

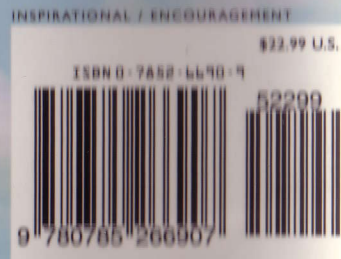
In spite of a diving accident that has left her paralyzed for more than thirty years, Joni Eareckson Tada has been able to build a life of faith and purpose. The peace she has found as she confronts the painful realities of life as a quadriplegic has made her a hero to many people.

In *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Faith*, Joni lets us know who her heroes are. Inside she tells the stories of people who inspire her with their faith and courage. Although Joni has met many famous "heroes of the faith" through her ministry, the lives she shares here are not the Billy Grahams of the world. They are a mother, a housewife, a nursing home resident, a child. Some are missionaries or pastors; others are bank tellers or data entry clerks. All of these people have touched Joni's life and the lives of others as they found their faith rise to the occasion—to forgive an assailant, to find strength despite the debilitating effects of cerebral palsy, to choose love in the face of racial prejudice, and to discover in the midst of questioning that God Himself is the answer to all questions.



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ORDINARY  
PEOPLE,

*Extraordinary Faith*

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STORIES of  
INSPIRATION

JONI  
EARECKSON TADA



# ORDINARY PEOPLE, *Extraordinary Faith*

JONI EARECKSON TADA

Stories of ordinary people exercising their faith in unusual, often difficult, circumstances are sure to be uplifting and encouraging. But Joni has more than just *feeling good* in mind. She wants you to see yourself in these stories. She wants you to know that these are people just like you, whose challenges have not only revealed their faith, but have given that faith the opportunity to grow. And she wants you to know that when you face hard times, your faith can help you not only to overcome, but to encourage those around you.

"It only takes the faith of a mustard seed to do this," Joni writes. "But—hey—give God an inch, and He'll take a mile, encouraging and strengthening you each step of the way . . . And you will be the true hero of your own story . . . the hero He always intended you to be."

Let these twelve stories of extraordinary faith focus your heart and mind on Jesus and His kingdom, knowing that you, too, can be a light of hope to everyone around you.



JONI EARECKSON TADA is president of *Joni and Friends*, an organization that advances Christian ministry among people with disabilities. Joni and her husband, Ken, live in Southern California where Ken teaches high school. Joni is the author of more than twenty books, including the bestsellers *Diamonds in the Dust*, *Heaven*, and *More Precious Than Silver*.

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*For everyone born of God  
overcomes the world.*



1 JOHN 5:4

# 4

## YET WILL I TRUST HIM . . . AND OVERCOME

*I*f you know Jesus, you also know He loves children. Red and yellow, black and white . . . they are precious in His sight. It's easy to picture the scene in Matthew 19:14–15 where Jesus says to His disciples, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” I can visualize the Lord tousling a little boy's hair or bouncing a child on His knee. I can see Him crouching to get to eye-level with a girl crying because she feels left out . . . and I see Him giving her a hug and a pat-pat on the back.

If Jesus had such enormous love for children who



could walk up to Him, how much more did His heart go out to children who couldn't walk?! He must be absolutely wild about kids who struggle with disabilities. His compassion must overflow for a little boy with muscular dystrophy or a little girl with cerebral palsy. A girl like Emily Shanahan.

I first met Emily—or Em, as I like to call her—when I wheeled into the meeting room at our Joni and Friends Family Retreat at Oakwood Inn, Indiana. She was the cutest thing on wheels, sitting in her small pink wheelchair. I took one look at this nine-year-old, her big brown eyes, that smiling face, and her hair done up in bouncy pigtails with pink ribbons, and I melted. I was especially glad that when we broke up into small prayer groups, Emily Shanahan parked her wheelchair next to mine.



Emily Shanahan and me

When it came her turn to pray, I couldn't help but peek. Her small body may have been stiff and rigid with cerebral palsy, but her head gracefully bowed as she prayed softly and eloquently. Emily's cerebral palsy has affected her speech somewhat, and so I tried very hard to listen closely.

"Dear God, thank You for dying on the cross for us and thank You for my mom and dad who love me very much and who take such good care of me—"

I could hardly believe my ears. *This nine-year-old knows about prayer. She really knows Jesus!*

"—and I want to ask You to please help my parents and bless them because they love You and I love them very much, too, and please help me to be a good daughter and thank You that my parents can come to this retreat to relax and—" Emily's pigtails bobbed as she breathed in between the spaces of her long sentence. "—it's so neat that my parents get to have time off from taking care of me here at Retreat and so I thank You for the volunteer who's helping me, and I love You, Jesus, and bless all the other kids here at the retreat, too."

Others in our prayer group—myself included—prayed after little Em, but I sensed that Jesus was still lingering over her words. I've always thought that the prayers of children possess a particular power with God; that day I felt it.

Emily Shanahan and I became fast friends at that retreat. My affection for this little girl only deepened long after the camp ended. As the seasons flew by, I kept abreast of her adventures, including the new surgeries on her legs and hips. Time and again,



I was encouraged when I read her E-mail reports: "I'm doing fine, Joni. Thanks to Jesus!" I could just picture her smile and pigtails bobbing as she plunked the computer keys with her finger.

Em is twelve years old now, but she hasn't lost an ounce of spunk and sparkle, despite her occasional physical setbacks. Recently I took the liberty of recording one of our "talks" together because I want you to know this special girl as I do. I should explain that Emily Shanahan was born twelve weeks premature on a warm summer day in August of 1988 in Dayton, Ohio. Although she cannot walk due to her cerebral palsy, she can drive her pink power wheelchair and can also use a stander that helps stretch her muscles. With an adaptive fork, Em is able to feed herself a little bit. She has had four major surgeries and has, twice, lain for months in a body cast. I asked Emily, "What has been your toughest circumstance to overcome?" and this is what she said:

"One of the struggles I had to overcome when I was in kindergarten was that my parents didn't know that I could be in regular classes, so they put me in a Multiple Handicapped (MH) classroom. MH school started two weeks after regular school did. So I went to regular school for two weeks. Then, when MH school started, I spent part of the day in kindergarten and part of the day in the MH class, which I was supposed to do for the rest of the year. I hated it! So on the second day they tried to move me from the regular kindergarten class to the MH class. I turned my chair off in the middle of the hallway when I realized what they were doing."



*Emily and me at a dress-up occasion at Joni and Friends family camp*

Stop and picture that. That kindergartner had chutzpah. Can you imagine the teachers on either side of Em's wheelchair, escorting her down the hallway when—*bam!*—suddenly the chair died. They probably thought her batteries gave out! But not so. Em continued . . .

"At that time I had a toggle switch, so I covered the toggle switch with my hand and said that I wasn't going anywhere. They didn't know what to do. You see, I had just gotten my chair, and they didn't know they could disengage the motors and push me down the hall. Well, to make a long story short, the school had to call my mom and say I wouldn't have to go to the MH class but she would have to come and get me. Mom and Dad ended up



having a meeting with the school, and they decided that I could be there at the regular classroom. It's been that way ever since then. I've gotten straight A's in the last quarter of fifth grade, and I hope I continue in that from now on. I was getting A's and B's before."

I bet the teachers thought they had a problem child on their hands, but Emily Shanahan isn't militant or aggressive and, no, she would never chain her wheelchair to a regular classroom in protest or carry a "Teachers Unfair!" poster down the hallway. (Then again, maybe she would.) Rather, Emily is just plain assertive. In a nice way. And *that's* what won over her teachers.

It was at that Family Retreat when I noticed that Emily was very good at making friends. I wondered if it had always been that way. When I asked, she said, "When I was in third grade, I told my mom that I wanted to have an overnighter. My mom said that it would be okay and what friend did I want to have over? I told her that I wanted to have an overnighter at someone else's home other than ours! I saw the look on my mom's face that said, 'That is something I can't give you.' At that time, we committed my desire to prayer and claimed Matthew 19:26: 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"

"One month later, my mom went to a weekend Women's Retreat. She shared a hotel room with four other women, one of whom was Julie Martin. While they were getting ready for bed one night, Julie told my mother that she and her husband, Jon, had been thinking of inviting me, Emily, for an overnighter at their home. You see, they have a daughter Christi who is my age! Mom

and Julie began to cry as my mom shared my prayer request from weeks before. I have not only had one overnighter in their home, but three! I even get to use my power wheelchair in their home!"

Wow. I looked into Em's liquid brown eyes and thought about all the times she had held disappointment at bay. Disappointment at not being able to run on strong legs to the school playground. At not being able to play dodgeball like the rest of the kids at recess. And disappointment that, at least up to that point, no one had ever offered, "Hey, Emily, how about bringing your sleeping bag over to my house this weekend?!" I also thought about the equal number of times Emily probably took those disappointments to God in prayer. The result? What seemed impossible was now possible. This overcomer now has a stronger heart, a deeper faith, and a lot of overnights at the homes of new friends.

As I came to know Emily better and as I watched her interact with other children at the Family Retreat, it occurred to me that this kid was out to change the world. Not just her world, *the* world. Case in point:

"In the spring of my fourth-grade school year, my class was going on a field trip to the Ohio Caverns. I couldn't help but think of Isaiah 55:8-9, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." From an earthly standpoint, I was limited in what I could do on this field trip, but once committed to God, His plans were revealed!



"My teacher wanted me to go on the trip but said that I would pretty much have to stay in the gift shop while my classmates went down into the cave. My mom began to pray about adaptive ideas for my involvement in this field trip to the Ohio Caverns. About three days later, God gave my mom the idea to write the local Fire Department and ask them to do a practice cave rescue with me down into the cave entrance while strapped into a gurney. Once down in the cave, they could prop me up against a wall to take in the sights of the cave. (My mom did ask me if I was okay with this idea before she wrote the letter. I said, 'Yes.')

"After writing the letter, my mom got a call from the local fire chief and he stated that he could not take me down into the entrance of the cave, so Mom said, 'Well, that's okay' and began to hang up. He said, 'Mrs. Shanahan, wait! My emergency personnel can take Emily down the exit instead!' My mom said, 'I understand there are sixty-six steps down the exit versus thirty-four steps in the entrance of the cave!' He said, 'Ma'am, we are here to serve the community!'

"I had to go down the exit since all my classmates would be going down the entrance and I would block their entry into the Caverns. Once I got to the Ohio Caverns, the paramedics transferred me from my wheelchair and onto the gurney. They even had special padding for my legs and a blanket to keep me warm, and I had my own tour guide. I was never propped up against the wall to take in the sights of the cave. I was carried through almost all of the cave by the paramedics. One lady paramedic had the sole job of making sure my face never got hit by a stalactite!

"We came to one point where I could no longer fit through the rocks while in the gurney. So two paramedics took me out and carried me in their arms to see the highlight of the cave, called the Stalactite King, then carried me back to the gurney and strapped me back in to begin the exit trip out of the cave and back up sixty-six steps! Once transferred back into my power wheelchair, my classmates began to come out of the exit and I joined them for lunch.

"I am reminded of Mark 2:1-5 where the paralytic was lowered into the roof by four of his friends after they dug a hole in the roof so the paralytic could ask Jesus for forgiveness of his sins. I am thankful for my friends who demonstrate that type of selfless love to me on a daily basis so that my life is full and complete, filled with grace because of God's love for me."

Can you see why I'm in love with the divine Miss Em? Talk about overcoming the odds! And I am humbled to report that Emily loves me. Am I the blessed one, or what! When I asked how my wheelchair has helped her, she told me this:

"I think the most important thing in life is for us to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ so that people can go to heaven and have a party with all their friends instead of being in turmoil down in hell. I believe this because the day after my fifth birthday party I felt there was no purpose for my life. I began to cry and told my mom that my legs were only cute ornaments to put tights on. My mother tried to comfort me, but I didn't want to hear anything about God.

"Three days later, Joni, I was listening to your *Harps & Halos*



CD that Mom ordered a few weeks prior to this ache I felt in my heart. Mom was doing the dishes, and I heard your words to the song 'Gonna Go to Heaven,' and a peace came over me. You sang:

Some people think they'll spend forever pushing up the grass.

But I believe I have a date to leave this earth at last.

That graveyard is just a place to hang this old suit to dry.

And with a brand-new body I will spread my wings and fly.<sup>1</sup>

"My mom thought the words were inappropriate and she started to turn it off. But then she noticed my peacefulness. From that point on, Ephesians 1:11 became very real to me. It says in *The Living Bible*, 'Moreover, because of what Christ has done we have become gifts to God that he delights in, for as part of God's sovereign plan we were chosen from the beginning to be his, and all things happen just as he decided long ago.' I realize I've been chosen and God is going to do something special with my life. I have the hope of eternal life, and I can give that message to others I encounter. My handicapped body is only temporary and can be used by God to touch others' lives while I am here on earth."

I'll say it again. Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, lame and deaf and without sight. Jesus loves *all* the children of the world. Children like Emily Shanahan. And may I share Em's words of advice to other kids?

"The message I want to give to other kids is, and I know this sounds strange because this is a kid writing this, but be thankful

for your parents. They do a lot for you. They help you with your homework. They help you make big decisions. And think about it: you wouldn't be able to get together with your friends most of the time, if it weren't for them. I am especially thankful for my mom and dad because they have to do a lot of other stuff for me, such as brushing my teeth, giving me a shower, getting me dressed."

How grateful to God I am for her parents, Tom and Barb, who have prayed and worked hard to build up their child's faith. Their daughter is a life-picture of Isaiah 11:6, for "a little child shall lead them." Tom and Barb have taught her to be an overcomer, and maybe that's why Em's favorite Scripture is Jeremiah 29:11: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

Emily's hope for her future is a growing and vibrant friendship with Jesus Christ. He positively affects everything she says and does. And I believe the cerebral palsy has been the tool He has used to hone and shape her noble, courageous little character.

It's a good thing. She'll need all the courage she can muster in the years to come. After Tom and Barb get older, and as Emily's preteen years give way to adulthood, others will give her the daily care she can't give herself. It won't be easy—I know that

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from personal experience. To wake up and wait for someone to bathe me, to dress me, to lift me into my wheelchair. To brush my hair and my teeth. Even after going through the routine countless times, I sometimes feel I just don't have the strength to face it one more day. And other people with less empathy will review her college entrance exams or job applications. Happy—yet sometimes hard—childhood days will give way to happy and *much* harder days of testing and disappointment. Somehow I'm not concerned for Emily, though. She's learned early how to be more than a conqueror—a lesson every one of us must learn sooner or later, whether we're disabled or able-bodied.

As for Emily, she is trusting God. And by His grace, she *will* overcome.