

Q&A: Joni Eareckson Tada on Prayer

Each year on the first Thursday in May, citizens of the United States celebrate their freedom to gather, worship and pray. Millions will answer the call to prayer on May 5, the 60th annual National Day of Prayer.

This year's theme, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," is based on Psalm 91:2: "I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

Author and international advocate for people with disabilities, Joni Eareckson Tada is serving as the 2011 Honorary Chairman and will give the keynote address at the national observance in Washington, D.C., to be held at the Cannon House Office Building.

A few weeks ago, Joni spoke with us by phone about the event and about the role of prayer in her own life.

What is the importance of Christians in the United States coming together and praying for the nation?

Our country was founded on prayer. My husband is a former public high school history teacher and he'll be the first one to tell you that prayer has always been a part of our national tradition. I've got a quote right here with me by Thomas Jefferson. Let me read it: Thomas Jefferson, back in the 1700s, wrote that "Fasting and prayer are religious exercises, acts of discipline, and every religious society has a right to determine for itself the time for these exercises and to determine the objects of prayer that are proper for the society according to their own tenets."

So right there you've got a president of the United States, one of our founding fathers, insisting that not only prayer,

but fasting and prayer, are a part of the American tradition. I think Christians—those of us who live in the United States—we are ignoring a treasured and much safe guarded tradition of prayer if we don't stop and intercede for the president, for our administration, for Congress, for the Supreme Court. These people, these leaders, need our prayer and we mustn't ignore the charge our founding fathers gave us so many years ago.

How can we be most effective in praying for our nation?

I have a special booklet called Pray for Our Nation. It's an excellent little resource and it provides biblical guidelines and prayer points for each branch of our government, including how we can pray for the president and his administration, for Congress, for the Supreme Court. It covers how to pray for emergency response personnel in our communities, law enforcement, paramedics, firefighters. It really shows how we can become prayer warriors on behalf of our country. Readers can get a free copy by visiting me at www.prayerforournation.com. We need to be praying for the leaders as we're told to in Romans to lift up those in authority over us.

Over the years, what have you learned about prayer? Tell us a little bit about the role that prayer has played in your life personally.

I love that portion of Scripture that says we should pray without ceasing and I used to wonder how to do that. "How do you pray without ceasing? Oh, my goodness, you'd be hitting your knees all day long, locked away in your prayer closet. Is this what God means?"

But my disability has taught me what it means to pray without ceasing and it is an open availability to the spirit of God to have Him prompt you and press you and push you to pray for all sorts of things throughout the day. For instance, opportunities to encourage other people, chances to drop

Gospel seeds, to shine Gospel light, opportunities to telephone a friend who might be ill, or chances to right what is wrong in our society.

We have chances every day to make Jesus Christ real to others and it just means keeping your heart open to the Holy Spirit and His whisperings and His nudging. Sometimes I like to think that praying without ceasing is having a hymn on your heart. I often like to start the day with a song and today it was ... There's within my heart a melody, Jesus whispers sweet and low ... and I love singing because all throughout the day as I'm humming a hymn and letting the words course through my mind and memory, it's a way of praying. It's a way of praising God. It's a way of worshipping Him in the Spirit.

Prayer is something that I run on every day and night and I'm so grateful that God gives us this privilege to come before His holy throne room every day, first to obtain mercy, then to find help in our time of need, and then to intercede for others, and then to effervesce it all back up to Him in a glorious fountain of praise and worship.

We've heard you say you prayed in the past to be able to walk again, to be able to be free of your wheelchair, and the answer from God has been "no." What can we learn from that?

Sometimes God's best answers to prayer are "no" because, if indeed we received everything that we prayed for, all our wants and wishes and heart's desires, I just don't think it would be God's best for our life. Let me share with you a quick story. I remember when I was in the hospital many, many years ago. I used to imagine myself in the Gospel of John, Chapter 5, lying at the Pool of Bethesda where all the other disabled, sick and lame were asking Jesus to heal them. I used to picture myself there pleading with the Lord not to forget me. "Don't pass me by, Lord. Here I am. Heal me."

As many times as I prayed when I was in the hospital, and read

John Chapter 5, my hands and my feet never got the message. I never got healed. Well, many years later, my husband, Ken, and I had a chance to visit Israel and we spent a whole day touring Jerusalem. It was late in the afternoon when we arrived at the Pool of Bethesda and as soon as I saw those old ruins, I turned to Ken and went, "Ken, you won't believe it. I remember decades ago when I was hospital, I used to picture myself here and I used to imaging myself asking God to heal me and He never did."

But you know what? I'm so glad God didn't because the "no" answer to a prayer for healing has meant a more urgent leaning upon Him every day, a more vibrant hope of heaven, a deeper sense of prayer, a more energetic love for His Word. It's fostered my friendships, and deepened my concern and compassion for others who hurt. It's helped me start this ministry, Joni & Friends, to other people with disabilities.

I could go on and on recounting all the glorious good things that have happened in my life and in the life of others all because God said "no" to an answer to prayer. It wasn't until I was sitting there, leaning on the guardrail and looking at the ruins of the Pool of Bethesda a few years ago, that I realized how wonderful it is that God sometimes says "no."

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