

Be Thankful for Suffering

✖ As Thanksgiving approaches once again, I am reminded of so many people who are learning to be thankful despite their suffering. However, I want to encourage them to go one better—I believe we can even learn to be thankful for suffering.

It is a common response to question God's goodness when we endure hardships—whether physical limitations, illness, job loss, the death of a loved one, you name it.

When I hear the question, "Where is God?," I am reminded of something I've learned through the years. God doesn't say, "Into each life a little rain must fall," and then turn a fire hose on the earth to see who gets the wettest. On the contrary, he screens the trials that come at us, always erecting invisible fences around the enemy's fury and bringing ultimate good out of wickedness.

"How does he pull it off?," I wonder. I realize that we are a world of finite humans trying to comprehend an infinite God. What is clear is that God permits lots of things he doesn't approve of. That fact doesn't sit well with us, but think of the alternative. Imagine a God who insisted on a hands-off policy toward the evil barreling our way. The world would be much, much worse than it is. Evil would be uncontrolled. But thank God he curbs it.

Please know I'm no expert. There are days I wake up and think, "I can't do this. I have no resources for this. I can't face another day dealing with total paralysis." But that's when I plead, "Lord, you do have the resources I lack. I can't do this, but you can." And he does.

The truly handicapped among us are those who start their mornings on automatic cruise control, without needing God. But he gives strength to all who cry to him for help. So, who are

the weak and needy? Who are those who need this help? A brief pause in the dark shadows of recent events always allows the point to come home. It's you and me.

These can be scary times in which we live. Never have the lines between the forces of darkness and light, of good and evil, seemed so clear. Never has the world, battered and bruised as it is, seemed so vulnerable, so fragile, so unsafe. In the years since Sept. 11, 2001, and through the last two years of our shaky economy, something has become clear to me. It was something I sensed was just ahead, something that began to appear on the horizon and that grew with each day, with each hug shared, with each word of encouragement spoken.

I'd been given eyes to see . . . an adventure.

In the long shadow cast by my wheelchair—the 43 years of my paralysis—I've been granted the privilege of living at such a time. No greater shadow has ever been cast in earth's history. Today, after September 11 and the economic meltdown, humanity seems to have taken an on-ramp to an ever-broadening highway. It is a chance, a mandate, to remember the world's most vulnerable—the disabled—while power brokers shift the planet's levers and gears. It is an opportunity—indeed, a gift—to witness the unfolding plan of a gracious God who draws near to the weak, stays close to the afflicted, and always seems bigger to those who need him most. It is an even larger, greater on-ramp to adventure.

And my wheelchair is taking me there.

God's "no" answer to my physical healing more than 40 years ago was a "yes" to a deeper healing—a better one.

His answer bound me to other believers and taught me so much about myself. It has purged sin from my life, it has strengthened my commitment to Him, forced me to depend on His grace. His wiser, deeper answer has stretched my hope, refined my faith, and helped me to know Him better.

So, I thank Him, not despite His answer, but for it. For the wiser choice, the better answer, the harder yet richer path. I thank Him for showing me that there are more important things in life than walking.

Joni Eareckson Tada, is the founder and CEO of Joni and Friends, an international advocacy organization for people with disabilities. A diving accident in 1967 left her a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. After two years of rehabilitation, she emerged with new skills and a fresh determination to help others in similar situations.