

❧ CHAPTER 1 ❧

*We're in  
This Together*



**W**hen I first began realizing all the adjustments that being paralyzed involves, I thought to myself, *My lot in life is harder than anyone else's. How many people have the humiliation of needing someone else to bathe them? Or empty their leg bag? What other girl can't even scratch her own shoulder or comb her own hair?*

Of course, it wasn't long before I was forced to realize that many, many people face problems just like mine—or worse. Every day thousands of people in hospitals and nursing homes all around the world need to be bathed and have their leg bags emptied. Many victims of paralysis have less movement than I do. Some have lost their limbs altogether or have been grotesquely deformed by disease. Others are terminally ill. To top it off, a good percentage of these folks have families who are either unable or unwilling to care for them at home (if they're fortunate enough to have families at all).

*It's a kind of scale, I finally reasoned. Every person alive fits somewhere onto a scale of suffering that ranges from little to much.*

## A STEP FURTHER



And it's true. Wherever we happen to be on that scale—that is, however much suffering we have to endure—there are always those below us who suffer less, and those above who suffer more. The problem is we usually like to compare ourselves only with those who suffer less. That way we can pity ourselves and pretend we're at the top of the scale. But when we face reality and stand beside those who suffer more, our purple-heart medals don't shine so brightly.

A mile from the house in Baltimore where I grew up, a beautiful children's hospital lays nestled among several acres of grassy hills and giant elms. Sometimes after school I would ride my bicycle there or kick up leaves during an autumn afternoon walk, enjoying the beauty outside, seldom thinking of the children inside. I never compared myself with them. I only stacked myself up against so-and-so at school who was prettier than I. Caught up in my life as a high school sophomore, it didn't dawn on me

that my problems were nothing compared with the problems of kids who had been confined to those buildings for years. Who cared about crippled children? Or suppertime lectures from mom about starving kids in India? I had *important* things to worry about—like dates and friends and field hockey games!

But not long after my accident I underwent several weeks of operations in that very hospital. When God moved *me* a few notches up the scale of suffering—ah, then it was a different story. *Now* the sterile smells and lonely, institutional atmosphere became more than just something I'd seen on a TV medical show. A whole new world had opened up and become real to me, an unpleasant world at that.

I was eventually to come to the conclusion that *one of God's purposes in increasing our trials is to sensitize us to people we never would have been able to relate to otherwise.*

Let me share with you one reason this is so important. I have observed how people who have known deep suffering are sometimes turned off by the glowing testimonies of Christians who have had life easy. Try to imagine yourself as a terminally ill patient watching television from your hospital bed. How do you think you'd respond if an attractive and talented young Christian, with seemingly everything going for him, suddenly appeared on the screen sharing how Christ can give a person victory over all of life's trials? It would be hard to stifle thoughts like: *What does this guy know about life? He can't even imagine what it's like to really hurt. If he had to face the problems I face, he'd drop that Colgate smile and "Jesus gives you joy" routine.*

It would be nice if the Christian message could be accepted or rejected on its merits alone. But the fact is that few of us can ever divorce a product from the person who sells it.

Now I'm not saying the answer is to go out, break your neck, and buy a wheelchair so people will listen to you! Even being paralyzed I've met people who had difficulty listening to me talk about suffering. All they could see was the contrast between my good

health and their chronic disease, my traveling opportunities and their confinement, my supportive family and their dead family.

What I am saying is that to reach and comfort someone, it sometimes takes a person with a similar problem. No one person can reach everyone. I can empathize with quadriplegics. You perhaps cannot. But you can identify with difficulties I have not experienced . . . perhaps marital problems. We as Christians can usually best reach people who have suffered less than, or the same as, we, not those who have suffered more. God has placed each of us exactly where He pleases on the scale of suffering. But remember, He reserves the right to move us up or down that scale any time He chooses in order to open up to us new avenues of ministry.

Two years ago I was sharing my testimony at a country church in southern Pennsylvania. After the service as I sat chatting with several members of the congregation, I kept noticing a tall and rather handsome man standing in the background with his family. Eventually he eased up to my chair. “Joni, excuse me, my name is Doug Sorzano. I just wanted to tell you that I wish I could understand and appreciate what you’re going through. You see, I’ve never known what it means to be paralyzed or face a really traumatic accident. I have a lovely wife and beautiful kids—in fact, they’re right here. Let me introduce you.”

Between introductions he managed to tell me how deeply impressed and excited he felt over all that had been said and done that evening. But he was honest in that he did not pretend to know and fully grasp all I had experienced. He was one who could not say, “I know exactly how you feel.”

Riding home later in our van, my traveling companions and I prayed that God might use what I had said to help some people.

Weeks passed in which I busied myself with drawing, reading, and an occasional speaking engagement.

One afternoon, perhaps a month later, I received a phone call from a neighbor of the Sorzano family who had been in church

that evening in Pennsylvania. She had called to let me know about “something awful that had happened.”

“It was just last Saturday, Joni. Doug has always been a motorcycle buff and spent lots of his free time riding trails. And, I’ll tell you, he’s good. But this time he and his buddies decided to tackle a new area of the woods.”

“Go on,” I added hesitantly.

“Well, from what we can gather there was a quick turn in the path. Anyway, apparently Doug came up suddenly on a hidden log. The front wheel of his bike hit it, and he was thrown some distance. . . .”

I was listening intently, but my imagination ran ahead of what my ears were hearing. Scared to ask, but wanting to know, I interrupted her with a question.

“Is he . . . uh . . . that is, has he—”

Reading my thoughts, she answered me in mid-sentence.

“His neck’s broken.”

There was an awkward silence.

The shock stunned me and made my ears ring. I was glad she couldn’t see my eyes fill with tears and my face becoming flushed and heated. Getting hold of myself, I tried to speak, but didn’t know exactly what to say. All I could do finally was assure her I would call or write this family very soon and let them know I would be praying for them in this time of real struggle.

After we hung up, my memory desperately tried to scramble back and recall my brief conversation with Doug. “I’ve never faced a really traumatic accident, Joni . . . have a lovely wife and beautiful kids . . . I wish I could understand what you’re going through. . . .”

I later learned that this man was paralyzed from the shoulder level down, confused, and frustrated.

My sister Jay grabbed a pen and some stationery and came into the room to help me write a letter to Doug and his family. But what do you say to a guy who has just broken his neck? Give advice? No, not just yet. Share some Scriptures? Okay, but it sure

would be good to say something more personal. What does a person really want when he's hurting? I guess he wants love . . . and to be understood. *That's it. He wants someone to know just what it is that he's going through. And I can do that.*

I am so glad that as I wrote that letter I was able to comfort Doug with real empathy. My own paralysis enabled me to walk in his shoes and see things from his point of view. It allowed me to honestly say, "I know exactly how you feel."

There is a healing balm in those words, but only if they are made believable by our own experience of suffering. People know whether or not we really understand them. They can look into our lives and see whether or not we have experienced deep anguish. If we say "I know how you feel" glibly, our words are empty, hollow statements. But if we can say it in sincerity, it can be such a comfort.

Jesus Himself came to earth partially to answer the charges that heaven's "ivory palaces" kept Him from knowing the pains of mankind. "Because He Himself suffered when He was tested, He can help others when they're tested . . . We have a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 2:18, 4:15 BECK). If He endured hardship in order to relate to those who suffer, we can expect to do no less. Therefore, I have learned to view the breaking of my neck as a special act of God that helps me relate to and comfort people in similar conditions.\*



So far I have been speaking about relating to people who must cope with difficulties that are higher on the scale of suffering than ours. These are people who face death, paralysis, and bankruptcy, to name just a few. But this is not the whole story.

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\*At the time of publication, Doug Sorzano has adjusted marvelously to his paralysis. In speaking with him over the phone, I learned that he is presently sharing his faith with others who are in his condition. The Sorzanos live in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, and attend church at Willowdale Chapel.