“Every Christian in America needs to read this book, and every church should study it, underline it, and live it!”

STEVE BROWN, radio teacher, *Key Life*



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