

Failing Bodies – Living with chronic illness

❖ **Some statistics**

- In the world an estimated 1.3 billion people experience significant disability.
- 11 million people in UK live with a limiting long term illness.
- This represents one in six of the population.
- Incidents of chronic illness rise with age.
 - ⇒ 6% - Children are disabled.
 - ⇒ 16 % - People of working age are disabled.
 - ⇒ 45% - People of pensionable age are disabled.
- 33% of those polled confessed that they believed that disabled people are a burden to society.
- 65% of those polled confessed that they treat disabled people differently.
- 180 disability hate crimes are reported every day in UK.
- 1.86 million people have some form of sight loss.
- 1.2 million people – 2% of the population – use a wheelchair.
- 2% of the population have severe learning difficulties.

1. Defining Chronic Disability

- *“Disability is a physical or mental condition impacting negatively on affected categories of people especially in the areas of social contact and perceived significance.”*
- Chronic disability is defined as substantial and long-term.
 - ⇒ *“Substantial”* is more than minor or trivial - eg it takes much longer than it usually would to complete a daily task like getting dressed.
 - ⇒ *‘Long-term’* means 12 months or more - eg a breathing condition that develops as a result of a lung infection.
- Disability may involve.
 - ⇒ Genetic misalignment in the womb
 - ⇒ Tragic and regrettable accidents
 - ⇒ The byproduct of infectious diseases
 - ⇒ The degenerative effects of old age

❖ **What are the main challenges facing disabled people and their carers?**

2. Getting our Theological Bearings

1) *The World is beautiful but broken*

❖ *The big story*

- **Gen 1-2** – The world was “very good”.
- **Rev 21-22** – The new creation will be perfect.
- We are no longer in the garden & we are not yet in the new creation.
- **Gen 3 - Rev 20**– We live in the middle of the book.

❖ *The only condition for suffering is to live long enough*

- **Rom 8:18-25** - The whole creation groans.
- **2 Cor 4:7** – We live in feeble bodies.
- **Job 5:7** – Suffering is certain – like sparks flying upwards.

❖ *Vox pop*

- *“Life was not meant to be like this!”*
- *“Chronic pain has invaded every part of my life. I cannot enjoy anything.”*
- *“I thought that church was supposed to be a place of encouragement. Why do I feel so unwelcome?”*
- *If I could see the end I could cope – but all I have to look forward to is death!”*

❖ *Humans have a unique dignity*

- **Gen 1:26-27** - All human beings are made in the image of God.
- **Psalm 139:13-16** - They have unique and intrinsic value.

2) *God still cares*

Martin Luther - Three pillows

❖ *God is Sovereign*

- Our disabilities are not outside His plan.
- **Gen 50:20** – Who sent Joseph to Egypt?
- **Acts 2:22** – Who sent Jesus to the cross?
- **Rom 8:28** – God works **all** things for our good.
- God uses all things – even painful things to fulfil His purposes.

❖ *God is Good*

- **Deut 32:4** – *“He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”*
- **Psalm 34:8** – *“Taste and see that the Lord is good.”*
- God cannot do anything that is not good and kind and loving.
- The cross confirms His goodness and love – it is an anchor for the soul

❖ *God is Wise*

- **Psalm 18:30** – God’s way is perfect.
- **Job 38-41** – God does not explain all His ways – the need for humility.
- God’s wisdom mean that he always chooses the best goals and the best means of achieving those goals.

3) **There is a purpose in pain.**

❖ **“Pray that I do not waste this suffering.”**

- **James 1:2-3** - “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”
- “Sometimes God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves.”¹
Joni

❖ **Three images**

- **1 Peter 1:7** – We are being proved and refined like gold.
- **Heb 12:1-13** – We are being chastened like a beloved child.
- **John 15:1-8** – We are being pruned like a fruitful vine.

❖ **God is deepening our fellowship with Him**

- **Elisabeth Elliot** - “I am not a theologian or a scholar, but I am very aware of the fact that pain is necessary to all of us. In my own life, I think I can honestly say that out of the deepest pain has come the strongest conviction of the presence of God and the love of God.”

4) **We live in hope.**

❖ **Christ’s Resurrection gives us hope**

- **1 Cor 15:20** - Christ is the firstfruits of those who will be raised
- “But resurrection is not just consolation — it is restoration. We get it all back - the love, the loved ones, the goods, the beauties of this life - but in new, unimaginable degrees of glory and joy and strength.”²

❖ **Christ’s Resurrection assures us of a new creation**

- **Luke 5:17-26** – Forgiveness is more important than physical health.
- **Luke 10:20** – What do we rejoice in?
- **Rev 21:1-4** – There is no disability in heaven.
- **Rev 22:1-5** – God is the final reward of His people.
- Short term disability and eternal term super ability
- **Rom 8:18** – Present suffering will result in future glory.
- **2 Cor 4:17-18** – These light and momentary sufferings are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory.

❖ **What other theological truths might help?**

¹ **Joni Eareckson Tada**

² **Tim Keller**

3. Practical things that help

1) Listen to the right voices.

- A cacophony of voices - pain, disability, people, the church, and our emotions all clamour to be heard.
- Pain makes us vulnerable to the lies that disability tells us
- Job's comforters and the stigma of disability.
- *"All sickness is because of the presence of sin or the absence of faith."*
- What does God say? - Choose to believe his Word.
- **Deut 8:3** - We live by promises not explanations.
- *"Faith is taking God at His word."*

2) Learn as much as you can about the disability.

- What is the prognosis?
- What should we expect?
- What are the effects of medication?
- What are the warning signs to watch out for?
- What support groups are available?
- Is respite care appropriate?
- What are the issues facing carers?

3) Get all the practical and emotional support you can.

- Don't feel guilty about asking for help.
- Don't lose your self-respect but be willing to surrender your pride and self-sufficiency.
- *"The tragedy of disability is not only the disability itself – it is also the isolation which it brings."*
- The Body of Christ is a vital support system.
- The church must see disabled people as a blessing not a problem.
- Avoid paternalism and pity – *"Does she take sugar?"*
- Think before you speak!

4) Make life as normal as possible.

- Try to be normal!
- The medicine of laughter.
- Work hard at your marriage and your parenting.
- Sex in marriage is important.
- Talk to your kids and de-mystify the illness.

5) See disability as an opportunity for service.

- **2 Cor 1:3-7** – Be a channel of blessing.
- Every Christian has a gift – ask God to show you.
- What can I do for God?
- William Carey's sister - my secret weapon
- *"I don't know what is wrong with my son, but I know what is right with him. God has used him as a channel to reach others with the gospel"*

6) Seek to glorify God – this is your calling.

- Jim Packer – dying of cancer to the glory of God.
- What is your calling?
- What does the Lord require of me?

7) Do not give in to negative emotions.

- **Eph 4:29-32** – Negative emotions include anger, bitterness, frustration, helplessness and fear.
- They can lead to a sense of loneliness and worthlessness.
- We can develop a critical spirit an ungrateful heart and a reputation for irritability.
- The Church’s pity or paternalism can be frustrating.
- Ask God and people to help you to try to stay sweet.
- Bishop Stanway – *“There is no future in frustration.”*

8) Grieve in a healthy way.

- **Job 1:20-22** - We are allowed to grieve.
- **Job 3:23-26** – Express your feelings honestly to God – it is natural.
- The Psalms cover every expression of human emotion.
- They are 150 of the best friends you will ever make.
- Fifty of the Psalms are laments.
- **Psalms 10** – *“Why are you so far away O Lord?”*

9) Learn to draw on God’s grace.

- **2 Cor 12:7-10** – Paul’s thorn in the flesh
- Humble yourself – *“God’s grace is lavished on those who consider themselves least deserving.”*
- *“We never know that God is all we need until we discover that God is all we have got.”*
- God becomes supremely valuable to us.
- There are worse things than disability.
- **Isa 43:1-5** – God promises to walk with us through the darkness
- God’s presence and promises do not depend upon our feelings or our performance or the strength of our faith.

10) Develop a sensitive and compassionate heart

- **Gal 6:1-2** – We are called to bear one another’s burdens.
- **Heb 10:24-25** – Encouragement – who is being addressed here?
- **Matt 12:15-21** – Jesus does not break the bruised reed – neither should we!

Practical suggestions for Carers and for churches

- ***Do not*** be judgmental – be careful of first impressions.
- ***Do not*** imagine that “one-size fits all”.
- ***Do not*** belittle their suffering
- ***Do not*** put them under spiritual pressure.
- ***Do not*** forget the “others” - the care givers.
- ***Do not*** forget to take care of yourself.
- ***Do not*** breach the boundaries of personal space.
- ***Do not*** forget basic courtesy and etiquette.
- ***Do make*** it easier for everyone to see and hear better.
- ***Do*** encourage people to talk and learn to be a good listener.
- ***Do*** avoid glib answers.
- ***Do*** pray for the person’s healing or for relief from the trial.
- ***Do*** give tangible physical support.
- ***Do*** give emotional support.
- ***Do*** give spiritual support.
- ***Do*** encourage self-care.
- ***Do*** be ready to offer alternative perspectives.
- ***Do*** acknowledge any achievements.
- ***Do*** avoid being paternalistic.

Appendix – Bible verses that deal with disability.

1. All humans are made in God's image

- **Gen 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6** – All humans are made in God's image and have intrinsic value.
- **Psalm 8** – Humans are a little lower than the angels.

2. The world is full of broken but God is still in control

- **Rom 8:18-25** – The world is broken.
- **Gal 4:15** – Paul suffered from bad eyesight.
- **Exod 4:10-12** – God made the mouth and he causes us to be deaf or to see.

3. Not all suffering is a direct result of sin

- **John 9:1** – The man born blind – this was not due to specific sin.
- **2 Cor 12:7-10** – God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh and did not remove it.
- **Leviticus 21:17-23** – Disabled Priests cannot enter the Holy Place
 - ⇒ They could still be priests.
 - ⇒ The theme of Leviticus is God's holiness.
 - ⇒ Physical perfection is a necessary representation of the holiness of God
 - ⇒ It points forward to the perfection of Christ.
 - ⇒ We are a royal priesthood – 1 Peter 2:9

4. Disabled people are to be respected and cared for

- **Lev 19:14** – Disabled people are to be respected and protected.
- **Lev 24:10-22** – All life is to be respected.
- **Deut 15:11; 26:12** – God is committed to the marginalized.
- **2 Samuel 9** – David cared for disabled Mephibosheth.

5. God uses weak people to fulfill His purposes

- **Judges 13-16** – Samson did more in his blindness than when he was sighted.
- **Micah 4:6-7** – God blesses the broken.
- **Psalm 103:13-14** – God remembers that we are weak.
- **1 Cor 1:20-31** – God chooses and uses weak people.
- **2 Cor 3:18-5:5** – We have the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay.

6. Jesus deliberately ministered to disabled people

- **Isaiah 42:1-3** – Christ does not despise the bruised reed.
- **Luke 5:12-13** – Jesus touched a leper.
- **Luke 5:17-26** – Forgiveness is more important than physical health.
- **Luke 7:18-23** – Healing is evidence of the presence of the kingdom of God.
- **Philippians 2:5-11** – Remember the weakness of Christ.

7. There is no disability in heaven

- **Luke 14:15-24** – At the Messianic banquet the poor and the disabled are now welcome.
- **1 John 3:2** – One day we will have brand new bodies.
- **Revelation 21:1-5** – There is no disability in heaven.

