

## **100922 Toward a Theology of Disability – Luke 2:10 et al**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Thank you, Caleb, and musicians. I'm sure you'll agree that those hymns we just sang – that - “**Assure us of Jesus and His Love**” - are some of the most beloved hymns of the church.

Two of the hymns we are singing this morning - and many like them - take on new understanding – when we realize that the authors – as they are praising God - were disabled.

Fanny Crosby – wrote both – “**Blessed Assurance**” and – “**To God Be the Glory**” – we will sing at the close- and some 8000 more hymns – was blinded for life – at the age of just six weeks - by an incompetent physician.

There are others – Kate Hankey – wrote – “**I Love to Tell the Story**” – during a serious illness that left her bedridden for over nine months.

And - William Cowper who wrote “**There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood**” – suffered from mental illness and deep depression - that took him near to the point of suicide. [PAUSE]

These are but three of our most admired saints - who – even as they struggled through disability and debilitating illness – God has used to bring about His perfect will – not only in their lives – but in the lives of countless others.

- Reformer Martin Luther suffered from debilitating Meniere's Disease
- Helen Keller was stricken with an illness at 19 months - that left her blind and deaf.
- Charles Haddon Spurgeon – known as the “*Prince of Preachers*” - suffered from deep depressive episodes.

In our day:

- Apologist Justin Peters [whom many of us know from ShepCcon] was born with cerebral palsy.
- Pastor and author Tim Challies who writes one of the blogs I read daily – suffers from an excruciating nerve condition – requiring the aid of others or dictation programs to write his blog. And of course.
- Joni Eareckson Tada – who has been confined to a wheelchair for over 50 years - and yet has blessed the lives of thousands through the ministry of Joni and Friends.

We know and are familiar with these - very special men and women – because – of their notoriety.

And yet – there are countless thousands of unsung heroes of the faith – throughout the ages – some right here in our church - that God HAS used and IS using – NOT – IN=SPITE of their disabilities – as if detriments to Gods work - BUT THROUGH their disabilities – AS INSTRUMENTS IN THE HANDS OF A SOVEREIGN GOD.

The fact is – as we sit here today – there are many among us - of all ages - who have significant - special needs - both seen and unseen – for which we – as their brothers and sisters in Christ have the opportunity - and the responsibility – to help meet.

This is an important issue ALL of us - since – if we live long enough – **we will ALL** become disabled in some way - whether from **illness** – **accident** – or through the **natural process of aging**. [my biopsy]

The question we want to ask ourselves – is this – **are you** – and are **we collectively** - a **welcoming church** for those with disabilities – and their families..

...Those who may come here - searching for a church that will **welcome them without hesitation** - **accepting them for who God has created them to be** – and **willing to care for them** and **accommodate their needs** – **WORSHIP SIDE BY SIDE** - **as we would for anybody else!!**

### **ARE WE THAT CHURCH?**

I can tell you from experience that there are many families touched by disability - who rarely if ever - attend church – for a variety of reasons.

Some church facilities are simply **not accessible enough** – which has – at times - been **coupled with that churches - inability** or even **unwillingness** to adapt the building to their needs.

Others have felt – **misunderstood – unwelcomed** – and **singled out as different** – and **even asked to leave.**

And – most unfortunately – some have been confronted with the **discouraging** and **unbiblical theology** - that **holds them responsible for their disability** – **chastising them** - with the mistaken belief that - **if only they had enough faith – they would be healed.**

### **WE DON'T WANT TO BE THAT CHURCH – WE MUST NOT BE THAT CHURCH.**

So - with that mind – how **SHOULD WE** - respond to the Lord's mandate to **love and care** for **ALL** His people – **without reservation** - **without hesitation** and **without fear** - **as evidenced by our Lord Jesus – Himself?**

We certainly cannot do all that in one Sunday morning – so – for today - we are going to begin by looking **Toward a Theology of Disability.**

The word theology simply means “**the study of God.**” And today we want to understand **disability from God's perspective** – which **must be our perspective.**

Because – that is where it begins. It doesn't begin with those with special needs. It doesn't begin with us or even the church. It **begins with the heart of God.**

So – this morning we are going to consider our right response to disability in three ways:

- I.     God's Grace Toward Disability in the Bible [OUR EXAMPLE]**
- II.    God's High View of Human Life [OUR FOUNDATION]**
- III.   God's Sovereignty Over Disability [OUR ASSURANCE AND HOPE]**

**WE WILL DO THAT THROUGH MANY SCRIPTURES TODAY - LUKE 2:10 – “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **ALL the people.**”**

Before we go any further – let's **PRAY.**

## II. GOD'S GRACE TOWARD DISABILITY IN THE BIBLE – OUR EXAMPLE

As we read the Bible - we find that those with disabilities are prominent throughout both the OT and the New.

In fact - some of the most notable characters in the Bible - suffered some disability - although most were common men and women.

And in each case – we can't help but notice how a loving God shows each one – HIS GRACE AND MERCY - which is our first point this morning:

### WE TOO – ARE TO SHOW GOD'S GRACE AND MERCY TO THOSE WITH DISABILITIES

In the OT we read that *Moses* struggled with a SPEECH IMPEDIMENT of some kind. In his fear of facing Pharaoh – he complained – in Exodus 4:10 - “*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.*”

So – God sent Moses' brother Aaron to speak for Him – evidence that God brings others alongside to support those with special needs. [God does not dismiss the disabled – v.15 – “*I will be with your mouth and with his mouth.*”]

Probably the most notable - is *Mephibosheth* who was the son of Jonathan [King David's best friend] and grandson of King Saul. 2 Samuel 4:4 tells us that *Mephibosheth* – fell or was dropped by his nurse at age five - leaving him disabled in both feet.

And God showed him GRACE AND MERCY through King David. After becoming king - David sought out any relative of King Saul's – [not to kill...] to whom he could show kindness for the sake of his friend Jonathan.

With that - *Mephibosheth* was brought before the king - fearing for his life. But – in an act of loyalty, friendship, and compassion – David greeted him with open arms.

Even in a society that would have typically shunned him – David didn't dismiss Mephibosheth because of his disability - nor did he recoil from caring for him and loving him.

Instead - David welcomed him to his table – not as a guest – but - “like one of the king's sons.” [PAUSE]

Twice – in 2 Samuel 4 and again in 2 Samuel 9 – Samuel mentions that *Mephibosheth* was - “lame in both feet” – as if we are to take special notice – which we are.

*Because – this - very special relationship between Mephibosheth and David serves as a vivid metaphor for the kingdom of God, where the abled and disabled sit together side by side - as family at the King's table.* [PAUSE]

Examples from the **NT** include - the Apostle Paul who not only had a “***thorn in the flesh***” – Galatians 4 tells that he also suffered from some type of chronic eye problem as well.

And – of course – there were **the many** in the crowd who flocked to Jesus in the hope of being healed.

They were often the **downtrodden** – and **marginalized** in society. Many were **despised and ostracized** - by family, friends and even the religious leaders - **as sinful - defiled** and **unclean**.

### **BUT IN JESUS – THEY FOUND A HEART OF LOVE – COMPASSION – HOPE AND HEALING.**

There was ***blind Bartimaeus*** on the road to Jerusalem in **Mark 10** who - even as the crowd tried to silence him as an **unwanted annoyance** - **cried out to Jesus for mercy**.

And Jesus – out of ***love and compassion*** – **STOPPED** – called Bartimaeus to come to Him – and restored his sight.

And - there was the woman – in **Luke 8** - who had ***suffered from a bleeding issue*** for more than 12 years. A malady that made her **ceremonially unclean** – **a woman no one dared touch - for fear of becoming unclean themselves**.

In desperation she reached out to Jesus and touched His robe - thinking – “***If I only touch his garment, I will be made well.***” Not only did Jesus **accept her touch** – **he welcomed it** – and because of her faith – He healed her.

**That reminds us of the importance of the COMPASSIONATE TOUCH OF A FRIEND.** Jesus was **never afraid to touch** – **or be touched** – not even by those who were – considered by society to be - **UNTOUCHABLE**.

In **Luke 5** we read of a man – **full of leprosy** – who had come to Jesus begging to be healed and made clean. **V.13** tell us that – “**<sup>13</sup> Jesus stretched out His hand --- and touched him, saying, “I will - be clean.”**”

Again - in **Mark 7** we read of a man brought to Jesus who was **deaf and had a speech impediment**. Jesus lovingly **touched his ears and touched his tongue** - “***And his ears were opened, his tongue was released.***”

And - in **John 13** - Jesus – **washed His disciple's feet** – a lowly and dirty job – normally reserved for the **lowest of slaves**. And yet Jesus – as an example of **love - humility - selflessness** and **servanthood** - washed their dirty feet **with his hands**.

And He calls on His people and His church to lovingly and humbly do the same. In **vv.14-15** – Jesus told His disciples – “***If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet...you also should do just as I have done to you.***” **[PAUSE]**

Sue and I experienced this firsthand in our missions' trips to the Middle East and South America - with *Wheels for the World* - where we rebuild – fit and distribute wheelchairs to children and adults those who have been disabled from many causes – birth defects and disease – accidents – from war – and even a man – shot, stabbed, and left for dead - by one of the drug cartels in Guatemala.

Our wheelchair mechanics and therapists often serve – while sitting in the dirt or on a dusty floor – handling the - often dirty feet and legs - of those who come.

Their gratefulness - is evident by the smiles on their faces and the tears in their eyes. And we are blessed as well.

Friends – we in the church – are to be the **HANDS AND FEET OF JESUS ON EARTH** until He comes again.

And - as His hands we must not be afraid to engage – to touch – to encourage - and minister to both the PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL needs of all those that God brings before us.

For the sake of Christ – and those in need - we must put aside whatever presuppositions we might have – we must put aside our fears and our discomforts – to willfully and loving serve everyone including - those with special needs – ***even as Jesus did.***

And - consider the fact that - Jesus washed the feet of ALL His disciples – and that included Judas who was about to betray Him – that is the love of Christ that we are to portray.

In Luke 7 we see Jesus heal - even the slave of a Roman centurion. And then Luke 8 we read of Jairus - a ruler in the synagogue – and who likely opposed Jesus – but came to Him – pleading with Jesus to heal His daughter.

Even though the young girl died before Jesus arrived – still – out of compassion – Jesus raised her from dead – showing us – how ***JESUS HAD COMPASSION FOR ALL*** - which is a major theme in the Gospel of Luke.

Luke – who was himself a Gentile - reveals the compassion of Jesus towards everyone - Jews and Gentiles – men, women, and children – the elite, the ordinary and the marginalized – the able and the disabled. ***That is why He came.***

As we celebrate Christmas – we read in Luke 2:9-11 – how an angel – proclaimed to the Shepherds - “***Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for - ALL - the people.***”

That is the **GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL** - that Jesus came to seek and to save – the lost. And - in His grace and Mercy – **Jesus - extends the call of the Gospel to ALL.**

In Matthew 28 and Mark 16 we find the ***Great Commission*** to “*Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.*”

And the **Gospel of Luke** includes in that mandate the call to the church to – reach out – in the name of Christ – to the disabled community.

Luke 14:12-24 is the ***Parable of the Great Banquet*** – and is the battle cry of ministries to the disabled including ***Joni and Friends***.

Although – in context - this parable is not specifically about disability – still – from it – we get a glimpse into the ***kingdom of God – the heart of God*** and His expectation for the ***hearts of His people***.

V.13 says – “*When you give a feast, invite the poor, the cripple, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed.*”

And - v.21 tells us that we are to – “*Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame*” – and – “***COMPEL*** the people to come.”

*As was typified by David's graciousness to Mephibosheth – and now at The Great Banquet - we see – in the words of Jesus Himself - that there are no exclusions in the Kingdom of God.*

*All of God's people - are invited - welcomed and fed at the King Jesus' table and therefore all must be invited, welcomed, and fed – IN THE KING'S CHURCH.*

## **FRIENDS - THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE – WHEREVER YOU FIND THOSE IN NEED – YOU FIND THE COMPASSIONATE HEART OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST.**

Throughout the Gospels we read that:

- Jesus had ***compassion*** on the crowd because they had not eaten – so He fed them (Mark 8:2).
- He had ***compassion*** on the sick, the blind, the lame – so He healed them (Matt. 4:14).
- Matthew 9:36 tell us that Jesus had ***compassion*** on the crowd – because they were they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd – so He gave Himself to be their ***Great Shepherd***.

## **JESUS HAD COMPASSION ON THE LOST AND THOSE IN NEED – AND WE ARE TO HAVE THE SAME HEART.**

Colossians 3:12 calls on each one of us – to - “*Put on then, as God's chosen ones... compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...*”

*And out of our compassionate hearts - we are to REACH OUT to the disabled – to COMPEL them to come – AND THEN welcome them – include them - care for them and love them...for the sake of those in need - for the sake of the church – for the sake of Christ.*

**BECAUSE ALL HUMAN LIFE IS PRECIOUS TO THE LORD**

### **III. GOD'S HIGH VIEW OF HUMAN LIFE - OUR FOUNDATION**

In 1984 – President Ronald Regan proclaimed January 22<sup>nd</sup> as National Sanctity of Human Life Day.

This day was set aside - in response to the abortion epidemic that – despite the overturning of Roe v. Wade – continues – especially in California where those seeking abortions are not only welcome – but invited to come. [recent Newsome billboard – Mark 12:31 – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.”]

How unfortunate it is – that our world – our nation – our state – even some churches – MISREPRESENT – IGNORE – and even SUBVERT the biblical teaching - that all human life is – DIGNIFIED AND SANCTIFIED BY GOD.

*So - what does this have to do with a theology of disability? - EVERYTHING.*

A proper theology of disability begins with the high view – GOD'S VIEW – of the sanctity of ALL human life.

I am not a politician - and this is a politically charged issue. But I believe – that we have - in this country - a truly hypocritical view of the sanctity of life.

ONE ON THE ONE HAND – MANY IN THIS COUNTRY WORSHIP – YES, WORSHIP – A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE WHILE – AT THE SAME TIME – DENYING THE RIGHT TO LIVE TO THE UNBORN – WHO HAVE NO CHOICE.

AS IT RELATES TO DISABILITY – ONE THE ONE HAND – we have the Americans with Disabilities Act – that prohibits discrimination based on disability. In many ways – it has done that.

At the same time – one of the societal and medical answers to reducing or eliminating disability – IS ABORTION.

Studies vary widely as to the prevalence of abortion – following a pre-natal diagnosis of disability. However – a March 2022 report from the US Congress Joint Economic Committee estimates that 60-90% of children with a preborn diagnoses with Down Syndrome are aborted compared to 18% of all pregnancies ending in abortion.<sup>1</sup>

In Denmark it is 95%<sup>2</sup> and in Iceland it is nearly 100%. And that concerns only - Down's Syndrome [prevalence of testing – opens pandoras box for testing for other prebirth disabilities].

But the sanctity of life issue with disability is not limited to abortion. As many of you know – our son Jared was born with Spina Bifida. We were told on the day of his birth that he would be paralyzed for life – not something we were prepared to hear.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/repsyndrome0and-social-apitol-assessing-the-costs-of-selective-abortion>

<sup>2</sup> The Atlantic, December 2020 Issue

Nor were we prepared for what came next - that we would be given the option to deny treatment to our newborn son – **with the hope that he would die.**

**Ours is only one of MANY similar stories.** We personally know of a **young woman with Down's Syndrome** who had been denied a life-saving - heart-lung transplant by a major <sup>3</sup>university hospital - solely based on her disability... even though she was **living independently** – was **able to drive** her car and **hold down a job.**

Thankfully – a protection and advocacy group – took up her cause – and the surgery was approved.

I read in an article several years ago – of a **young man named Chris** - who had been admitted to a hospital - suffering from a **debilitating neurological disorder.**

Chris was totally competent in mind – and expressed a desire to receive necessary life-sustaining treatment - and yet the hospital administration initially refused – based on his condition.

There are many more examples we could site and - we haven't talked about the fact that California is **one of eleven** so called - “**right to die**” states – that allow doctor assisted suicide - and how that affect the disabled community.

We need to stop here just for a moment to acknowledge that - those who have found themselves in these - **oh-so-difficult circumstances** – **[to choose an abortion or deny medical treatment]** rarely intend to be heartless nor cruel – and remember that – **these circumstances arise in Christian families, too.**

Many – even most – of those who have had to make these most **agonizing – life and death decisions** have done so – **in the moment** - with what seemed best.

But – we take heart knowing that – **regardless of circumstance** - our Lord is always ready to **forgive** - **comfort** and **care** for them - **as we in the church must be as well – without judgment.**

**WE ARE NOT TO STAND BACK AND CAST STONES.** But – rather - come alongside them offering **love and emotional and spiritual support and care.**

We have already seen from Colossians 3:12 that we are to put on - “**Compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...**” **And these situations are no different.**

And from Galatians 6:2 we are to – “**Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.**” And with that – be the loving church God calls on us to be.

What we need to understand - this morning is that life must never be determined – by **a perception** of how much a person might **contribute to this world** or - what is often termed **“quality of life.” [often the reasoning]**

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Both are subjective terms that says – what I deem, the world deems, or culture deems to be valuable – is the standard for what is truly valuable.

The world might think that being blind diminishes one's quality of life and yet – hymn writer Fanny Crosby – wrote – “*If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me.*”

And - you might think that being confined to a wheelchair for more than five decades – would cause a person to feel slighted in life - and yet - Joni Earekson Tada has said many times that she would never trade her intimate relationship with Jesus for the ability to walk.

She writes – “*My wheelchair, more than anything else, has become the theology textbook that has shown me so much about the sustaining grace of God.*”

Their testimony and the testimonies of so many others show us that all lives must be treated with respect and dignity – for all life emanates from and is sustained by God – therefore all human life has intrinsic value.

That is where a **PROPER THEOLOGY OF DISABILITY** begins – with the **SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE.**

*a. Created in the Image of God*

If you have your Bibles – you may want to turn with me to the **book of Genesis – CHAPTER 1.**

When we speak of the sanctity of life – we mean that – all human life has been sanctified by God – that is – mankind has been set apart and is distinct from the rest of creation.

We won't read - the whole chapter - you know it well. But – when we consider the sanctity of life – consider these things – **FROM HOLY SCRIPTURE**.

In v.3 we read – “*And God said – Let there be light and there was light.*” With amazing creative power - God simply spoke light into existence.

That is God's pattern for the first five days of creation. All things - God spoke into existence - by the power of His word – and God declared it – **GOOD**.

But then we come to v.26, and we read this – “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness.”

As we read that - it feels like God paused the creation narrative – to draw attention to what was to come - that man would not be like the rest of His creation.

*And that is made clear in Genesis 2:7.* God doesn't speak man into existence as He does with the rest of creation – instead - He “**FORMED the man of dust from the ground.**”

In other words - **God shaped man with His own hands – so to speak.**

And after forming man into the special creation – he was to be - God - “**breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living creature.**”

All living creatures are given life by God – but only the man was given **God's own** - “*breadth of life.*”

The Hebrew word for **spirit** is **ruach** meaning - “**wind, breath or spirit**” – and describes **an eternal soul.**

Then - **God created woman out of the man** – and - she too would **bear the image of God** – and have an **eternal soul.**

He commanded them to be fruitful and multiple – to reproduce of their own kind – **CHILDREN** – who would **also bear the image of God.** **And God said – it was [WHAT?] - VERY GOOD.**

We see further evidence that **God set man apart from the rest of creation** – in Genesis 2 – where He prepared for them a garden - placed them in it - and **gave them DOMINIAN – OR RULE** over the rest of His creation.

Some 3000 years later - King David – marveling at the **majesty of the Lord** - wrote – in Psalm 8 – “**What is man that you are mindful of him...you have ...crowned him with glory and honor.** ‘**You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.**”

**So – what does it mean to be “made in the image of God?”**

Simply put – it means that God created men and women - to **be a REFLECTION OF HIMSELF** – meaning that – although imperfectly – we **share in God's nature.**

From creation – God shares with man - some of His divine attributes – the **ability to love** – to **have compassion** – to **communicate [to name only a few]** – that allows us to have a **unique and personal – intimate - relationship with God** – **and with each other** – **THAT IS NOT AFFORDED THE REST OF CREATION.**

And because all human beings are **created in the image of God** – **it is imperative** that we **view one another as CREATED EQUALS** – treating one another with **RESPECT AND DIGNITY** – as co-bearers of God's image – **an image that cannot be diminished** – **NOT EVEN BY DISABILITY.**

**The question then arises – WHEN DOES A PERSON ASSUME THE IMAGE OF GOD? – asked another way – WHEN DOES “LIFE” BEGIN?**

All other arguments notwithstanding – the **truth of God's word** makes it clear – that **LIFE BEGINS AT CONCEPTION** – making even the unborn – **LITTLE IMAGE BEARERS OF GOD.**

We will talk about God's sovereignty in just a minute – but we note here:

**BECAUSE GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER ALL CREATION – BECAUSE GOD IS THE GIVER AND SUSTAINER OF LIFE (John 1:3) - GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER CONCEPTION.**

Psalm 139 is a psalm of praise to the **SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**. It speaks to the intimate relationship that God has **PURPOSEFULLY** established with all mankind – as **He PERSONALLY creates** - each and every person – giving them life – **IN THE WOMB**.

VV.13-16 reads – “**You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.** <sup>14</sup> **I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...** <sup>16</sup> **Your eyes saw my unformed substance.**”

We also know that life begins at conception – as the Bible refers to both the **born and unborn** as - **babies - as children** – giving them **full personhood**:

- Genesis 25:21 – tells us that Isaac’s wife Rebekah conceived – and “**the children - struggled together within her**.”
- Luke 1:41 – “**When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting – the BABY leaped in her womb.**”
- And – of course – Mary is said in Luke 2:5 – to be “**with child.**”

There are even instances where the unborn child – **IS KNOWN** - and **EVEN NAMED** by God:

- The Lord told the *Prophet Jeremiah* - “**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.**”
- Zechariah – the husband of Elizabeth was told by God that – he would **have a son** who was to be **named** – “**John.**” [John the Baptist]
- And *Mary* – was told by the angel that – “**you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.**”

All this and more – make it clear – **BIBLICALLY** - that life - begins at conception – that the “**unborn**” child – **IS NOT A SOMETHING BUT A SOMEONE** - giving even the **newest and smallest unborn child** - **dignity and sanctity** – **AS AN IMAGE BEARER OF GOD.**

***How important dare we to God? Human life is so precious*** – so **valuable** to **HIM** – that the He sent His only Son Jesus – who was - “**Born in the likeness of men.**” <sup>8</sup> **And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**”

If God is so – “**mindful of man**” – that He would sacrifice His only Son to provide the way to **ETERNAL LIFE – WITH HIM** - then we must treat **EVERY PERSON - born or unborn – male or female - white, black, or brown – able or disabled – with the DIGNITY – GRACE and RESPECT** - that all human life affords.

As members and attenders of GCBC we want you to know that this is the belief and commitment of this church. ***ARTICLE XVII – Statement of Faith*** - reads in part:

***“We teach the dignity and sanctity of all human life, including the preborn, the aged, the physically or mentally challenged, and every other stage or condition from conception through natural death (Gen. 9:6; Ps. 139:13-16). We teach every person as created in God's image must be afforded compassion, love, kindness, respect, and dignity.”***

#### IV. [READ] SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN DISABILITY – OUR FOUNDATION

Pastor Phil recently completed our sermon series on the attributes of God. And – one of those attributes – is that of God's **SOVEREIGNTY**.

By God's sovereignty – we mean that God is in **ABSOLUTE CONTROL OVER ALL THINGS**.

And – if we think it through – **TO BE GOD – GOD MUST BE SOVEREIGN OVER ALL THINGS.**

As *RC Sproul* was fond of saying – if there is even **one rogue molecule in the universe** that is out of God's control – God is not God.

That presents us with a dilemma. If God is truly sovereign – **then He must be sovereign over disability**. And that naturally leads to the question – as sovereign God – **WHY DOES HE ALLOW DISABILITY AND SUFFERING?**

I don't have to tell you that these are huge questions that have spawned thousands of sermons – books and conferences. And in the short time we have left this morning – we certainly won't even touch the surface.

But we can't just bypass the question either. So - let's talk about **the good news of God's sovereignty** – and it is good news!

**FRIENDS – IF GOD IS NOT SOVEREIGN – EVEN OVER DISABILITY AND SUFFERING – THERE IS NO PURPOSE IN IT – AND WE HAVE NO HOPE.**

First – **IS God truly sovereign over disability?** And the answer is a definite – **YES**.

As we spoke of earlier – we read in Exodus 4:1-17 how God called Moses to go before Pharaoh and demand that he let the Israelites go.

In His reluctance - Moses complained to the Lord in v.10 that – “**I am not eloquent...I am slow of speech and of tongue.**”

And then in v.11 – God makes this **definitive rebuttal** to Moses' complaint - “**I 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?”**

Here - God both **Asserts His sovereignty** and **takes responsibility** for Moses' speech issues and **by inference – ALL DISABILITY.**

Notice however – **GOD DOES NOT APOLOGIZE NOR TAKE THE BLAME** – and we should not presume to blame Him either - **as we often do.**

All **sickness - imperfection - disease** and **death** - are **symptoms of original sin**. Romans 5:12 reminds us that – “**Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin.**”

God created Adam and Eve with **communicable attributes** – we spoke of earlier - including – the **ability to reason** – and **VOLITION** – which is the **capability of conscious choice**.

They were given free access to everything in the Garden - with only one prohibition – they were not to eat of the *fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* - and if they did – *God clearly warned them – THEY WOULD DIE.*

But - they ignored God's warning – and chose to eat the fruit – and - with that - sin, disease, death – and disability entered the world.

In righteous judgment – God removed them from the perfection of the Garden and relocated them *into a world now tainted by sin.*

As *THE righteous and just* God – He could have *let sin take its natural course* which would have been the swift destruction of man. Instead – God – God showed them and all mankind – *HIS GRACE.*

Instead – out of His steadfast love for His people – God – in His sovereign power - has chosen to *allow - but restrain the effects of sin and death – FOR A TIME – until His perfect will and ultimate purpose for man is complete.*

And here is that good news of God's Sovereignty – the sovereign creator and sustainer of the universe – has - as we read in Ephesian 1:10 - *“a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in [Christ Jesus], things in heaven and things on earth.”*

...that time when He will gather His people to Himself when - *“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.”*

So - we take heart from that - knowing that the time is coming when Jesus will do away with every evil and suffering that ever existed. That is the – *sure promise – to every believer in Jesus Christ.*

*However - until then we all must live in an imperfect world.* However – but we find our hope in God's sovereignty – in that – through it all – He is in sovereign control over *every aspect of our lives* – every day.

Let's go back to Psalm 139 – that great Psalm of God's sovereign and intimate relationship that He has with all His people.

We have already seen in vv.13-14 - that each one of us – *was knit by God in our mother's womb and we have been - fearfully and wonderfully made – He gave us life – and His image.*

And He has not left the glory of His creation – *His image bearers* – to wander all alone until He returns.

We are told in opening verses - that our loving God - constantly *searches us* – and **HE KNOWS US – HE KNOWS YOU** *[think about being known personally by the Creator].*

He knows when you sit down and rise up – He knows your thoughts – every step you take – He even knows every word you will speak.

And then it says in v.5 – *“You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.”* That means that He has you in the palm of His protective hand – and nothing can pull you away from your loving and sovereign God.

And – then in v.16 we read this – “*In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.*”

Which is poetic way of assuring us that - God is intimately involved in every aspect of your day-to-day life – and the lives of ALL His people – from conception until death – which gives sanctity – dignity – meaning and purpose to ALL persons – in ALL circumstances - in ALL stages of life.

And think of this. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ this morning - Ephesian 1:4 – tells you that “He chose us in Him BEFORE the foundation of the world [even before you were conceived] ... In love <sup>5</sup> He predestined [you] for adoption to Himself as a son through Jesus Christ – ACCORDING TO THE PURPOSE OF HIS WILL. The praise of His glory.”

That means that God created you to be you – JUST AS YOU ARE - and more importantly – He created you – JUST AS YOU ARE – TO BE HIS!

*How great is God’s sovereignty in your life?*

With the time we have remaining – consider just a couple of the many ways in which God’s sovereignty manifests itself in the lives of His people touched by disability [all struggles]. The first is this:

i. [READ] God’s Sovereignty Over Disability Calms Hearts and Minds

Those touched by disability – very often struggle with troubling thoughts and fears that they are somehow responsible for their situation. They ask questions like – Did I do something to cause this? Am I an accident? Is my child a mistake?

*These painful questions are often accompanied by great anguish - and tears – that if left unanswered – can bring deep depression and anxiety that is – in itself disabling – robbing us of the joy of life and even destroy relationships.*

However - the SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD – even over the greatest of limitations - is the assurance – that those with disabilities - are NOT mistakes – rather – they were lovingly – and purposefully created – in God’s own image – FOR HIS PURPOSE.

If that is you this morning - **you are not an accident – you are an INTENTION.**

Some disabilities are caused by various kinds of accidents - that can cause tremendous guilt and blame. I’m guessing that Mephibosheth’s nurse struggled with the fact that she dropped the King’s grandson – disabling both feet.

And - some disabilities are the result of sinful lifestyles and behavior - such as alcohol and drug abuse that destroy mind and body – or result in the birth of a drug addicted baby.

However – the sovereignty of God – says that He understands and stands ready to assuage unnecessary guilt. The message is that God was no less sovereign over the accident – than He would have been had the accident never occurred.

And He is ready to forgive sin – when sin is the issue – forgiving all who come to Him in humble repentance - in faith and belief - knowing that He can and does – use - even these tragic situations for His perfect purpose.

I'd like to address parents of children with a disability - for a moment – although it applies to others as well. Parents – if you are struggling with the prospect of your child's future – ***put your trust in God's sovereignty.***

**If God was sovereign over the birth of your child – then He is sovereign over his or her future as well.**

Remember the words of **Jeremiah 29:11** that apply to both you and your child – “***For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.***”

ii. **[READ] God's sovereignty Gives a Purpose and Meaning to Disability**

**In discussing this sermon – my wife Sue - made the all-important point that – “God has a plan for every believer that far exceeds our limitations.”**

And that clearly born out in Scripture. **Ephesians 2:10** – tells us that – “***10 We are His workmanship [there is God's creation], created in Christ Jesus for good works [there's the purpose], which God prepared beforehand [there is God Sovereignty], that we should walk in them [there is the call to service].***”

One of those PURPOSES that He calls us to – is to be His light in the **lives of others** – wherever we are – **showing the love and compassion** of Christ **to others in need - to encourage** – to **offer hope** – to be an **example of what it means to overcome in Christ - to others who are struggling - to show God's grace in adversity** – and even to **redeem lost souls**.

God allows disability – and He did so for a reason – and He will use those disabilities for the sake of His kingdom.

Consider this – **IF GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER DISABILITY – HE IS SOVEREIGN OVER ABILITY AS WELL.** And I don't mean the difference between two individuals – I mean **within each one of us**.

We all have our strengths and weaknesses, and God often uses our **abilities alongside our disabilities**.

And He also uses our **disabilities to reveal our strengths**. We are reminded of Paul's words in **2 Corinthians 12:10** that in Christ – “***When I am weak, then I am strong.***”

**And if God uses our disabilities – they are not really disabilities at all – RATHER, THEY ARE TRULY INSTRUMENTS IN THE HAND A SOVEREIGN GOD.**

**Joni Earekson Tada** - is a good example. In His sovereignty – Joni has been in a wheelchair for more than five decades – survived breast cancer twice – and COVID.

**BUT THAT IS NO HINDRANCE TO THE LORD.**

He used her accident and her wheelchair – to strengthen and focus - Joni's many gifts and talents - that have brought hope, joy and meaning - through the Gospel of Jesus Christ - to thousands. [leaving for DR on the 27<sup>th</sup> – New Director, Roberta Dunn – in the foyer.

Which brings us to this point - Scripture tells us that every man, woman, and child – including **those with special needs** – have been given **SPIRITUAL GIFTS** with which to build up the body of Christ.

**1 Corinthians 12:7** says – “*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” That common good – is **the common good for the church.**

And that means that God **has a place – has a purpose – has a role** - for every member of the body of Christ. Every member is **equally necessary** if the body is to function efficiently – and to grow. And when it does – it brings honor and glory to God.

So - in God’s sovereignty He uses our disabilities and our limitations to serve others and to serve the church.

And in His most intimate relationship with us and His desire to grow us into the image of Christ - God always uses our disabilities for our - **personal - spiritual growth and wellbeing.**

We see how the Lord did this in the life of the Apostle Paul.

Sometimes He uses our struggles to cause us to **focus only on Christ.**

At his conversion - **Acts 9** - the risen Christ spoke to Paul through a **brilliant light that blinded Paul for three days** – **giving Paul time to contemplate His calling to faith and coming ministry.**

Other times – the Lord gives our disabilities to cause us to **rely solely on Him for everything.** In **2 Corinthians 12** – we read of Paul’s infamous **thorn in the flesh** that the Lord refused to remove.

And Paul knew why. **In 7** he understood that it was there – “*to keep me from becoming conceited.*” And you remember the Lord’s answer – for refusing to remove the thorn. He said – “*My grace is sufficient for you. [HOW?] – for my power is made perfect in – WEAKNESS.*”

Paul faced **adversity after adversity** throughout his life and ministry – including the chronic eye problem.

As in Paul’s life – God uses difficulties and even disabilities in our lives **to mature our faith and to sanctify us – that is – grow us in the likeness of Christ.**

Paul’s conclusion was this – **Philippians 4:13** - “*In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance, and need.*”<sup>13</sup> **I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**”

And – as God is sovereign over disability **[all struggles and adversity]** – those disabilities have eternal value through Jesus Christ – as Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 4:17-18** - “<sup>17</sup> *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,*”<sup>18</sup> **as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”**

**Romans 8:28 – works through his curse to bless us...**

### *iii. All For His Glory*

And finally – God uses disability to bring Him glory. In **John 9** – Jesus healed the man born blind. This story encapsulates much of what we have been talking about today.

We read that – like Bartimaeus - the man was a beggar – an outcast – but still **Jesus stopped – touched the man's** eyes – “**anointing them with mud**” [as we are told] – and out of **compassion** – gave the man sight for the first time.

Then - in a **mistaken theology of disability** – Jesus' disciples asked the question still heard today – “**who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?**”

Jesus' answer is telling as we consider His **sovereignty and divine purpose** - “**It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.**”

## V. CONCLUSION

***So, what are we to do with all this?***

- “**Disability**” vs “**Special Needs.**” [**can't be done – must be done**]
- Have the compassionate heart of Jesus for those with disabilities.
  - Compassion - not pity
- Care for those in the body
- They are not their disability – they are persons – furthermore – they are brothers and sisters in Christ – equal and gifted in every respect as all believers are - Encourage them to use their gifts
- Invite others to come to share in the love of Christ and the care of the Body
- Inclusion – not addition
  - Not because of difference – but **because of relationship**- our mutual fellowship in Christ.
- ADDITION – 10/27 to DR – pray for us and the good folks we are called to serve
- New Director – Roberta Dunn – w/Sue --- JAF table in the foyer

**LET'S PRAY**