

Before You Begin

I first met Joni in the summer of 1969 in a church parking lot. Several hundred other teenagers and I had just exploded from the building. The youth meeting was over, and everyone was scattering, engines starting, radios cranked up – laughter and good-hearted tomfoolery everywhere.

A white station wagon had pulled up to the side steps. Somehow, with my friend Diana holding the keys, it avoided looking like a middle-aged person's wheels. Diana had the world's most carbonated personality. She stood by the front passenger door, next to an empty wheelchair she had pulled from the back seat to unfold. She wanted me to meet the paralyzed friend she had told me about. From my angle up on the steps, I couldn't see the face of the tall girl in the seat. I could see the braces on her wrists.

"Steve, I want you to meet Joni."

"Hi, Joni."

The face in the front seat bent down to peer out. Stylishly short blonde hair. Freckle-faced and cute. Ski-slope nose. A bright but bittersweet smile – sweet because, if you know Joni, that's just her. Bitter because she looked as if that chair had taken something precious out of her.

"Hi, Steve! Good to meet you." Enthusiastic but tentative.

"You two have a lot to talk about," Diana effervesced. We agreed it would be fun to get together.

A week later I walked into the stone-and-timber home that I'll always think of as a vestibule into heaven. Antlers over every fireplace, Indian rugs scattered about. Candles, candles. Simon and Garfunkel on the turntable, laughter in every room, and the bubbling friendliness of the parents and sisters from whom Joni had stolen that winning smile.

But once we were alone, it wasn't ten minutes before the question came.

"So, Diana says you're big into the Bible. Tell me, do you think God had anything to do with my breaking my neck?" She casually brushed a wisp of hair from her forehead with the back of her wrist, but those eyes were anything but casual.

Here is the crux of the book you're about to read.

I am a sixteen-year-old nobody, a paper boy, sitting across from perhaps the most popular girl of her huge high-school class from two years earlier. The crowd she ran with I saw only from across the gymnasium. Now look at her. I tap my foot to James Taylor in the background; she just bobs her head. I eat my own lunch; someone has to feed her. I'll be walking out that screen door in about thirty minutes; she'll stay sitting in that chair till the Grim Reaper comes. And she wants to know if I think God put her there? Who am I to open my mouth?

I know what the Bible says about her question. A dozen passages come to mind from years of church and a Christian dad who taught his kids well. But I've never test-driven those truths on such a difficult course. Nothing worse than a D in algebra or puppy-love-gone-sour has ever happened to me. But I think, If the Bible can't work in this girl's life – it never was for real.

I clear my throat and jump off the cliff.

"God put you in that chair, Joni. I don't know why, but if you'll trust him instead of fighting him, you'll find out why – if not in this life, then in the next. He let you break your neck because he loves you."

Oh, it sounded trite to me – but apparently not to her. We looked at a few verses, and I went home. From that day on I had to study hard just to keep one step ahead of the girl; she always had her nose in that Bible.

This book is about God weeping over human heartache, his entering our anguish himself, and the love that drives him to let us suffer. It's about experiencing the friendship of God along difficult paths we didn't even know he

walked. Much of it is written from Joni's perspective because her life is a remarkable laboratory that proves God knows what he's talking about.

But your life is the important laboratory to put God's Word to the test as you read. Do God's thoughts about suffering sound trite to you?

Steve Estes

March 31, 1997

Where do the years fly?

I can still see Steve Estes, humped over his Bible by the hearth, looking up only long enough to put another log on the fire. He'd flip furiously between the Old and New Testaments, finding a page, tracing his finger down a column, and jabbing the very verse to answer my latest query.

"Okay, Jon, now follow me. Listen to this in Ephesians chapter three: 'The purpose is that . . .,' " he'd say, as if revving an engine with little taps on the accelerator. Off we'd go, heading down a road of questions, bumping over them, stopping, backing up, and then starting again, taking a detour or two, then shutting down after the last log on the fire had burned into embers. He was as raw and youthful as I, hungry to see truth work. And so we'd be at it again, next Bible study, charging ahead – he, excitedly pointing out the sights through Scripture, and I, keeping pace, not missing a thing.

If God is loving, why is there suffering?

What's the difference between permitting something and ordaining it?

When bad things happen, is God in cahoots with the Devil?

How can he expect me to be happy this way?

"Hold that thought!" Steve would yell over his shoulder, running to the kitchen to grab another RC Cola.

Never were there sweeter days than those early years we spent journeying through Scripture. Our adventure was to go down that road of knowing God in suffering as far as it would take us. Thirty years later we've passed a few milestones and suffered the bumps and bruises of growing older and wiser. Thankfully we both have marriage partners, Verna and Ken, who keep cheering us on. Much has changed, but one thing remains constant: our friendship still orbits around the Son.