

# Accessible Church

*A Gospel-Centered  
Vision for Including  
People with Disabilities  
and Their Families*



Sandra Peoples

*Foreword by*  
Joni Eareckson Tada

“Theologically grounded and deeply practical, *Accessible Church* will give clear direction to any church that desires to be welcoming and accessible to people with disabilities and their families. I’m grateful for Sandra Peoples’s advocacy on behalf of families like mine and creating ways for all people to experience God’s plans, purposes, and blessings through disability.”

**Laura Wifler**, mom to a child with a disability; author, *Like Me: A Story About Disability and Discovering God’s Image in Every Person*

“Sandra Peoples has provided a biblically grounded and clinically aware guide to disability ministry. As the dad of a young adult with autism, I was moved by the compassion and intentionality expressed in *Accessible Church*. As a church leader, I’m grateful for a resource that’s practical and scalable for congregations of different sizes and budgets. This will be my go-to recommendation for churches looking to start or mature a ministry to special-needs children, students, adults, and their families.”

**Jared Kennedy**, Managing Editor for Books and Curriculum, The Gospel Coalition; author, *The Beginner’s Gospel Story Bible* and *Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission*

“Few churches are equipped to welcome our brothers and sisters with disabilities, not because we don’t want to but because we don’t know how. Sandra Peoples wants to help churches be well prepared for the task. Her pioneering work is a gift to the church. If you are a pastor who desires to serve saints with disabilities, you and your staff need this book.”

**Daniel Darling**, Director, The Land Center for Cultural Engagement; author, *The Dignity Revolution* and *Agents of Grace*

“Sandra Peoples has given us a plethora of practical steps in this important book. Her many years of living with people with disabilities and working ‘in the trenches’ has produced wisdom that she translates effectively into pragmatic, down-to-earth models for ministry in the church. The church needs to read, absorb, and apply this wisdom. I am grateful Sandra has labored long to produce this faithful resource, and I recommend it heartily and with gratitude.”

**Michael S. Beates**, Chaplain and Bible Teacher, The Geneva School; author, *Disability and the Gospel*

“As a father of a son with a disability, I’ve seen firsthand the profound beauty and challenges that come with raising a child who doesn’t fit the world’s narrow definition of ‘normal.’ But Sandra Peoples reminds us in *Accessible Church* that God’s grace shines brightest in our weakness. This book is a powerful call to the church to embrace families like mine—not with pity but with purpose. People with disabilities are not to be looked down on; they are some of the greatest teachers of God’s goodness, joy, and unconditional love. Sandra weaves together theology, personal experience, and practical wisdom to show how every church can be a place where the gospel reaches and transforms everyone. This is more than a book; it’s an invitation to see God’s glory in unexpected places.”

**Shane Pruitt**, National Next Gen Director, North American Mission Board; author, *9 Common Lies Christians Believe*

“In my estimation, this is the most complete book on disability ministry that is currently available. Sandra Peoples approaches a bevy of crucial topics with biblical wisdom, ministerial understanding, practical knowledge, and personal experience. This is more than a book; it is a valuable resource, and a necessary tool, for anyone who has come alongside individuals whose lives are impacted by disability.”

**Chris Hulshof**, Disability Ministry Program Director,  
John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University; author,  
*Jesus and Disability: A Guide to Creating an Inclusive Church*

“Every church should be accessible to everyone. In *Accessible Church*, Sandra Peoples casts a compelling vision of the *why* and *how* of becoming more accessible to the disabled community. Read this book, but more importantly, do whatever it takes to implement the wisdom it contains.”

**Kyle Idleman**, Senior Pastor, Southeast Christian Church,  
Louisville, Kentucky

“Gospel centered through and through, built on a rock-solid theological foundation, and practical on every level: This wonderful book checks all the boxes! Its theme—‘the goal is the gospel’—rings consistently in every chapter. What a beautiful gift Sandra Peoples has given to the church.”

**Stephanie O. Hubach**, Research Fellow in Disability Ministries,  
Covenant Theological Seminary; author, *Same Lake, Different Boat:  
Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability*

“The main reason many churches struggle to include people with disabilities is because they don’t know where to start. Sandra fixes that! She leads readers by the hand through the journey, providing a solid theological foundation (and destination), and then gently and practically pointing out the realities and blessings afforded by offering belonging for people with disabilities!”

**Dan Vander Plaats**, adult with a speech disorder; creator, The  
Fives Stages: The Journey of Disability Attitudes; Vice President of  
Development, Acts 29



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 **CROSSWAY®**  
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*Thank you to the churches who have welcomed my entire family  
because they were accessible to my sister Syble and my son James:*

*First Baptist Church, Duncan, Oklahoma*

*Stewartstown Baptist Church, Stewartstown, Pennsylvania*

*Heights Baptist Church, Alvin, Texas*



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## Foreword

NEARLY EVERY CUL-DE-SAC in America includes a family that deals with disability. Life is anything but easy for them. Non-stop disability routines, butting heads with the school system, meltdowns, cleanups, insurance hassles, therapy appointments, lack of respite—all this sets the stage for isolation and depression.

To be fair, there are some disabling conditions that are easy to manage. But there are always bone-weary parents who must lock the doors and windows at night to keep their hyperactive child with autism from escaping.

These homes need the gospel to walk through their front door. They need Jesus in the flesh to enter their world. Yet, God is doing everything from his end. He is fully engaged and at work to give peace and strength to parents and comfort to bewildered kids. He is fighting, his Holy Spirit is warring on the side of his families where a disabling condition has snuffed out hope.

And God has called you to fight alongside him. As a volunteer or staff worker in disability ministry, you embody the good news

where the bad news feels overwhelming due to disability. You speak words of hope; you become the gospel, wooing special needs families who otherwise would never come to church.

You create welcoming spaces, networks of support and friendship, access to biblical teaching, counseling, and worship. You help shape your church into a home that embraces every family member, regardless of disability. You fight, advocate, love, pray, and rejoice when families affected by disability find their place in the body of Christ.

Sandra Peoples has done all this and more. She is one of the most respected “go-to” guides when it comes to disability ministry. She grew up alongside a sister with Down syndrome and raised a son with level 3 autism. She understands the need, has advocated for change, has loved on hurting families, prayed for the impossible, and watched her congregation joyously become what church should be: a body of weak and needy people all leaning hard on Jesus.

Sandra has now poured all her insights and best practices into the remarkable book you hold in your hands. *Accessible Church* is not merely an instruction book on how to set up a special-needs department. It’s more personal than that. As my advocate-friend Jackie Mills-Fernald often says, some churches are content to have you serve at a safe, arm’s-length distance, untouched and unscathed within neat and tidy programs. But as a disability ministry worker, you don’t do a program—you do a person.

Finally, Sandra Peoples takes you deep into the theological context for embracing families that live with disability. This is because disability ministry reminds the church of something it has forgotten, and that is that we are all frail, enfeebled, and in

need of God's transforming grace. Ministry to special-needs families forbids the gospel to be conveyed from a position of power; rather, it requires that we all enter Christ's kingdom from a point of grace. For aren't we all needy in God's eyes? Isn't this why the "weaker [members] are indispensable" (1 Cor. 12:22)?

I applaud Sandra's work in *Accessible Church*. Her book will help you win the heart of your church for disability ministry. Not a special-needs department or something segregated and separated off to the side. Rather, you will bring the church back to its roots as it integrates special-needs families into the fold. Your congregation will then not only be giving the gospel but embodying it. Not only declaring the good news but becoming truly great news to families who need Christ desperately.

Great work, Sandra!

*Joni Eareckson Tada*

JONI AND FRIENDS INTERNATIONAL  
DISABILITY CENTER



## Author's Note about Terminology

I AM THANKFUL FOR self-advocates who help family members and ministry leaders understand how the language used to describe them makes them feel. In writing and editing, I have considered current preferences and the most widely used terminology. I understand that in the future use of this book, acceptable language may further evolve, and I ask for your understanding that our intent is to honor and respect, never offend.



# Introduction

I WAS BORN into a church-going family. Members of my family had attended First Baptist Church in Duncan, Oklahoma, since it was founded. My great grandparents' house was right behind the church, and they often hosted the pastor and his family for Sunday lunch. My great grandmother played the organ there for years. In the next generation, my grandmother served as the preschool director, and my grandfather was an usher in the balcony. Kids would climb the stairs to see him each Sunday because when they shook his hand, he slipped them a Tootsie Roll.

I was also born into a disability family. I grew up with a sister with Down syndrome. That diagnosis, which came shortly after her birth just days after Christmas in 1977, could have changed our church involvement. It meant her development wouldn't be the same as her peers'. She would need extra time to do the crafts, extra explanations to understand the lesson, and extra eyes on her because she could be pretty mischievous—like getting into the snacks before snack time or heading down the hall to find Grandpa and his pocket full of candy. Would the church where my family had served for decades be able to serve our family by being accessible to Syble and therefore our entire family?

For many churches, the answer isn't an automatic yes. The extras that people with disabilities may need at church can feel like too much, and many churches think they have already reached their limits. There are no extras—no extra time to learn, no extra cash in the budget, no extra volunteers to serve, and no extra room to put people with disabilities.

There's a story in the Gospels of a group of people who have also reached their limits. And like what often happens in churches today when they feel like they've reached their limits, a person with disabilities suffers. A paralytic man is cut off from accessing Jesus and from the people who followed Jesus. But in Mark 2, the group finds ways to overcome their limitations! Verses 1–3 say, “And when [Jesus] returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men.”

These four men want to bring their friend to Jesus. They have likely heard of his reputation as a healer. And hearing that Jesus is in a home, they see an opportunity to bring their friend close to him. At this time, people with disabilities were blocked from having access to the temple. According to New Testament scholar Craig Keener, teachings from the *Mishnah Hagigah* and other Jewish documents would have prevented those who were lame and blind from entering the temple.<sup>1</sup>

By being cut off from the temple, people with disabilities were also cut off from the community built around the rhythms related

1 Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2009), 502. For a discussion on the topic, see also Chris H. Hulshof, *Jesus and Disability: A Guide to Creating an Inclusive Church* (B&H, 2022), 46.

to worship, sacrifices, and feasts. No temple and no community. This paralytic man is in a desperate situation—a situation made worse by his inability to save himself. But his friends have hope. They just have to find a way in. Mark continues, “And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay” (2:4).

They have similar challenges to the ones we face today: no time (Jesus may only be passing through and there for a short time), no volunteers (It’s up to just the four friends), and no space (They can’t even open the door). But instead of seeing these as hindrances they can’t overcome, the friends use them as motivation. I can almost hear their optimism: “There’s no time like the present! We can do it together! We can’t get through the door, but we can make a way through the roof!” It makes me smile just to think of it. Maybe these men are young. I can see my teenage son coming up with a plan like this with his friends much more easily than I can picture my husband and his middle-aged friends with their fully formed prefrontal cortexes and bad backs!

The men in this biblical story overcome their challenges and find a way to get their friend to the healer they have heard about, but Jesus’s reaction may have surprised them: “And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’” (2:5). Your sins are forgiven! Is that what they came for? Did they know Jesus believed he could forgive sins? It certainly surprises some in the crowd:

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming!

Who can forgive sins but God alone?” And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” (2:6–11)

Jesus perceives their thoughts and responds to them with a question: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’?” (2:9).

How would you respond to the question of which is harder, to forgive sins or heal a man who could not walk? Some believe it’s easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” because there’s no observable proof of your success or failure. You can’t see sins being forgiven. You can see whether a man who came in on a mat through a hole in the roof walks home without assistance. But the audience at this time would have known it’s much harder to say you can forgive sins. Being able to forgive sins is something only God himself can do. It’s a serious claim to make, and one that eventually leads to Jesus’s crucifixion. John 5:18 says, “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because . . . he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

With these words, Jesus is showing his authority over both sin and sickness to this audience in Capernaum. He is making a claim only he can make and prove. “And [the paralytic man] rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never

saw anything like this!’ ” (Mark 2:12). When we encounter Jesus, we are amazed, and we glorify God. And that experience should motivate us to bring others to him, no matter what obstacles seem to stand in our way.

Just like the paralytic man who could not save himself, not even take a step toward Jesus on his own, we come to Jesus in the same state of desperation. None of the work we do to try to overcome our sin can release the hold it has on us. That is, until it is met with the power of Jesus. Paul tells us in Ephesians how those who are dead in sin become alive again in Christ:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4–7)

Like the paralytic man, we are forgiven and raised up. This is the good news of the gospel, and this message is at the heart of everything else you will read in this book. We modify lessons, provide noise-reducing headphones, and give support to those who are dysregulated so they can hear and have an opportunity to respond to the gospel. The goal is the gospel—you’ll read those words again and again on the pages to come.

We can see from the story of these four friends that we aren’t the first to face the idea of accessibility and be overwhelmed by our own limitations. But we aren’t bound by those limitations

because when it comes to reaching people with the gospel, God has shown himself faithful over and over to overcome those limitations and call people to himself.

Our church welcomed Syble and made accommodations for her from birth until our family moved away when she was nineteen. And because they made room for her, my whole family was able to attend together. I heard the gospel in that church. I was baptized there. And while sitting in those pews as a teenager, I prayed that God would use me in ministry. Experiencing what Jesus did in my life drives me to make that relationship possible for every single family, especially families like mine, whose lives have been radically altered by a diagnosis from a doctor or therapist.

In this book, we will walk together through each step. I'll introduce you to people who've been working in this space for decades—people with disabilities, caregiving families, pastors and ministry leaders—who will guide us. We'll empower you to be like the paralytic man's four friends: to overcome obstacles and bring more people to Jesus. I can't imagine a more exciting opportunity. We'll be amazed by what God will do, and we'll glorify him together. Are you ready to help your church become an accessible church?

# Laying the Foundation

## *A Theology of Disability*

IF YOU READ ONLY ONE BOOK about disability ministry, I don't want it to be this one. If you're going to read just one book about God's design and purpose for people with disabilities, how he expects his followers to treat people with disabilities, and the lengths he will take to ensure they are welcome in his family and his church, it shouldn't be this one. Because all that and more is in Scripture. If you're going to read just one book about inclusion and accessibility, it should be the Bible.

The theme of disability crops up all through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. The commentary *The Bible and Disability* lists almost two thousand verses and passages on disability.<sup>1</sup> In *Disability and the Gospel*, Michael Beates focuses on thirty-nine. If you read through the Bible in a year like I did this year, you'll

1 Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Young, eds., *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (Baylor University Press, 2017).

see the passages pop up in the narrative.<sup>2</sup> Jacob limps and leans on his staff. Moses tells God he can't speak before Pharaoh because he is slow of speech. Mephibosheth, the lame son of Jonathan, is invited to King David's table. Paul writes of a thorn he asked God to remove, which may have been a chronic condition that affected his eyesight.

Throughout this book, we'll see how passages on disability set the framework for why and how we do disability ministry. The Bible isn't a disability ministry handbook, but it's a head and heart book—it teaches us how to think about disabilities and how to treat those with disabilities (including how to view ourselves if we are ever diagnosed with a disability).

To begin, let's focus on passages that illustrate the overarching view of disabilities in Scripture. We will build our theology of disability on these passages. Jen Wilkin and J. T. English write in their book, *You Are a Theologian*, that theology is a means of organizing the ideas given to us in God's word. So when I talk about building a theology of disability, what I mean is organizing and understanding passages in Scripture about disability. Having a theology of disability matters because, as they write, "we think differently, feel differently, and act differently as a result of developing better categories for understanding God."<sup>3</sup>

In our disability ministry world, we sometimes put theologians and practitioners in different categories: Theologians *think* about disability and the Bible, and practitioners *do* disability ministry.

2 Robert Smith, ESV Chronological Reading Plan, *ESV* podcast, <https://www.crossway.org/>.

3 Jen Wilkin and J. T. English, *You Are a Theologian: An Invitation to Know and Love God Well* (B&H, 2023), 19.

But we are all theologians, and developing our theology of disability makes us better practitioners. You are a theologian, and you have a theology of disability. Let's make sure that theology has a firm foundation that will hold up when we are ministering to people with disabilities and their families. To do that, we're going to look at God's *plan*, God's *purpose*, God's *provision*, and God's *promise* in disability.

## God's Plan

We will start at the beginning of the world as we build our theology of disability. It starts with our theology of man, which of course begins at creation:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)

Man was created by God and in the image of God. Being created in the image of God sets humans apart from everything else God created. However, the fall and sin distort our ability to reflect God perfectly, but the image of God remains in each person.

What it means to be created in the image of God has been discussed for centuries and has not always been agreed on. Theologians Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley remind us, "As fallen human

beings, we are not in a position to understand the image of God completely. We do not fully know what it means to be human.”<sup>4</sup> Even though we can’t fully know, what we do understand about the image of God has implications for how we view and treat others, especially those with disabilities.

Beeke and Smalley underscore that “the image consists centrally of inward righteousness and a right relationship to God, but more broadly encompasses man’s whole nature along with his divinely ordained function.”<sup>5</sup> What’s helpful about this view is that it doesn’t reduce God’s image to only the roles we play or the capacities we have.

Although the image of God can include functions and characteristics, it is more than that. If the image of God were only about our dominion over the earth, those who have opportunities to have more dominion might be seen as reflecting more of God’s image. Or if it were primarily about intelligence and understanding, those with the highest IQs would resemble God most. Instead, 1 Corinthians says, “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1:27, 29). If it were only about doing, would we still image God if we failed to function? Instead of only imaging God (a verb), we are the image of God (a noun). The image is about who man is and not just what he does.

Beyond being simply functional, the image of God is also relational. Being able to have a relationship with God and having

4 Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Man and Christ* (Crossway, 2020), 204.

5 Beeke and Smalley, *Man and Christ*, 193.

the potential for salvation and sanctification (the ability to reflect Jesus, who *is* the image of God) is an essential characteristic of the *imago Dei*. It is holistic and ontological, based on who people are and not what they do. John Kilner writes, “Being made in the image of God involves connection and reflection. Creation in God’s image entails a special connection with God and also God’s intention that people be a meaningful reflection of God, to God’s glory.”<sup>6</sup> This understanding better represents realities for people with disabilities who reflect the image of God. As John Hammett contends, “We may affirm that each person has the capacity for a relationship with God because we believe God has the capacity to reach every human spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

As Beeke and Smalley remind us, we won’t fully know what Scripture means by “image” and “likeness” in Genesis 1, but we know enough to treat all people with respect and dignity and to understand all people have the potential to have a relationship with God. This matters in our evangelism to and our discipleship of people with disabilities. Seeing all people as image bearers is the reason we need to do disability ministry. We can see everyone as God sees them, with the potential of having a relationship with him and with others. Colossians 1:16 says, “All things were created through him and for him.” Through him and by him we were created, and he created us for himself—for his plan and his praise. In our diversity, even in the diversity of our physical abilities and disabilities, social

6 John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Eerdmans, 2015), 311.

7 John S. Hammett, “Human Nature,” in *A Theology for the Church*, rev. ed., ed. Daniel L. Akin (B&H, 2014), 320.

strengths and deficits, and intellectual challenges and achievements, we ourselves are evidence of his love and care for each one of us.

In Psalm 139, David writes of this love and care in God's creation of himself. In the sensory class I teach each week at our church, the Seeds Kids Worship version of this Psalm is the first song I play. I want our kids to know that God has a plan for their design, and that his plan is for their good and his glory. They can echo what David knows to be true:

For you formed my inward parts;  
     you knitted me together in my mother's womb.  
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
 Wonderful are your works;  
     my soul knows it very well.  
 My frame was not hidden from you,  
 when I was being made in secret,  
     intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
 Your eyes saw my unformed substance;  
 in your book were written, every one of them,  
     the days that were formed for me,  
     when as yet there was none of them. (139:13–16)

Disabilities are diagnosed at different times in a person's life. My sister Syble's Down syndrome was written into her DNA in our mother's womb. My son James's autism wasn't detectable until the gaps between his development and the development of other kids his age became too clear to ignore. Joni Eareckson Tada had a diving accident at age seventeen

that left her a quadriplegic. These verses in Psalm 139 make it clear that no matter when a diagnosis comes, it is under the sovereign plan of God.

### God's Purpose

Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Each one of us is his workmanship. We are clay in the hands of a loving potter (Isa. 64:8). Being born with a disability or developing one later in life is not a sign of faithlessness or weakness on our part or a mistake or anger on God’s part. Disabilities may be results of the fall, but they are still part of God’s plan and his purpose for our lives.

Exodus 3–4 records a conversation between Moses and God that is foundational to our understanding of disabilities and God’s sovereignty. God reveals himself to Moses through a burning bush and tells him about his expectations for Moses’s advocacy and leadership for his people. Moses has many excuses for why he can’t fulfill this calling. In 4:10–12, Moses even tries to use his limitations as an excuse: “But Moses said to the LORD, ‘Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.’ Then the LORD said to him, ‘Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.’” What’s profound about this response is that it’s clear—and clear in such an early account for the followers of God—that God takes credit for disabilities.

There is no guessing, no assuming, no excusing. God says, “Is it not I” who is fully responsible for your creation? As Michael Beates writes,

We have discovered that God is not only creator of man and we are made *imago Dei*, but we have seen that God is declared to be the creator of disabilities. He is also, in some profound sense, the source of brokenness and the one who has ordained to use such brokenness for his purposes, and ultimately, for his glory.<sup>8</sup>

“How could this be?,” you may ask. How could something that leads to suffering and hardships be part of God’s plan? We all wrestle with this question. When my son James was diagnosed with autism, I questioned what God’s purpose would be in his life and the life of our family. I had grown up with a sister with Down syndrome, so I knew firsthand some of the barriers we would encounter. On his first day of special-education preschool, I locked myself in the bathroom and cried as I called out to God. “Why James? Why us?” If there was a lesson he was trying to teach me, I considered this to be a cruel way to teach it.

In that moment (and in every moment since then), I’ve had to hold on to what I know is true about God when I’m struggling to bring my emotions in line with his truths. *God loves me. God loves James*, I repeated that day in the bathroom. I repeated it when we were adjusting his medications, and he was reacting with self-injurious meltdowns he couldn’t control. *God loves me.*

8 Michael S. Beates, *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace* (Crossway, 2012), 77.

*God loves James.* I repeated it when we celebrated his sixteenth birthday with Blue's Clues decorations and a new swing set instead of keys to a car like his big brother had gotten. *God loves me. God loves James.*

Eareckson Tada writes, "God permits what he hates to accomplish that which he loves."<sup>9</sup> And that which he loves—his purpose—can be seen in the life of James and others who have disabilities. We see it in another of the best-known passages about disabilities, John 9:1–3: "As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.'"

As I was adjusting to having a son with a diagnosis and all that would mean for our family, this passage brought me peace and hope. But now as I look at it from the broader perspective of a ministry leader, I see the context it was written in and the application not only for the family of the man born blind but also for those of us caring for special needs families.

First, let's think about the purpose for this miracle and the other miracles of Jesus. Jesus heals many people, but he doesn't heal everyone. Some people he heals show evidence of their faith before the healing, and some after. Some are healed by a touch, whereas others have to take steps to receive healing. Some show appreciation for their healing, while others do not. For some, Jesus heals them and also says their sins are forgiven, as we saw in Mark 2 with the paralytic man. What is consistent in each healing

9 Joni Eareckson Tada, *Pearls of Great Price: 366 Daily Devotional Readings* (Zondervan, 2006), Dec. 12.

miracle recorded is the healer. Jesus heals to show his power over sickness, suffering, and death. Albert Wolters writes, “Christ’s work was not only a preaching of the long-awaited coming of the kingdom, but also a *demonstration* of that coming. In his words, and especially in his deeds, Jesus himself was proof that the kingdom had arrived.”<sup>10</sup>

Jesus’s healings do more than restore sight or mobility or health. They also restore relationships and communities. As Lamar Hardwick observes, “An examination of [Jesus’s] healing ministry strongly suggests that the central theme and aim of his healing ministry was to restore people who were disabled and disregarded back into the community.”<sup>11</sup> This restoration of connection is seen in his healings and teachings (in Luke 14 and Matt. 21 specifically).

Second, let’s place this encounter with the man born blind into the wider scope of John’s Gospel. Professor Chris Hulshof connects it to Jesus saying “I am the light of the world” in John 8 and to his good shepherd discourse in John 10. Without these important connections, we might wrongly assume that this man glorified God only after his healing. Instead, as Hulshof writes, “God was glorified through the visual validation that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and his representative. Thus, the focus is shifted from the blind man and directed to both God the Father and God the Son.”<sup>12</sup>

10 Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 2005), 74 (emphasis original).

11 Lamar Hardwick, *Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion* (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 52.

12 Chris H. Hulshof, *Jesus and Disability: A Guide to Creating an Inclusive Church* (B&H, 2022), 126–27.

The connection to Jesus's teaching on what it looks like to be a good shepherd comes from the reactions of those in the life of the man who was born blind. His neighbors, the Pharisees, and even his parents discuss his condition out of curiosity, not care. Jesus calls himself the good shepherd and gives examples of what it looks like to be a good shepherd. But in the story with the man born blind, the people (and specifically the religious leaders) do not exhibit these characteristics. Again from Hulshof: "For Jesus, leaders who lack the divine compassion and sympathy for the blind man give evidence that they are not true shepherds. Further, the inability of these leaders to recognize this divine compassion and mercy in Jesus only adds to their indictment."<sup>13</sup>

Seeing God's purpose in creating people with disabilities in Exodus 4 and noticing Jesus's purpose in healing people with disabilities helps provide guardrails for our own thinking about disabilities. They are not accidental or without purpose. They are not a result of our sin or God's apathy. In my own experience after receiving my son's autism diagnosis, I was able to read James 1:17 through this lens: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." If my son's autism was from God, then somehow it must be a good and perfect gift for the purpose of making us more like Christ and to bring others to him. It is part of his purpose for us.

### **God's Provision**

We can see that God takes responsibility for disabilities and has a purpose for them. We can also see that God provides for the

<sup>13</sup> Hulshof, *Jesus and Disability*, 121.

disabled. This truth is seen most clearly in the stories of David's practical provision for Mephibosheth and God's sufficient grace for Paul.

Consider the former:

David asked, "Is there anyone remaining from the family of Saul I can show kindness to for Jonathan's sake?" There was a servant of Saul's family named Ziba. . . .

So the king asked, "Is there anyone left of Saul's family that I can show the kindness of God to?"

Ziba said to the king, "There is still Jonathan's son who was injured in both feet."

The king asked him, "Where is he?"

Ziba answered the king, "You'll find him in Lo-debar. . . . So King David had him brought from the house of Machir son of Ammiel in Lo-debar.

Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul came to David, fell facedown, and paid homage. David said, "Mephibosheth!"

"I am your servant," he replied.

"Don't be afraid," David said to him, "since I intend to show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all your grandfather Saul's fields, and you will always eat meals at my table."

Mephibosheth paid homage and said, "What is your servant that you take an interest in a dead dog like me?"

Then the king summoned Saul's attendant Ziba and said to him . . . "Mephibosheth, your master's grandson, is always to eat at my table." . . .

. . . Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem because he always ate at the king's table. His feet had been injured. (2 Sam. 9:1–10, 13, CSB)

After many military victories, David experienced a season of peace. Scripture says he “administered justice and equity to all his people” (2 Sam. 8:15). It was at this time that David thought of his friend Jonathan and wanted to show kindness to any surviving relatives. He found out there was a survivor—Mephibosheth. Earlier, in 2 Samuel 4:4, we read this about him: “Saul’s son Jonathan had a son whose feet were crippled. He was five years old when the report about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nanny picked him up and fled, but as she was hurrying to flee, he fell and became lame. His name was Mephibosheth” (CSB).

Mephibosheth was now a man and was summoned to approach the king who was ultimately responsible for the death of his father and grandfather. The very king who in his anger at being mocked by the Jebusites (who said even their blind and lame could hold David off) had made a law that the blind and lame couldn’t live within the city of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6–8). Mephibosheth fell at David’s feet in fear as he was brought before the king. But David responded with restoration, invitation, and compensation. David restored to him the land of Saul and Jonathan, three miles north of Jerusalem in Gibeah. He extended an invitation to sit at his table, and “so Mephibosheth ate at David’s table just like one of the king’s sons” (2 Sam. 9:11, CSB). David also offered compensation, giving to him “all that belonged to Saul and . . . his house” (9:9). Mephibosheth then lived in Jerusalem and “ate always at the king’s table” (9:13).

## Functional and Social Aspects of Disability

There are two aspects of disability: *functional* and *social*. The functional aspect of disability is the impairment itself. For example, my son with autism is functionally nonverbal. He can speak fewer than one hundred words. The social aspect of disability is the treatment of the disabled person by society. Because James can speak so few words, people don't speak to him, even to ask a question he might be able to answer. His limited language is a barrier, and so is the assumption by others that he won't be able to communicate.

The current postmodern worldview trend is to focus on only social aspects of disability and downplay or deny functional aspects. In this view, the only barriers are those created and enforced by society. This worldview presents functional aspects not as debilitating but simply as differences that are neither good nor bad.

The biblical worldview of disabilities acknowledges both the functional and social realities. Addressing the functional aspects, we can say that bodies and brains don't function as they should, as they would have before the fall. Addressing the social aspects, we can say that society has created barriers that make it harder for people with disabilities to flourish. In our churches, we can focus on decreasing the social barriers that exist for people with disabilities.

God's provision for Mephibosheth is clear in these verses. Mephibosheth was at the mercy of David: He fell on his face before him, calling himself a servant to David and "a dead dog." In humility and with fear, he came when David summoned him. But instead of finding wrath because of the actions of his grandfather, he was met with grace. It is important to note that Mephibosheth doesn't receive an invitation to the table after he is healed. He remains lame. God's provision doesn't equal healing. It does equal his grace.

The thorn Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 is also evidence of this grace:

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In 2 Samuel, David is a representative of God's grace in the life of Mephibosheth. In Paul's epistle, he also experiences God's grace, even though his suffering is not alleviated. Instead of growing bitter and resentful, Paul grows in Christlikeness as he identifies with Christ in his sufferings and finds strength. We are all

broken, needy people. People with disabilities just can't hide their neediness as easily as the rest of us try to hide ours. But in that neediness we find God's sufficiency—his provision. As Jesus says in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

### God's Promise

The final piece to building our theology of disability is looking at God's promise to all of us. I quoted from Beeke and Smalley at the beginning of the chapter, and the rest of that quote helps us now: "We do not fully know what it means to be human. But we will know. . . . One day the image will be revealed to those who belong to Jesus Christ and—beyond all dreams and expectations—we will share in it."<sup>14</sup> As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:49, "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven."

Being made in the image of God is mysterious to us now, and so is understanding exactly what our eternities will look like in heaven. We do know there will be an end to the suffering we experience here on earth—both the functional and social aspects of disability will pass away. Revelation 21:4 says, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Thomas Boehm helps us apply this verse to experiences with disability: "God's promise is to swallow up death and wipe away tears from our faces. As this

<sup>14</sup> Beeke and Smalley, *Man and Christ*, 204.

glorious truth relates to disability, whatever brings us loss, sorrow or discomfort in this life will no longer have the power to do so—whether that source be the functional impairment associated with disability, the socially-induced aspects of disability, or some combination of both.”<sup>15</sup>

This healing in heaven includes far more than people with disabilities looking, acting, feeling, moving, communicating, and thinking like people without disabilities. The healing we will receive is that all of us will be more like Christ. As 1 Corinthians 15:51 says, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” Our reproach will be taken away (Isa. 25:8). We will spend eternity without hindrances to our fellowship with each other or our worship of God. Anything about us now that holds us back from fellowship and worship will be no more. That promise makes me long for heaven, where I will be able to have a conversation with my son for the first time and where we will praise God side by side.

In all we can imagine about heaven, especially as those who have disabilities or love people with disabilities, Eareckson Tada helps us focus on what’s most important:

When I was first injured, I only viewed heaven as a place where I could get back what I had lost. I would receive hands that worked and feet that walked and even danced. For me, it wasn’t ‘the Day of Christ,’ it would be ‘the Day of Joni.’ My attitude changed as I studied the Scriptures. I realized that heaven was mainly focused on Jesus, not me . . . I also began to understand that every fringe benefit of heaven—whether receiving my new

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Boehm, “10 Pillars of a Theology of Disability,” Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability, [www.wheaton.edu/faithanddisability](http://www.wheaton.edu/faithanddisability).

body, a new home, new friends, whatever—really centered around the culmination of Christ’s purposes and his kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

As we look at all Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, we can trust in God’s plan, purpose, provision, and promise for those with disabilities. This foundation will set us up for how we include those who are affected by disabilities and their families in our churches.

### **Bringing It All Together**

Based on what you learned in this chapter, here are steps of accessibility you can take:

*Start by* seeing yourself as a disability theologian.

*Then try* choosing two or three passages listed in this chapter and dig deeper into understanding their context and application.

*Next, apply* what you’ve learned to cast a biblical vision for including people with disabilities at your church.

<sup>16</sup> Eareckson Tada, *Pearls of Great Price*, April 13.