

SOMETHING GREATER THAN HEALING

Physical healing is good, Joni Eareckson Tada says. But if we stop there, we will have missed out on God's best for us. Here's what to do (and think) when the healing doesn't come.



Joni Eareckson Tada dispensed with the superficial healing narrative decades ago. Paralyzed in a diving accident, Tada was forced to trust a God who doesn't always heal, who doesn't always prevent or alleviate our suffering. In her interview with *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, "Something Greater Than Healing," Tada describes her hard-won understanding of God's purposes and sovereign care for his people—in the *midst* of their suffering.

Scripture: Genesis 3; Matthew 18:7–9; Mark 8:31–38; John 14:1–14; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

Based on: "Something Greater Than Healing," interview by Sarah Pulliam Bailey, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, October 2010

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY

This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.



1 Make enough copies of the article for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader's guide for them as well.

2 Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.

3 Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.

4 When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.

5 Begin and end the session in prayer.

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Something Greater Than Healing" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

To hear some Christians tell it, when you trust God—*really* trust him—you can expect to be healed. While we may deny that we are “health and wealth” or prosperity believers, in truth that is how we often live. Subtly, deep in our hearts, we think that if we believe enough, pray enough, or do enough, the sufferings of this world will alight on “the other guy.” They are for other people, we think (or hope).

But sometimes a black cloud of doubt casts a shadow over this assumption. A friend, a neighbor, a loved one contracts cancer or is severely injured in an auto accident. A daughter from a “good Christian home” overdoses on drugs. A Christian business dedicated to the Lord’s glory goes bankrupt, a Christian marriage is torn apart by infidelity. Where are our assumptions then? Where is our faith? More importantly, where is our God?

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] Describe a time when you asked God for healing and received it—and a time when you asked and didn’t receive. What was your response in each case?
- [Q] Why do you think God only heals sometimes?
- [Q] What kinds of healing do we typically ask for, and what kinds do we remain silent about?
- [Q] Why are requests for healing so prevalent during group prayer times?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**Teaching Point One: God can use our suffering to advance the gospel.**

Joni Eareckson Tada has endured quadriplegia and chronic pain. Now she has received a diagnosis of breast cancer, prompting some to call her a modern-day Job. Yet Tada does not focus on what has happened to her, but on how she can use the suffering to draw closer to Christ. In her interview with CHRISTIANITY TODAY’s Sarah Pulliam Bailey, she said: “Even though it seems like a lot is being piled on, I keep thinking about 1 Peter 2:21: ‘To these hardships you were called because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.’ Those steps most often lead Christians not to miraculous, divine interventions but directly into the fellowship of suffering.”

Read John 14:1–14.

[Q] Speaking to his disciples the night he was betrayed, Jesus pointed them to two sources of hope in the midst of trial: himself and his Father. With the authorities ready to close in and the success of their mission seemingly in doubt, the Lord encourages them to believe in him and to look forward to eventual rest in his Father's house (vv. 1–4). How do these emphases encourage you in your own trials? What promises does Jesus give regarding the coming persecution?

[Q] Doubt is common to Christ's followers (vv. 5–9). Suffering often envelops us in a kind of spiritual darkness that causes us to forget what we know. Describe a time when you suffered and lost sight of God. What brought you back? If you are not back yet, what would it take to get you back?

[Q] How does Jesus' relationship with the Father strengthen our faith (vv. 10–11)?

- What does it mean that the first and second persons of the Trinity are in one another, and that the Father works through the Son?

In verses 12–14, Jesus moves from relationship to responsibility—for the apostles and for us. Tada says that her illness has opened the door to ministry and evangelism opportunities, and she suggests that these represent the “greater works” to which Jesus calls us: “The greater thing is not the miracle; it's the advancement of the gospel, it's the giving of the kingdom, reclaiming what is rightfully Christ's.”

Optional Activity: *Give each person a piece of paper with a line drawn down the middle. Then say:*

On the left side, write down any times of real suffering you have endured in the last five years: illness, persecution, and so on. On the right side, describe the opportunities God gave you to point observers to the kingdom, and whether you indeed did so.

After everyone has had time to write, spend a few moments in prayer thanking the Lord for using us to spread the gospel and asking him to work his will in any ongoing suffering.

Teaching Point Two: Suffering is a sign of God's mercy.

“How can a good God allow suffering?” is a classic question of theodicy, and one that has haunted thoughtful people, Christian and non-Christian, for millennia. Yet Tada points out that it misses a key point: “This earth is wired to be difficult.” Suffering is imprinted on the universe's DNA, not because God wants to punish us, but because he desires to have mercy on

us. Tada again: “If God being good means he has to get rid of sin, it means he would have to get rid of sinners. God is a God of great generosity and great mercy, so he is keeping the execution of suffering. He’s not closing the curtain on suffering until there is more time to gather more people into the fold of Christ’s fellowship.” We see a clear picture of this severe kind of mercy in Genesis.

Read Genesis 3.

[Q] Prodded by the serpent, Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and fall into sin, knowing that the penalty would be death (vv. 1–6). Here, the action that causes suffering is willful. Describe a time when you deliberately sinned, and what the consequences were.

[Q] In verses 7–11, the consequence of sin is estrangement, from one another and from God. Why might alienation and relational brokenness characterize the life of someone who has fallen into sin?

[Q] Brokenness and estrangement quickly lead to blame (vv. 12–13). Describe a time when you were on the giving end of blame.

[Q] In the midst of announcing the consequences for sin (vv. 14–19, 22–24), God offers grace to the man and the woman, allowing them to live and giving them animal skins to cover their nakedness (vv. 20–21). Did they deserve this treatment? Recount a time when God had mercy on you amid your suffering, whether or not it was your fault.

Teaching Point Three: Christians have hope in the midst of suffering.

Tada describes her response to learning she had breast cancer: “I don’t fall apart emotionally. There’s a lump. Wow, okay, let’s get this taken care of. I broke my neck. Yikes. What is this going to mean? Okay, let’s buckle down and move forward. I’m the kind of person who cannot allow those emotions to go down the grim path of despair. It’s too deep of a miry pit. I’d rather face life head-on and with full force and take things as they come, learn from those things, and move forward.”

Is this just the extraordinary response of an extraordinary saint? Are the rest of us mere mortals destined always to be knocked for a loop, whether suffering comes in the form of a cancer diagnosis, a career setback, or whatever comes along? Or are we all called to move forward—and if so, how?

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18. Paul is writing to a church that is undergoing severe persecution from a pagan culture (see 2 Thess. 1:4). He does not advocate taking legal action, or organizing self-defense courses, or running and hiding. Instead, he advocates attitudes and actions that reflect a higher reality.

[Q] When you suffer, do you look down or up? Why?

[Q] The first command is to *always* rejoice (v. 16). Quickly list five things you can rejoice about, even when suffering.

[Q] The second is to pray *continually*, or all the time, practicing God's presence and drawing near to him in good times and in bad (v. 17). How can we encourage one another to be more prayerful, and what should we be praying about?

- What keeps us from a lifestyle of prayer?

[Q] The third is to give thanks *in every situation* (v. 18). What trial are you facing now? For what can you give thanks in the midst of it?

- What assurance does Paul give us?

Teaching Point Four: The Christian life should be a preparation for death.

Tada says death faces all of us, and we need to face death. But she says we can be prepared to face it not only at life's end, but every day. "None of us, in our culture of comfort, know how to prepare ourselves for dying, but that's what we should do every day," she says. "Every single day, we die a thousand deaths. We don't just walk through the valley of the shadow of death when we get a medical report or when we survive a stroke. We go through the valley of the shadow of death every time we say no to our selfish desires. When we say yes to the grace of God, we are learning how to die." Jesus said the same.

Read Mark 8:31—38.

[Q] Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Jesus knew this kind of self-denial first hand (vv. 31–33). Why do we, like Peter, expect to sidestep the kind of suffering that Jesus experienced?

[Q] Jesus calls all who would be his followers to take up their cross, a shameful symbol of death (v. 34). How can we discover what cross faces each of us? And what does it mean to take up our cross?

[Q] Jesus contrasts the folly of "saving" your life and really losing it against the blessing of "losing" your life to really find it (vv. 35–37). How does this divine paradox work out in your own life?

[Q] Jesus links the cross we must carry to our willingness to stand for him (v. 38). Describe a time when being a Christian cost you something.

Teaching Point Five: There are more important things than physical health.

Tada notes Jesus' teaching about cutting off our hands and feet and gouging out our eyes and says it indicates a divine priority: spiritual healing comes before physical wholeness. She says: "Here Jesus, the one who delighted in healing hands that could not work, restoring feet that could not walk, giving sight to eyes that could not see—here he is, saying cut off your hand, gouge out your eyes, *if* these things are causing you to sin. Jesus underscores his priority that yes, the physical body counts, but it does not trump the health of the soul."

Read Matthew 18:7–9.

[Q] Jesus pronounces woe on the world for the way it tempts us to sin (v. 7). Regarding suffering and physical disability, how does the world do this?

[Q] Verses 8 and 9 make it clear that spiritual loss is worse than physical loss. Why?

[Q] How does an acknowledgement of the reality of eternal suffering put our temporal suffering in perspective?

Part 3 APPLY YOUR FINDINGS

For Tada, healing would certainly be a good thing, but she tries to keep her priorities in proper order. So should we all. "When people ask about healing," she says, "I'm less interested in the physical and more interested in healing in my heart. Pray that I get rid of my lazy attitude about God's Word and prayer, of brute pride—set me free from self-centeredness. Those are more important, because Jesus thought they were more important." Suffering can draw us closer to God. The question is, will we allow it to do so?


Action Point: *On your own this week, read Hebrews 11 with paper and pen at hand. Jot down each person of faith listed and the suffering each one endured. Reflect on whether great faith is possible without great suffering. Ask God to give you that kind of faith, whether you suffer or not.*


— *Stan Guthrie is author of All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us (Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a monthly column for BreakPoint.org and blogs at stanguthrie.com.*


RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **Job: God Is in Charge** – 9-session Bible study
- **Redeeming Suffering** – Single-session CHRISTIANITY TODAY Bible study
- **Suffering** – 5-session Bible study based on CHRISTIANITY TODAY articles
- **God's Purpose in Our Suffering** – Single-session CHRISTIANITY TODAY Bible study

 **A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty**, by Joni Eareckson Tada (David C. Cook, 2010). Honest and insightful theology on our merciful and sovereign God's purposes in suffering.

 **Joni: An Unforgettable Story** (Zondervan, 2001). In a split second on a hot July afternoon, a diving accident transformed the life of Joni Eareckson Tada forever. She went from being an active young woman to facing every day in a wheelchair. In this unforgettable autobiography, Tada reveals each step of her struggle to accept her disability and discover the meaning of her life. The hard-earned truths she discovers and the special ways God reveals his love are testimonies to faith's triumph over hardship and suffering.

 **Suffering and the Sovereignty of God**, John Piper and Justin Taylor, editors (Crossway, 2006). In the last few years, 9/11, a tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and many other tragedies have shown us that the vision of God in today's churches in relation to evil and suffering is often frivolous. Against the overwhelming weight and seriousness of the Bible, many Christians are choosing to become more shallow, more entertainment-oriented, and therefore irrelevant in the face of massive suffering. In *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, contributors John Piper, Joni Eareckson Tada, Steve Saint, Carl Ellis, David Powlison, Dustin Shramek, and Mark Talbot explore the many categories of God's sovereignty as evidenced in his Word. They urge you to look to Christ, even in suffering, to find the greatest confidence, deepest comfort, and sweetest fellowship you have ever known.

 Joni and Friends offers practical advice and Christian insight for people affected by disability; www.joniandfriends.org.

Joni Eareckson Tada, now facing breast cancer and chronic pain, talks about the blessings of suffering. Interview by Sarah Pulliam Bailey

ONI EARECKSON TADA might be mistaken for a modern-day Job. The disabilities advocate was severely paralyzed in a diving accident at age 17. For the past ten years, she has endured chronic pain. Now, at age 60, she confronts breast cancer. Sounding upbeat and confident after surgery, she spoke with *Christianity Today* about her latest book, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty* (David C. Cook), where she outlines her theology of suffering.

How has your perspective on suffering and healing changed since your breast cancer diagnosis?

Thankfully, it hasn't changed at all. You examine Scripture again and follow every passage regarding healing. I did that with my quadriplegia, and I did that again 10 years ago, when I embarked on a whole new life of chronic pain. Just a month ago, getting diagnosed with breast cancer, I looked at those same Scriptures, and God's words do not change.

Even though it seems like a lot is being piled on, I keep thinking about 1 Peter 2:21: "To these hardships you were called because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps."

Those steps most often lead Christians not to miraculous, divine interventions but directly into the fellowship of suffering. In a way, I've been drawn closer to the Savior, even with this breast cancer. There are things about his character that I wasn't seeing a year ago or even six months ago. That tells me that I'm still growing and being transformed. First Peter 2:21 is a good rule of thumb for any Christian struggling to understand God's purposes in hardship.

Can you elaborate on new ways you think about God's character?

In John 14, Jesus says, "Anyone who has faith in me will do . . . even greater things than these." We tend to think Jesus was talking about miracles, as if Jesus were saying, "Hey guys, look at these miracles! One day, you'll do many more miracles than me!"

The thing that Jesus was doing wasn't necessarily the miracles. He was giving the gospel; he was advancing his kingdom; he was reclaiming the earth as rightfully his. When Jesus gave that promise, he was saying, "I'm giving you a job to do, my Father and I want the gospel to go forth, and I promise you'll have everything you need to get that job done, and you'll do an even better job than me." Jesus ministered for three years, and at the end, he had a handful of disciples who half-believed in him. After Jesus went to heaven and the Holy Spirit came down—my goodness, Peter preaches one sermon and thousands believe. That's the greater thing that God wants us to do.

That's what I have been seeing this past month. Every x-ray technician, every nurse, every doctor's secretary, every clinician, every person I meet in nuclear medicine and at the MRI—it's amazing how many opportunities I've been given to see people hungry and thirsty for Christ. I knew that was true before, but there seems to be something special that is accompanying this diagnosis. I'm just so amazed by people asking me, "How can you approach this breast cancer with such confidence in a God who allows it?" And I'm being given the chance to answer.

The greater thing is not the miracle; it's the advancement of the gospel, it's the giving of the kingdom, reclaiming what is rightfully Christ's.

You have hinted at a classic question: How can a good God allow such suffering in the world? How does your latest book, on God's sovereignty, address that?

When people ask that question—even I struggle with that question—we aren't accepting the

{ THE CT INTERVIEW }

A woman with short blonde hair and bangs is sitting in a black wheelchair on a balcony. She is wearing a bright orange long-sleeved top and dark pants. She has a prosthetic right arm with orange and white components. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The balcony has a wooden railing and is surrounded by lush greenery and colorful flowers. In the background, there are rolling hills under a clear blue sky. The wheelchair has a blue logo on the backrest and the brand name 'Nutron' is visible on the front. The overall scene is bright and positive.

Something Greater Than Healing

fact that this earth is wired to be difficult. The rule of thumb is that we experience much suffering because we live in a fallen world, and it is groaning under the weight of a heavy curse. If God being good means he has to get rid of sin, it means he would have to get rid of sinners. God is a God of great generosity and great mercy, so he is keeping the execution of suffering. He's not closing the curtain on suffering until there is more time to gather more people into the fold of Christ's fellowship.

The greater thing Jesus promises we can do is not the miracle, but the advancement of the gospel, reclaiming what is rightfully his.

That answer suits me, and I think it would suit others if they stop and think: *Suffering is connected to sin; if God were to get rid of suffering, he'd have to get rid of sin, and then he'd have to get rid of sinners—and God is too merciful to do that.*

Is it different when the cause of suffering is natural? For instance, you might not have

control over getting breast cancer. Do you cope differently from someone who has something done to her by another person? Certainly I could have controlled this one; I should have gotten a mammogram five years ago. I have no one to blame but myself. I can't point the finger at secondhand smoke in restaurants. I should've gotten a mammogram, and I did not. I failed to do it, and I regret that. (If I were to tell your female readers anything, I'd say, "Get a mammogram.")

Whether hardship is brought on by our own negligence or through the direct assault of the hand of a wicked person, or our own ignorance and misinformed decisions, or our lack of awareness or misdoings, or some catastrophe of nature—these things fall under the purview of God's overarching decree. A close look at the New Testament shows that God's sovereignty extends over all these things. God permits all

sorts of things that he doesn't approve of. He doesn't approve of my spinal-cord injury or my cancer, but in his sovereign decree he has allowed them. I don't care if you use *permit*, *allow*, or *ordained*; it's all the same thing. Ultimately it goes back to God being in charge. I don't think there is a real difference.

Suffering is hardship and heartache. It's one package. Yes, God could have prevented it. He could prevent a thief from breaking in and stealing, he could prevent a wicked man with a gun from firing it, and he could have prevented my cancer. He could have put in my heart: *Go get a mammogram*. If he chooses to allow these things to occur, it doesn't mean he's any less caring or compassionate. His will, purpose, and sovereign design may be a bit more obscure and enigmatic on this side of eternity.

When you discovered you had breast cancer, was your reaction different from all your previous experiences of suffering?

I don't fall apart emotionally. There's a lump. Wow, okay, let's get this taken care of. I broke my neck. Yikes. What is this going to mean? Okay, let's buckle down and move forward.

I'm the kind of person who cannot allow those emotions to go down the grim path of despair. It's too deep of a miry pit. I'd rather face life head-on and with full force and take things as they come, learn from those things, and move forward.

How should we respond to someone who is suffering?

It's important to follow injunctions from God's Word: Go to the elders, be anointed with oil, and confess sin. If you feel you need to go to a special prayer service, by all means attend it. Have a pastor anoint you with oil and lay hands on you. After you do, you have to keep on living. That's what happened to me when I was first injured. I confessed sin and was anointed with oil. Do I sit around for my hands and feet to get the message? I have to live in the meantime. If you feel led to, pray and seek healing, but keep living while you're looking for the healing.


Even if the focus is on living, shouldn't Christians prepare themselves for further suffering and death?

None of us, in our culture of comfort, know how to prepare ourselves for dying, but that's what we should do every day. Every single day, we die a thousand deaths. We don't just walk through the valley of the shadow of death when we get a medical report or when we survive a stroke. We go through the valley of the shadow of death every time we say no to our selfish desires. When we say yes to the grace of God, we are learning how to die.

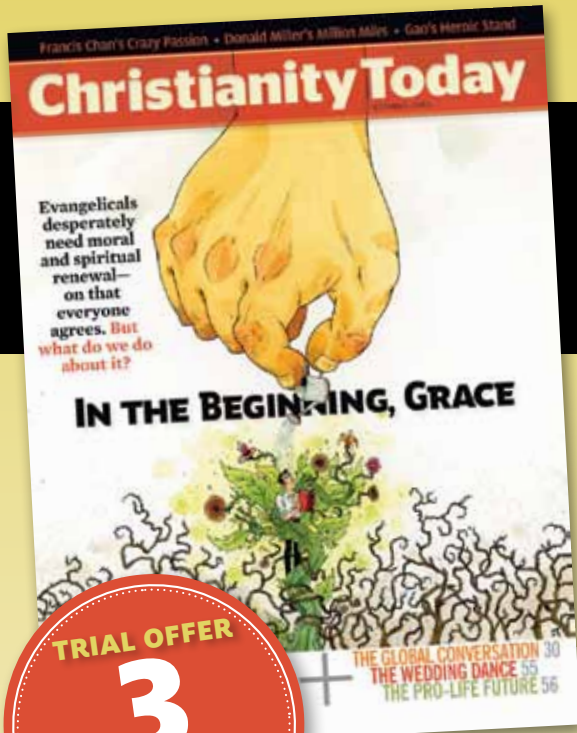
This past weekend, I was singing hymns with friends. One of my favorites is "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," but the words in the hymnal we were using had been changed. They took out the verse on death: (singing) "Death of death and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side." They exchanged the wonderfully rich, pithy, deep, hard words with something vague like, "Help me through until the other side." They extricated those words about death and hell's destruction. Why do that? We need to learn how to die every day. Suffering does that. It prepares us. Every time we go to sleep, it's a rehearsal of the day when our eyes will ultimately close and we wake up on the side of eternity.

What teachings of Jesus especially help you understand suffering?

There's the portion of Scripture in Matthew 18 where Jesus says, "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out." Here Jesus, the one who delighted in healing hands that could not work, restoring feet that could not walk, giving sight to eyes that could not see—here he is, saying cut off your hand, gouge out your eyes, *if* these things are causing you to sin. Jesus underscores his priority that yes, the physical body counts, but it does not trump the health of the soul.

When people ask about healing, I'm less interested in the physical and more interested in healing in my heart. Pray that I get rid of my lazy attitude about God's Word and prayer, of brute pride—set me free from self-centeredness. Those are more important, because Jesus thought they were more important. 

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