Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

A Deeper Healing (Joni Eareckson Tada)
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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Strange Fire Conference

JONI: If I'm breathing a little heavy, you'll understand, being a quadriplegic for forty-six years is not easy. Even singing a hymn like that…O my goodness. And, you know, whenever I feel the crunch of my quadriplegia, the crunch of chronic pain which I deal daily with, I think back to those darker days when I was in the hospital, so depressed, so discouraged. I said, "I wanted desperately to be healed." When friends would come into the hospital to visit me and we asked, "Should we read anything to you from the Bible?" I would always, always ask for John chapter 5, "Please read to me from there." When I read it here, you'll understand why.

"For there is in Jerusalem near the sheep gate a pool which is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades, here a great number of disabled people used to lie, the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for 38 years when Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition or a long time," gee, if he thinks 38 years is a long time, I wonder what he thinks of 46?
He asked him, 'Do you want to get well?' Jesus said to him, 'Get up and walk.' I cannot tell you how many times I would lie in that bed, straining to make my muscles move, and I would sing a hymn that I had learned as a child, 'Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry. While on others Thou art calling, Jesus do not pass me by.'" But I never got up out of that bed and walked. And it seemed back then that Jesus had passed me by.

I was released from the hospital. My sister J.K. invited me to come and live with her on our Maryland farm. And one morning while she was doing my get-up routine, bed bath, toileting, exercising, we flipped on the bedside television and there was an advertisement, "Kathryn Kuhlman was coming to Washington D.C."

How many here remember her, Kathryn Kuhlman? Yeah. Well for those of you who might not, she was like her Benny Hinn of the day, okay? Well, my sister and I got into the station wagon and we got to the Washington Fulton Ballroom early. We wanted to have a good seat. We were escorted, however, over to the wheel-chair section where I was sitting with a number of people, crate, crutches, canes, walkers, wheel chairs. We all waited in anticipation. The lights dimmed. A spotlight came on the stage and there comes Miss Kuhlman, sweeping out onto the stage in her long white gown and with a crescendo of organ music, there are songs and hymns and before you know it, after some

time, the spotlight moves to the far corner of the ballroom and we can tell something's going on over there, like people getting healed. Are they getting healed? Are they getting healed? And so we're just waiting for the spotlight to come on the wheel-chair section, like, "Hey, come over here where all the hard cases are."

Before the service ended, ushers came to escort us all out of the wheel-chair section and to the elevators so as to not clog the hallways. And I could hear the organ music on the other side of the wall still playing as I sat, number 15 in a line of 35 disabled people at the elevator. We were all very quiet. And I looked up and down that line and I thought to myself, "Something is wrong with this picture. What kind of Savior? What kind of rescuer, what kind of healer, what kind of deliverer would refuse the prayer of a paralytic?

When I got homes that night in bed, I thought, "Okay then, if I can't be healed, I'm just not going to do this, I'm not going to live this way." And soon a bitter spirit, a mean a real complaining spirit began to take hold. Nobody anything…nobody that…nobody did anything that was good enough. Every…every hurdle became an excuse to feel sorry for myself. If something didn't go my way, it was off with their heads, Queen Joni I was.

Most of all, in that bitterness, Jesus the healer seemed so far and so distant. And if I could not be healed, I said to my sister, "Just leave me in my bedroom draw all the drapes, turn out the light, shut the door and just leave me alone."

But even in that dark bedroom, hymns would come back up to the surface of my heart and I would comfort myself in the loneliness that I was experiencing and just, (singing) "Abide with me, fast falls the even tide, when darkness deepens, Lord with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, I'm so helpless, O abide with me."

And somewhere in that dark bedroom days later, I cried out to God, "If I…If I can't live this way, then somebody else is going to have to. Jesus, You're going to have to do it for me. I can't do this thing called quadriplegia. Please show me how to live."

Those were days when it was my first plea for help. My sister would come into the bedroom then from that time out and she'd open up the drapes, let in the sunshine, get me dressed, sit me in my wheel chair, wheel me to the living room and pull my wheel chair up to a music stand much like this one, plop a large Bible on it, put a mouth stick in my mouth and there I would sit day after day, flipping through the pages of the Bible, this way and that, trying to make sense of it all.

Of course I was still interested in healing. I still wanted to know what God's Word had to say about it. And I found out in the first chapter of the gospel of Mark. You know the story. There Jesus is healing a great deal of diseased and disabled people all throughout the day and long past sunset. Next

morning the crowds return, Simon and his companions go rushing looking for Jesus, but He's nowhere to be found. That's because Jesus had gotten up early and gone off to a solitary place to play…to pray. And when they finally find Him, they tell Him about this crowd of disabled and diseased people at the bottom of the hill all looking for healing. And I thought what Jesus responded to them was so curious because it says in the 38th verse, "Jesus said, 'Let's go somewhere else, to the nearby villages in towns where I can preach there because this is why I have come.'" And that's when it hit me, O did it hit me. It's not that Jesus did not care about all those sick and diseased people, it's just their problems weren't His main focus. The gospel was. The gospel that says sin kills, hell is real, but God is merciful and His Kingdom can change you and Jesus is the way. And whenever people miss this, whenever they just started coming to Jesus to get their pain and problems fixed, the Savior would always back away. No wonder I had been so depressed. O my goodness. I was in to Jesus just to get my problems and my paralysis fixed. Yes, Jesus cares about suffering people. He cares when you've been paralyzed for 38 years, or 46 years.

(Ken, can you get my hand behind me? I need, I'm so weak I need help turning a page. But I'm thankful that you guys know that when people are weak, then God can be strong.)

I was in to Jesus just to get my pain and my paralysis fixed. And I realize that yes, Jesus cares about suffering and He spent most of His time when He was on this earth relieving it. But the gospel of Mark showed me His priorities because the same man that healed blind eyes and withered hands is the same one who said, "Gouge out that eye, cut off that hand if it leads you into sin."

I got the picture. To me, physical healing had always been the big deal, but to God, my soul was a much bigger deal. And that's when I began searching for a deeper healing, not just a physical healing, although I was still praying for such. I asked for a deeper healing, a Psalm 139, "Search me, O God, try my heart, test me and (singing) see if there be some wicked way in me. Cleanse me from every sin and set me free."

And I tell you what, for the last 46 years that's been my prayer. And God has been answering it, exposing things in my heart from which I need to be healed and I tell you what, I am so far from being finished, so far. Remember that bitter spirit that I told you about, well nobody…anything that nobody did was good enough? Well it was early on in my marriage to Ken, maybe about three or four years, and he was really starting to struggle with the 27…24/7 non-stop day-to-day routine of my disability. Now sure I had help. I had girlfriends assisting, but a lot of it fell on Ken's shoulder. And one night before we went to bed, he sat on the end of the mattress and slumped-shouldered confessed, "I can't do this. I feel so trapped. Joni, I just feel trapped."

Out of nowhere I spat out, "Well where was your head when we got married? Didn't you know it was going to be like this? Didn't you understand I was a quadriplegic? Didn't you realize it was going to be this hard?"

As soon as I said those words, I wish I could have stuffed them back in my mouth. And I quickly apologized. “O Ken, I don’t know what got into me, that’s just not like me. That’s not like me at all to say that.”

But you know what? It is like me. It is just like me. And so God does not remove the hardships, He allows them purposes them, plans them, ordains them, permits them and pain and problems and paralysis become the lemon that He kept squeezing in my life, revealing all sorts of things from which I needed to repent…bitterness, spitefulness, selfishness. I don’t like it when God squeezes that lemon, but I need it. “Search me, O God, and show me the sin of which I am capable of.” My disability even to this day so many years later is still squeezing me, revealing the not so pretty stuff of which I am made. And in the last ten years or so of my marriage to Ken, chronic pain has been a big issue. I remember oh maybe ten years ago it was though, I was in the worst of my pain…I’m talking about mind-bending, jaw-splitting pain and Ken had to get up extra times at night to turn me. This went on for several weeks. But one night before we turned out the lights, he sat on that bed again and confessed, “I feel trapped. I can’t do this.” But this time my response was, “O, sweetheart, I don’t blame you one bit. If I were in your position, I’d feel exactly the same way. I would feel trapped. So I’m not going to fault you or scold you, I just want you to know I’m going to cheer you on and pray for you somehow the Lord Jesus can get us through this. And I just want you to know that I believe that God’s grace is going to help us, sweetheart. We can do this.”

It was a visible weight that lifted off my husband’s shoulders. I could just see it. Anxiety, fear just seem to dissipate. It was a huge turning point in our marriage. God was doing a deeper healing in both of us and I tell you what, we needed it because just years later I was diagnosed with stage three cancer. And that’s when God began squeezing the lemon even more. I remember though, one day Ken driving me home from chemo-therapy, I was in the back of the van tied down and I could watch him in the rear-view mirror and as we were traveling down the 101 Freeway, we started talking about how suffering is like little splash-overs of hell. When you suffer, it should be your cue to remember the hell from which you were ultimately rescued because of Christ. And so we just started…we’re discussing this and how amazing it was that God allowed splash-overs of hell in our lives to wake us up out of our spiritual slumber and then when we pulled up in the driveway, he turned off the ignition and looked at me in the rear-view mirror, “Well then what do you think slash overs of heaven are?” And I thought, “Well are they easy-breezy bright days where everything is going well?” We discussed this. Is it times when all the bills are paid and there are no trials, tests, no chronic pain? And in the silence we said no…no, those aren’t splash-overs of heaven. Splash-overs of heaven are finding Jesus in your splash over of hell. There’s nothing more poignant. There’s nothing sweeter than finding Jesus in your hell. And Ken and I are so grateful for the affliction. I know that sounds strange, but all of it helps us stay hungry for the bread of life, it helps us stay thirsty for the living water. And suffering is this, not just a lemon, it’s a textbook that keeps teaching us about who we really are. It sandblasts us, strips us of our sinful ways.

Don’t you think that’s curious, I mean, that suffering came from original sin, and yet God knows uses suffering in our lives to help us get rid of sin. And so He keeps sandblasting us, leaving our souls raw and exposed but that is all that we might be better bonded to the Lord Jesus Christ because when our hearts get beating in rhythm with His, O my goodness, heaven’s joy comes cascading down, spilling and splashing up and up in our hearts, rushing out to others in streams of encouragement and rising back to God in an ecstatic fountain of (Singing) “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation.” And there’s nothing sweeter than experience when the joy of the Lord Jesus in the midst of suffering. We are then, as it says in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, “Sorrowful, but yet always rejoicing. Being poor, but yet making many rich, having nothing and yet possessing everything.”

People often ask me, they’ll say, “Don’t you think God was just laying on you a little too much? Cancer on top of chronic pain, on top of decades of quadriplegia?” Well is it too much for me? Would it be too much for you if that were God’s choice of lemon in your life? To this you were called, it says in 1 Peter chapter 2. Because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps. O my goodness, I want to follow in His steps. And if my Savior learned obedience that the things which He suffered, I’m not above my Master. God is still doing a deeper healing, testing and trying and seeing if there’s any offensive way in me. That’s why you’ll often hear me quoting from the book of Common Prayer on which I was raised in the Reformed Episcopal Church, all the time, it seems, I am saying, “Almighty God, we have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devises and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against Thy holy Law s, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us.”

I love those words. But I hate those words. So don’t be thinking that for me in heaven the big deal after I get to see Jesus is to get my new body. No, no, no. I want a glorified heart. I want a glorified heart that no longer twists the truth, resists God, looks for an escape, gets defeated by pain, becomes anxious or worry some, manipulates my husband with precisely timed phrases. No, I don’t want anything…anything like that. When people come up to me, Christians, usually of the Pentecostal/Charismatic persuasion, they always want to pray for my healing. And they’re quite bod to come up and ask if they might do so. I never say no, never. If you want to pray for my healing, bring it on. But I’ll say to them, “May I tell you some specifics about which I really, really need prayer for healing.”

Well they get so excited. “Would you please ask God to get rid of my peevish attitude in the morning when I wake up, and please, I have such a sour disposition when there’s too much work on my desk. And, you know, I really am a workaholic so I wish you would pray about…” let me just go on and on telling them all the things in my heart that yet need to be uprooted, confessed before God and repented of and healed.

First Peter chapter 4 says, “Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourself with this same attitude, because He who has suffered in his body is done with sin.” As a result he lives for the will of God and what is God’s will? Oh many things, but for me it is best embodied in Philippians chapter 2 verse 14, quote: “Do everything without complaining. Everything without complaining.”

Some time ago, Ken and I had a chance to visit the holy land and he didn’t not tell me our tour itinerary but I knew that we were going to go the city of Old Jerusalem. And that we did, I was in my push wheel chair, not this power one, and he bumpy-bump, bump, bump me down the Via Delarosa, you don’t go up the Via Delarosa, you go down it when you’re in a wheel chair. And we got to the bottom and we wheeled over the cobble stoned streets and to the right was the Temple Mount, we made a left-hand turn, went pass St. Anne’s Church, and then all of a sudden the path opens up and oh my goodness, would you look at this. “Ken, come here, look at this. It’s the pool of Bethesda. O, Ken, you would not believe how many times, how many times I used to picture myself here as one of those people with disabilities.”

The place was dead quiet. All the tour buses must have been down at the Dead Sea, and it was beautiful. It was quiet. And I leaned there on the guard rail of the old ruin and while Ken, he ran down and went into the cisterns to see if there really was any water left in the pool of Bethesda. But while I was there alone, I was alone just with myself and with my Savior and tears streaming down my face, “O Jesus, thank You, thank You for a no answer to a request for physical healing. You really knew what You were doing so many years ago because a no answer to a request for physical healing has purged so much sin out of my life, so much selfishness and bitterness, and I know I’ve got a long way to go, but every day I want to wake up and I want to be a different Joni than I was yesterday, I want to be a Joni that You created, that You’ve destined me to be. O God, help me to step into that a no answer, Lord Jesus, to a request for physical healing has meant that I’m depending more on Your grace, but it’s increasing my compassion for others who are hurt and disabled, it’s help me put complaining behind me, it stretched my grope(?), it has pushed me to give thanks in times of sorrow. It has increased my faith. It has strengthened my hope of heaven and it’s made me love You so much more…so much more. It is such a safe wonderful thing to be back in the inner sanctum of the fellowship of sharing in Your sufferings. And I would not trade it for any amount of walking.”

That is the deeper healing. That’s the real healing. When Charles Wesley writes that Jesus has risen with healing in His wings, that’s the kind of healing that you would not trade for anything, no amount of walking.

So, my question to you today is do you see yourself at the pool of Bethesda? Maybe number 15 in a long line of 35 people waiting for your problems to get fixed? Are you wondering why God hasn’t removed the disappointment, why He’s given…not given healing when you have so desperately asked for it? Well, you know what? God may remove your suffering, and that will be great cause for

praise. But if not, He will use it, He will use anything and everything that stands in the way of His fellowship with you. So let God mold you and make you, transform you from glory to glory. That’s the deeper healing. And you do not have to break your neck to receive it.

I want you to pray with me a prayer, together we’re going to pray this, and I know you know this hymn by heart, but as you sing it, sing it as from your heart in an expression to the Lord Jesus, or perhaps a new Covenant with Him of rising to some fresh level of trust and obedience in spite of your suffering. God bless you and thank you for listening. (Applause)

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