

KEEPING
FAITH
WHEN
LIFE
HURTS

100
DEVOTIONS
FOR HARD DAYS

JONI EARECKSON TADA

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Keeping Faith When Life Hurts: 100 Devotions for Hard Days

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Before You Begin

I'll be honest and tell you my life hurts. It's been hard ever since I broke my neck in 1967 and became a quadriplegic. I had big questions for God, but over time, he gave me his Answer in my Savior, Jesus. Knowing Christ, however, did not mean that living with useless hands and legs became easy. Nearly six decades of paralysis, and almost as many struggling with chronic pain, make it hard for me to keep faith.

Take my bedtime routine. Getting out of my wheelchair and into bed is the simple part. While I lie immobile, Ken tightens the lymphatic sleeve to rid my arm of edema, and then positions me on my "good" side with five pillows. He coils my catheter, puts in my mouth guard, tightens the chinstrap, and snaps on my headgear. He then connects the nasal tube to my external ventilator and tucks in supports for my head. He turns on the machine and fine-tunes the oxygen. After adjusting the ceiling clock, Ken finally hikes up the guardrail and asks, "You okay? You got this?"

With so much stuff, and the noise of the oxygen compressor, I can hardly hear him. But it's routine, and I know he wants assurance

that I'm okay and ready to face the long night, positioned exactly right. The mask covers my mouth, so I nod yes. He leans down to kiss me somewhere in between all the straps, and says, "You can always call me."

But I hardly ever do. My caregiving husband needs his sleep too. Often in the night, to push away the panic of not being able to move, I relax and let the ventilator breath for me. I "say" breath prayers in my mind, inviting Jesus to participate with me in my suffering . . . so that I might understand more of what he endured for me in his afflictions. It's what my union with Christ looks like. I sense his grace and, thankfully, fall asleep.

That said, I am bold enough to say that I empathize when people hurt. For years I have authored books that help readers like you grasp God's goodness in the midst of pain. For when one goes through a strenuous ordeal, it is easy to lose faith. It is human nature to doubt God when he sends demanding trials. It takes no effort to complain and thus diminish the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. To keep faith requires grace as well as great intention to hold fast to his Word, pray, and cry out, "Oh God, I'm slipping, please help me . . . give grace . . . make effective the prayers of your people for me!"

If you have ever prayed that way, then I'm delighted to place *Keeping Faith When Life Hurts* in your hands. I consider this slim volume to be a treasure trove of the most thoughtful, impactful, and Christ-honoring vignettes I've ever written on suffering (and how to live with it). It is a prime collection of one hundred readings that

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

I carefully selected from the 2006 edition of *Pearls of Great Price*. I offer these handpicked devotionals to you, each one filled with rich, deep insights that will help *you* keep faith when hardships seem overwhelming.

What does it mean to keep the faith? In 2 Timothy 4:7, the aging apostle Paul says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” To *keep faith* is to continue to rely on Jesus Christ until the end. It means to endure. Press on. Hold fast. And not complain (Philippians 2:14).

In your most distressing trials, I want you to hear Jesus say—as he said to a weak and faltering disciple, “I have prayed for you . . . that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:32). Peter’s faith was shaken to the core, but it was not extinguished. Even John Calvin spoke of faith as sometimes being “weak and flickering.” But still genuine. Oh, friend, take heart; Jesus is praying for you, even now.

So, may this precious book help you find the strength to cling to the Lord Jesus through your trials. You may hurt—and hurt bad—but the tribulations are not an inconvenient detour in your otherwise pleasant life. They are the main highway. Always the glorious highway that leads you to a sweeter, more satisfying devotion to the Lord Jesus.

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DAY 1



What's Up Ahead

Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.

—PSALM 37:5–6

I sit so tall in my wheelchair that I need a van with a raised roof. The trouble is, I can't see the road. My friend Careen and I once drove from Chicago to Urbana, and I didn't see a single cornfield or farmhouse for three and a half hours! She kept describing lovely country landscapes, but it only frustrated me. I wanted to see. I'm the sort of person who likes to know what lies ahead. If I can't see the whole road, then at least a few feet?!

We are like that spiritually. We say to God, "If you don't mind, please show me where I am going. I don't need to see the whole road, but at least a little bit." We think our faith has to be supported by a bit

WHAT'S UP AHEAD

of evidence. A hint, a signpost, a whisper . . . something to give us a clue as to what God is doing. We wrongly assume that faith is the ability to take a couple of puzzle pieces and be able to envision the entire picture. Not so. Faith that must be supported by the five senses is not genuine. Jesus said to doubting Thomas, “You have believed me because you have seen me, but blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29).

Our insistence upon discerning what's up ahead is natural, but it is a hindrance to real faith. It's why God constantly encourages us to trust him in the dark (Isaiah 50:10). True faith means resting in who God is. He has charged himself with full responsibility for your eternal happiness, and he stands ready to take over the management of your life. He is wise and good. Trust him with what's ahead.

No ifs, ands, or buts, dear God. I trust you with the road ahead!

DAY 2



Heart Exam

*If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out,
then how can you compete with horses? If you fall down in a
land of peace, how will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?*

—JEREMIAH 12:5 NASB

Would you like to know what you really believe about God? I'm not talking about what you say you believe, or what you ought to believe, but what you truly do believe. Would you like to see the truth about you that God sees?

Well, you can. You can actually know what's way down deep in your heart. And here is how: The next time you suffer, watch how you react. Watch what happens in your head and heart. Take an attitude check. Because nothing reveals the stuff of which your Christian beliefs are made more than tough times. Maybe that's why the Bible says, "Rejoice in suffering" and "Welcome trials as

HEART EXAM

friends.” Maybe it’s because only then can we know what we’re really made of.

It’s what happened to the Israelites when they were in the desert. It says in Deuteronomy 8 that God caused the tough times to test them . . . to see what was in their hearts. Well, the fact is, God already knows what’s in your heart. He just wants *you* to know what’s in your heart. You may be facing some keen disappointments today: loneliness, a bad medical report, financial worries, chronic pain, or an important relationship on the rocks. It’s hard. But it’s also strangely helpful. Because when you find out who you are and what you really believe, you’re facing the truth. And remember, the truth always sets you free.

What have your recent trials or setbacks revealed to you about your faith and trust in the Father? That insight wasn’t meant to crush or discourage you. It’s an encouragement to set aside distractions and seek him with fresh urgency.

Dear Lord, I’m so far from where I want to be in my walk of faith. Draw me closer to your heart this day, and help me to release my anxieties and fears into your loving hands.

DAY 3



God Means It

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

—GENESIS 50:20

I draw a lot of inspiration from the story of Joseph. Although he was never paralyzed, a lot of things happened to him that could be construed as accidents. There were plenty of unfortunate mishaps in Joseph’s life, like being tossed by his envious brothers into a pit and left to die. But later on—after more mishaps—Joseph told his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good so that others might be saved.”

I like that word *intended*. He is a God of intention—he has a purpose, a target, a goal, and a plan. God was a giant step ahead of Joseph’s brothers, aborting their evil intentions to suit his own purposes. Joseph’s problems did not catch God off guard, presenting

GOD MEANS IT

him with situations he wished would never have happened. From the beginning, God calculated for Joseph to experience all these things. Why? For the salvation of others.

God is not a sweep-up boy who follows you with a dustpan and brush, second-guessing how everything will fit into a divine pattern for good. He does not put on a hazmat suit so that an evil situation doesn't contaminate his holy reputation.

Think of disappointing or bad things that have happened to you. God's hands stay on the wheel of your life from start to finish so that everything follows his intention for your life. This means your trials have more meaning—much more—than you realize. Your problems have more purpose than you can imagine. Not because God merely used bad things, but because God intended them so that others might be brought to Jesus through your example.

Lord God, I praise you that your intentions in my life are always good. Every "accident" happens so that somehow, some way, others might be introduced to the Savior through me.

DAY 4



A Borrowed Smile

*For You have been my help, and in the
shadow of Your wings I sing for joy.*

—PSALM 63:7 NASB

In a crowded ladies restroom during a break at a Christian conference, a well-dressed woman putting on lipstick turned to me and said, “Oh Joni, you always look so together, so happy in your wheelchair. I wish I had your joy! How do you do it?” Several around her nodded.

“I don’t do it,” I said. “In fact, may I tell you honestly how I woke up this morning?” Several women leaned against the counter to listen. “This is an average day. After Ken leaves for work at six, I’m alone until I hear the front door open at seven. It’s a friend coming to get me up. While she makes coffee, I usually pray, ‘Lord, my friend is about to give me a bath, get me dressed, sit me up in my chair,

A BORROWED SMILE

brush my hair and teeth, and send me out the door. I don't have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources. I don't have a smile for the day, but you do. May I borrow yours? I urgently need you, God.'

"So when my friend walks into the bedroom, I turn my head on my pillow and give her a smile sent straight from heaven. It's not mine, it's God's. Whatever joy you see today"—I gestured at my paralyzed legs—"Was hard won this morning."

I have learned, as I hope those women learn, that the weaker we are, the harder we must lean on God. And the harder we lean on him, the stronger we discover him to be.

Where do you feel weak today? When you borrow from God the strength, courage, and joy you don't have, people can't help but notice. Just make sure they know where it came from!

Lord, be my strength today—not only in the areas where I know I am weak but also in the areas where I think I am strong. And may all the credit, all the glory be yours.

DAY 5



God's Longings

*Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore
he will rise up to show you compassion.*

— ISAIAH 30:18

I have longed for many things over the years. When I was a child, I longed for my daddy's approval and praise. In high school I longed for a date on Friday night, good grades, and graduation day with a college acceptance letter. After my accident, I longed to be on my feet. My longings nowadays are often pretty mundane, such as hankering for a slice of something sweet and chocolaty after dinner.

The verse at the top tells us what God longs for: "The LORD longs to be gracious to you." The word *longing* is only used this way twice in Scripture—the other time is when Jesus longed to gather the people of Jerusalem under his wings. Notice something about God's longings? They are focused not on things but on people. His

GOD'S LONGINGS

yearnings are never directed inward or self-focused; they are outward. Never does he express a longing to benefit himself. His heart's desire is to benefit his people that they might glorify him.

Oh, how different my yearnings are from God's! Too often my desires are about what I want rather than what I desire to see happen in others. How often do I actually yearn for God to be glorified and his kingdom advanced?

The journey of the Christian is to strive to be more and more like God. Take a giant step in that direction today by asking the Lord to cleanse and refine your longings. A good place to begin is with James 4:8 (KJV) where it says, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

Purify my heart, O God, and place within me a passionate longing to know you better and to look out for the interests of others before my own. I long for you to be glorified in my life. I desire for your gospel to go forth into the world. I long for your soon return!

DAY 6



Choices

*Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But
as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.*

—JOSHUA 24:15

Years ago, after living with quadriplegia for a short time, I finally got tired of being fed at our dinner table. But as I tried to feed myself with paralyzed arms, I felt like giving up. I wanted my arms back! Wasn't there an easier way than having a bent spoon inserted into the pocket on my leather arm splint, then straining my weak shoulder muscles to scoop food on the spoon, and finally balancing and lifting it to my mouth? It was humiliating to have my food land more times on my lap than in my mouth.

I could have surrendered—it would have been easy and many wouldn't have blamed me. But I had to make a choice. Was I going to let disappointing failures overwhelm me? I decided the awkwardness

CHOICES

of feeding myself outweighed the fleeting satisfaction of self-pity. It pushed me to pray, *O God, help me with this spoon!* Today I can easily feed myself. No, I didn't recover the use of my hands, but I was able to leave self-pity behind, as well as cultivate a little bit of humility. It meant making the hard choice many, many times.

My growth in Christ can probably be boiled down to one word: *Choose*. Choosing the right path is hard. Often we have to keep pushing through failures. Sometimes it seems easier just to ignore God's instructions. But Proverbs 8:10 says, "Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold."

What a difference you can make for the kingdom if you will follow the lead of the Savior and "choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life" (Deuteronomy 30:19–20).

Father, every day is filled with so many choices.
Touch my awareness, open my eyes, quicken
my understanding to the eternal implications of
seeking your heart and choosing your path.

My growth
in Christ can
probably be boiled
down to one
word: *Choose.*