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A Place of Healing

Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty

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One

Report from the Front Lines

If God sends us on strong paths, we are provided strong shoes.

—Corrie ten Boom

This is no time to write a book.

But I have to try.

It won't be easy. It may not be wise. Nevertheless, if you are reading these words, it has been accomplished, and the book has been published. God be thanked!

So mark it here. I am taking on a task that in-the-know book writers wouldn't attempt, and setting myself to complete an assignment that military historians would never dream of undertaking. I am writing in the midst of my experience, in the violence of a firefight, in the crush of circumstances, and in the vice grip of unrelenting pain. I am recording my combat zone observations before the smoke has cleared, before the shells have stopped falling, before the guns have gone silent, before the long grass and wildflowers have grown over the scars of war.

And I am writing with great urgency. My life is changing, and I want to speak to these issues of suffering in a believer's life—and yes, to God's undeniable healing power—while I still can. Incessant pain, as those who have lived in its grip can attest, makes it very difficult to think, work, relate, plan, write, and—as I recently discovered—take on a public speaking opportunity.

Not long ago I was invited to speak to a class at Biola University here in Los Angeles, California. I'd been asked to address Dr. Kathy McReynolds's class on "A Theology of Suffering and Disability," a course designed by Biola and our *Christian Institute on Disability* here at the Joni and Friends International Disability Center. Dr. McReynolds had asked me to come and lecture her sixty-five students on how God redeems suffering. And some of those students, she had told me, had deeper questions than that.

The class met in one of those classrooms in the older part of campus that has no windows—and precious little ventilation. The professor had placed a fan near one of the doors, which I appreciated. Still, without windows and on a warm day in Southern California, the room immediately seemed hot and close.

Before I could even be introduced, I felt those familiar sensations of the walls closing in on me.

Claustrophobia, my old nemesis.

It was the same feeling that comes when I wake up at 2 a.m., after the pain medication has worn off and Ken is sleeping soundly. In those dark, middle-of-the-night moments, I'm not physically able to free myself from a too-hot blanket, and the stiffness of lying in one position for so many hours overtakes me with a rush of pain that dares me to try and fall asleep again.

Dr. McReynolds introduced me to the class, and I looked across the room as I began. Some young, fresh-faced juniors leaned forward on their elbows, anticipating, I gathered, something bright and inspirational. Others slouched, fiddling with their pencils. Those were probably the ones with the “deeper questions.” *Well, welcome to the club.*

I began where I have begun a thousand times before: with my own testimony. The hot summer morning at Chesapeake Bay. The raft, the dive, the impact, the injury, the Stryker Frame in a Baltimore hospital ... the long years of treatment and therapy, and the beginnings of an unimagined ministry. From there I bridged into the whole question of God’s will. *How could God allow all this to happen in my life?* Although I try to make it fresh, I have to admit there are times when it all sounds a little too rote, a little too pat in my own ears.

But not this time.

Fresh Urgency

At this stage of my life the question bears down on me with fresh urgency, just as it did in that very moment in the classroom. Although I’d tried hard to get my corset right before the class, and although I’d been lifted up, carefully positioned, and repositioned repeatedly that day, I was hurting.

I mean *really* hurting.

Fifteen minutes into my talk I found myself squirming in my wheelchair and biting my lip, struggling to express even familiar thoughts and ideas. And the room was so warm. It felt like an extra effort just getting my breath.

I somehow muddled through my allotted forty-five minutes. But it had felt like a muddle. Had the students gained anything from it? Their faces told me at least some

had been moved—perhaps even deeply. Certainly no one was slouching or doodling now. Had God done something mysterious with my labored presentation—something beyond what I could have reasonably expected? (How many times He has done that before!)

After a short break it was time for the question-and-answer segment. Most of the questions were pretty predictable, but for whatever reason, one of those common, expected questions suddenly pierced deeply, touching some nerve I hadn't even realized was raw.

“You mentioned that you're going through a season of pain,” the student began. “I would think it would be awfully distracting from your main mission. Why do you think God allowed this?”

Why, indeed.

Why has God allowed this? I'm almost sixty years old! Why such agony and distraction at this point in my journey, after all these years of enduring, persevering, and seeking to serve Him?

The simple question, like driftwood hidden in heavy surf, came at me in a wave of fresh pain. It's not like I hadn't dealt with that issue a million times. I've handled that “why does God allow this” query on countless occasions in numberless settings in multiple languages throughout the course of my paralyzed life, but ... for some reason, I found it terribly difficult to answer in that moment. *Was it because I was tired? Lack of sleep will do that to you. Was it because the room was stuffy and the fan wasn't working? Was it because I'd stopped quietly pleading with God for His mercy?*

My throat thickened and my eyes welled with tears. I started to answer. I had the words on my tongue. But I had to stop. I took short breaths to gain composure, but my nose began to run and tears escaped my lower lids.

Yeah, I'd lost it, and the students all knew it.

Now what?

I didn't want to make a scene. Didn't want the whole thing to look contrived. But what could I do but plow ahead, nearly blubbering my response? "I—I have thought about that question many times ... and ... I've never said this in public, but ... lately I have wondered. ... Well, it's like this. For decades I haven't suffered. Not *really*. Yes, I'm a quadriplegic and that's hard, but it's mostly behind me. I'm used to it. I've almost forgotten what having hands that work feels like. But with this pain, it's—it's as though God is reintroducing me to suffering, like ... I'm brand new to it and have never experienced it before.

"Why? I don't know. Maybe—maybe He has allowed this so that what you've just heard—the last forty-five minutes—wouldn't come off as something trite, something rehearsed, or sound like a platitude. The Bible says, 'Not many of you should be teachers.' And perhaps this is why."

The classroom fell dead silent. Rising quietly from his perch on the front row, my wonderful Ken came up with a Kleenex—and I didn't even care that the students were watching me blow my runny nose. Anyway, I doubt that they minded.

You can't teach about suffering from a textbook. You can place yourself in front of a class, lecture, and even do a snappy PowerPoint, but how do you communicate truth so that words become a branding iron on a heart of soft wax? How else do you treat the subject of suffering? Sharing about suffering is like giving a blood transfusion ... infusing powerful, life-transforming truths into the spiritual veins of another. And you can't do that with words only. Or, you shouldn't. How can you learn about suffering except by feeling the pain yourself? But mercifully, none of those sixty-five students had to break

their necks that day or endure mind-bending pain. They just had to have faith that the tears were real ... which proved that the Man of Sorrows really can redeem suffering.

For me and for them.

The Fight of My Life

So here I am gathering these thoughts and writing them down, working with an editor and starting a book when some would say that the timing is all wrong. “Wait awhile, Joni,” they say. “Get some perspective. Conserve your energy. Concentrate on getting better.”

Famous military leaders who write their memoirs are usually retired, but I’m still in the battle. Storied generals like Grant, Lee, Pershing, Eisenhower, Montgomery, and Churchill wrote after years of reflection. (I have a mental picture of a wicker rocking chair on an old-style front porch, with a light spring breeze carrying the scent of lilacs and teasing the corners of a writing tablet.) But I’m penning these words in the midst of hostilities, while the dust and smoke of war still drift over the battlefield.

In fact, I find myself in the fight of my life. I’m in the thick of it, as they say, and honestly have no idea how long this struggle will continue or how and when it will be resolved.

As I said, it’s an unlikely time to write a book on healing.

To this very moment my great adversary is not the garden variety of aches and hurts associated with quadriplegia. No, this is something new and malevolent that has intruded into my life. It manifested first as a driving lance of pain in my neck. And just as I began to “reconcile myself” to that field of battle, a new, even fiercer attack broke out on a new front—my lower back. The persistent attacks of physical agony I have experienced over the last two years are beyond anything I could have imagined.

Words truly fail me.

After keeping me in the hospital for days and putting me through what seemed like every test known to man, doctors have at last discovered the culprit—or one of the culprits. It is a fracture in my sacrum—that large, triangular bone at the base of the spine. No wonder I've been in such a state! No wonder those fiery fingers radiate across my abdomen. The fact is, every moment I've been sitting up, I've actually been sitting on the injury itself.

Since remaining upright in my wheelchair for any length of time hasn't been possible, I've been working from a little bed in my office. Some days I do attempt to sit up for as long I am able, trying to complete as much work as I possibly can before pain drives me back to bed.

As you might imagine, it has complicated everything I do by a factor of ten. Here's one small example.

Not long ago I was sitting in my studio, attempting to record my *Joni and Friends* weekly radio program, an activity I have enjoyed for decades. On this occasion, however, I found myself with a very troubling choice: I could cinch my corset extra tight, enabling me to breathe properly in order to talk, but also greatly increasing my pain. Or, I could loosen the corset, lessening the pain, but making it a struggle to record. So I did both. It was read a page or two, stop, tighten the corset, then read again, then loosen it again. I got it done, but it all seemed so very slow and took so long.

The truth is, over this past year I've endured some of the most difficult days and weeks of my life—rivaling those early days in the Baltimore hospital after my injury.

An Honest Fear

Is my life beginning to unravel? Have I reached a limit in what I can endure? Have my friends and coworkers and—God forbid—my husband reached a limit in what *they* can endure for my sake? How much longer can I—can *they*—go on like this? These are the questions that plague me.

Finally, after all these years, I'm honestly beginning to wear people out. These are the people—around eight or so—who graciously offer to get me up in the morning—or in the case of Judy and my husband, Ken, help me through the night. It used to be that only my husband helped me turn in bed in the evening, and often, I didn't need his assistance through the night. He would put me up on my side, tuck my pillows, and then I'd comfortably sleep straight through until morning.

That doesn't work anymore.

Neither do muscle relaxers. Or Advil PM. Or even Vicodin. Or (and I'm sorry to say this) even stronger drugs than that.

I despise taking medication. Born of my mother and father's sturdy stock, I'm a little bit of German and a wee bit Scots-Irish, with some Swedish thrown in for good measure. It's a solid constitution, my family line. For all my years (and I learned this from my parents), I took some pride in the fact that I could push through pain relying on only an aspirin or two. That's just the way I was made; that's the way I handled pain.

The medications don't work very long, anyway—and the side effects can sometimes be worse than the original affliction. It's a little like those TV commercials that promise your skin will be silky smooth with this particular medicine—but take it only upon the risk of kidney disease, liver failure, dry mouth, nausea, and thoughts of suicide! Who wants nice skin after *that?!?*

Seriously, nothing seems to work. Almost like clockwork, I wake up at 2 a.m. with searing pain in my lower back—particularly in the *quadratus lumborum* and the *iliopsoas*. (I know my muscle groups.) For the layman, it translates into the left lower back above my hip along with the left abdomen and inside of my thigh. It probably doesn't mean much to you, but those parts of my body—paralyzed as I am with no feeling in the rest of my limbs—in the wee small hours of the morning come alive with throbbing pain.

Sometimes I can get back to sleep. Most times I bite my lip until my whimpering can be heard by Ken who, unfortunately, now must sleep in a bedroom adjacent to the one we've shared for years. That's when he shuffles in, bleary-eyed and trying hard to not awaken himself too much so he can get back to sleep. Then on automatic pilot, he turns me. It used to be on my other side, but I can't tolerate that anymore. Now I go on my back for a couple hours. Then it's up again at 4 a.m., and hopefully that'll keep me until my girlfriends arrive at 7:30 a.m.

It never used to be this way. Honestly.

I never used to keep that kind of sleep schedule. I never used to whine. I never used to wake up wondering if I'd be able to get out of bed. Most of all, I never remember being this anxious or fearful. Some of it is understandable, but I suspect most of it is a side effect of the medications.

This is why I'm afraid I'm wearing out my friends. And my husband. Now when my girlfriends begin my exercise routine in the morning it involves at least an extra hour of stretching and pulling my muscles. "Oh, could you please pull on my back muscle? Like—angle your hand toward the headboard and That's it Kind of rake-up my back with your fingers Gee, I can't quite feel that Can you dig in harder?"

They give me odd looks now. It used to be fun getting me up. We would sing. We would say to each other, “We get to go work for Jesus today!” But these days, we all just do the best we can.

But one thing is better.

We are all much more dependent on God for help.

And for sanity itself.

Because I have never been more aware that I am a target of the Devil and his hordes.

A Target

The adversary knows very well what my example of trust and confidence in God has meant to Christians throughout the years, from the time I published my first book, *Joni*, back in 1976 through the present. Has Satan read my books? I seriously doubt it—there’s way too much Jesus in those pages for his liking. Nevertheless, he knows my love for the Savior, and hates me for it.

My enemy has most probably assigned some captain in his lowerarchy of hell to harass me. My wicked adversary knows I have at least become accustomed to quadriplegia. He recognizes that total and permanent paralysis is no longer the struggle it used to be for me. He is aware that my profound disability has helped me develop the prized characteristic of needing God desperately when I wake up in the morning.

And quite frankly, he despises that.

He hates knowing that my trust in God resounds to the Father’s glory. He detests thinking of my increased eternal capacity for worship and joy in heaven as a reward for my perseverance these forty-plus years in my wheelchair. He loathes the way my fellowship with Christ in His sufferings turns up the wattage on the Savior’s glory. He considers it odious that I have yielded to the Hebrews 12-type discipline of the Lord in

years past, and he sneers as he watches me “walk” deeper into that fellowship of suffering with Jesus.

It makes him sick.

Hence his full-on attack on my body, mind, and spirit, and on my friends who love me and help me. It’s war—and like all war, it isn’t pretty.

But there’s something earthy about my response to God that further sickens Satan. I believe he views disabilities as his last great stronghold to defame the good character of God. Suffering is that last frontier he exploits to smear God’s trustworthiness. The devil relishes in inciting people to complain, “How could a good God allow my child to be born with this horrible defect?” and asking, “How can I trust a God who would permit cancer to take my husband of only six months?” or wondering, “Why would I believe in a God who includes Alzheimer’s and autism in His plans for people?”

My adversary knows that the Lord has used my personal testimony many times, in many ways, in many nations to push back dark thinking like that. He’s certainly cognizant that the ministry of Joni and Friends has been used of God to promote His grace and goodness among the suffering in some of the darkest corners of our world. He knows I’m well aware that we wrestle not against the flesh and blood of disease and disability, but against powers and principalities that rub their hands in glee as they crush the hopes of disabled people, pushing them deeper into despair and discouragement (Eph. 6:12).

Little wonder I’ve got such a large target on my *quadratus lumborum*.

Battlefield Jesus

Does this chapter surprise you a little? Did you flip back and check the title page to see if you had the right author?

Do you find yourself objecting, perhaps, to the battlefield imagery I've employed to describe my life as is? Could it be you've never quite pictured your walk with Jesus in such terms?

Here at our ministry we refuse to present a picture of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," a portrait that tugs at your sentiments or pulls at your heartstrings. That's because we deal with so many people who suffer, and when you're hurting hard, you're neither helped nor inspired by a syrupy picture of the Lord, like those sugary, sentimental images many of us grew up with. You know what I mean? Jesus with His hair parted down the middle, surrounded by cherub-like children and bluebirds.

Come on. Admit it: When your heart is being wrung out like a sponge, when you feel like Morton's salt is being poured into your wounded soul, you don't want a thin, pale, emotional Jesus who only relates to lambs and birds and babies.

You want a warrior Jesus.

You want a battlefield Jesus. You want His rigorous and robust gospel to command your sensibilities to stand at attention.

To be honest, many of the sentimental hymns and gospel songs of our heritage don't do much to hone that image. One of the favorite words of hymn writers in days gone by was "sweet." It's a term that doesn't have the edge on it that it once did. When you're in a dark place, when lions surround you, when you need strong help to rescue you from impossibility, you don't want "sweet." You don't want faded pastels and honeyed softness.

You want mighty. You want the strong arm and unshakable grip of God who will not let you go—no matter what.

For instance, I absolutely love that beautiful old hymn (a great favorite of my parents) “I Come to the Garden Alone.” Remember the verse that says, “He speaks and the sound of His voice is so sweet, the birds hush their singing”? It’s a nice sentiment, and I’m aware that a thought like that can provide comfort. But it’s really just a reinforcement of a romanticized nineteenth-century image. We have gilded the real Jesus with so much “dew on the roses” that many people have lost touch with Him—or simply turned away.

Why do some people gravitate to a sentimental picture? Well, think about it: A sugar-coated Christ requires nothing from us—neither conviction nor commitment. Why? Because it’s an image that lacks truth and power.

We have to try to change that picture.

And the only way to do it is to think about the resurrection.

Sure, romanticists try to color the resurrection with lilies and songbirds, but lay aside the emotions and think of the facts for a moment: A man, stone-cold dead—a cadaver of gray, cold flesh, really—rose up from His slab and walked out of His grave.

Friend, that’s almost frightening. There’s nothing sugar-coated about it. And the powerful thing is that it accurately describes what Jesus did. That reality has power; it’s truth that grips you. Some people believe Jesus came to do sweet, pleasant things, like turning bad people into nice people. Not so. As someone once said, our Lord and Savior came to turn dead people into living ones—and there’s nothing sentimental about that.

At different times in my life I’ve enjoyed the old pictures of Jesus cradling cute lambs or walking around with blow-dried hair, clad in a white robe looking like it just arrived from the dry cleaner. But these days, these warfare days, those old images just don’t cut it with me. I need a battlefield Jesus at my side down here in the dangerous, often messy

trenches of daily life. I need Jesus the rescuer, ready to wade through pain, death, and hell itself to find me, grasp my hand, and bring me safely through.

There will be a time very soon, I hope, when I will once again enjoy the casual stroll through the garden with Him, admiring the dew-drops on the roses. But for right now, if I am to “endure hardship like a good soldier” as 2 Timothy 2:3 mandates, I need a comrade in arms, a strong commander to take charge of my private war.

And that is exactly who He is, and what He has done.

Battle Zone

The book of James says: “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14).

Of course I had read that passage scores of times, and although I wasn’t “sick,” I wanted to do anything—everything I was supposed to do in this fierce battle—to obey Scripture. And so not long ago, after Sunday services on a bright sunny afternoon when I was still in bed in pain, Pastor Bob and our small group of elders entered my bedroom. They looked so large and out of place! Little did they know they had entered a war zone. (It happens every time you want to obey Scripture.)

As they opened their Bibles, I could feel dark spirits retreating—spirits of discouragement and doubt that had harassed and haunted me over the last few days. But with these Christian men—my husband Ken included—I felt safe for the first time. They read Scriptures, prayed, and then pulled out a small vial of oil.

When Pastor Bob approached the bed, I asked if he would give me a blessing at the close of his prayer for my healing—the sign of the cross on my forehead. Growing up as a Reformed Episcopalian, I knew this to be an outward physical symbol of, well ... a seal, a kind of amen. *So be it. Let it be as the Lord wills.*

Bob prayed: “Lord God, You can, with a thought, simply take this pain of Joni’s away, and so we pray that in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that you would heal Joni of this long and tiring ailment.” And at that he touched my forehead with oil and sealed his prayer.

That’s right. It would only take a thought toward me, Lord. Just a thought from You.

The whole idea of the ease and simplicity with which God could touch me and release me from pain comforted me greatly. A fresh peace settled over the bedroom—a peace I had not sensed in days. Dark spirits of disappointment with God had vanished and my confidence in Him had been refreshed.

At that point Elder Dave kneeled by my bed and began singing a song that addressed one of the fears I had struggled with over the last day or so:

He who began a good work in you.

*He who began a good work in you,
will be faithful to complete it.*

Will be faithful to complete it.

*He who started a work
will be faithful to complete it in you.*

I chimed in on harmony and we sang out the old Steve Green chorus for all it was worth.

Because who can live without purpose? Who can survive without a reason to live? If you are God’s servant—and you are—you have been given a command. Many commands. And if He asks you to do something (and He has), you’ve just been given a reason for living every morning when you wake up. God who began a good work in me *will complete it!* Pastor Bob flipped his Bible open to Psalm 57:2-3 and read it as though

it were a benediction: “I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills [His purpose] for me. He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me.”

I had been hotly pursued long enough by those dark spirits. And by the time my pastor and elders left, Ken and I were determined to look for God’s redemption in my pain. For pain is a bruising of a blessing; but it is a blessing nevertheless. It’s a strange, dark companion, but a companion—if only because it has passed through God’s inspecting hand. It’s an unwelcome guest, but still a guest. I know that it drives me to a nearer, more intimate place of fellowship with Jesus, and so I take pain as though I were taking the left hand of God. (Better the left hand than no hand at all).

Perhaps the simple realization of something so redemptive is healing enough.

I don’t know when this season of pain will be over. Maybe, in God’s grace and wisdom, He’ll say, “Enough!” and banish the pain within the hour. Or maybe He’ll say, “Enough!” allowing me to step out of this long-disabled, deteriorating temporary housing into my “building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Cor. 5:1).

In the meantime, these afflictions of mine—*this very season of multiplied pain*—is the background against which God has commanded me to show forth His praise. It’s also that thing which I am to reckon as “good and acceptable and perfect,” according to Romans 12. God bids me that I not only seek to accept it, but to *embrace* it, knowing full well that somewhere way down deep—in a secret place I have yet to see—lies my highest good.

Yes, I pray that my pain might be removed, that it might cease; but more so, I pray for the strength to bear it, the grace to benefit from it, and the devotion to offer it up to God as a sacrifice of praise. My strength in prayer these days is scant—I’ll confess that.

So for all the concentration I can muster in prayer, I must not dissipate it in seeking physical blessings only. Rather, I must spend a good portion of it seeking spiritual growth and praying for Christ's kingdom to go forth into this dark world. For such prayers are a way for me to know God and to know Him deeper, higher, richer, wider, and fuller—*much* fuller than if I comfortably cruised through life in my wheelchair.

To this point, as I pen this chapter, He has chosen not to heal me, but to hold me.

The more intense the pain, the closer His embrace.

That's one of the truths I'd like to speak to, God helping me, in the following pages.