



## More than Conquerors?: Romans 8:26-39 & Disability

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**The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

**By Jaime Clark-Soles**



*“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (Rom 8:37 NRSV)*

I hope you've all read or seen *The Fault in Our Stars* by now. Each of the main characters has a disability: Gus has prosthesis after his leg is amputated; Hazel remains on an oxygen tank due to faulty lungs; Isaac becomes blind during the course of the movie. I wonder how this verse from Romans would play with Hazel, Gus, Isaac, or anyone who loves them:

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28 NRS)?

Really? Gus, who overtly expresses room for belief in God, bites it at age 18, leaving his moribund girlfriend and freshly blind friend to mourn in the wake of his death. Is this what “all things working together for good” looks like from God’s perspective?

Maybe I’m overly sensitive to the passage given the fact that a few weeks ago, I co-taught a class on “Scriptural Representations of Disability” with my colleague, Jeremy Schipper, in the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability. Our class of 28 people included a number of folks in wheelchairs, some people who are blind, some who have cerebral palsy but are not in wheelchairs, some with TBI (traumatic brain injury), some who are non-disabled, and some who have loved ones with a disability. A stated theme of the entire Institute that week was: “Disability as Question and Questioner.” Indeed.

The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) took effect in 1990. But some of us individuals (including me) and churches are still playing catch up (or, worse, ignoring it altogether). Is your church’s choir loft wheelchair accessible? Are people with physical or cognitive disabilities tapped for lay or ordained ministry (i.e., “ministered with”) or are they simply “ministered to,” if that? Do people with disabilities have agency and voice about how best to do church, or are they infantilized and patronized by the non-disabled? Does your church regularly provide an interpreter for those who are deaf? Do you and your church use language that equates a person with their disability as if their disability is the only significant aspect of their life (i.e., “the blind man, the lame woman, the deaf girl”)? Do you use disability as a metaphor for that which is negative and needs to be “overcome” (e.g., “blind faith”; “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see”; “he who has ears let him hear”)? Here are some things that I, as a non-disabled person, have learned from listening and participating in the questioning conversation.

1. It can be useful to distinguish between impairment (a physiological, medical phenomenon which the person may or may not find necessary to cure in order to have quality of life) and

disability (a social phenomenon). A society disables people with impairments when it refuses to take steps to ensure that all members of society have equal access to the benefits of that society, including education, transportation, employment, architecture that can be navigated, political power, etc., all entitlements that people with “normate” bodies usually take for granted.

2. “Cure” and “healing” are not synonyms. “Cure” refers to the elimination of impairment and is experienced at the individual level. “Healing” refers to a person who has experienced integration and reconciliation to self, God, and the community. “Healing” may or may not involve a “cure.” Just as impairment is experienced on an individual basis, so is a “cure.” Just as a disability is a communally imposed limitation, so also “healing” is a communally based liberation. Impairment and disability are not synonyms.

3. People with disabilities want justice, not pity. But non-disabled people tend toward pity because justice-making requires more of them.

4. Some non-disabled people deploy Biblical texts, such as Romans 8:28, to instruct people with disabilities that God has made them disabled for a reason. The “reasons” proffered are multifarious. For example:

- a test of faith for the good of the person with a disability
- an “inspiration” to everyone else about the power of steadfast endurance and the ability to “conquer” adversity
- a set-up in which God will eventually cause a cure and, by doing so, will show God’s miraculous power and draw people to the Christian faith.

Romans 8:28 involves a translational conundrum. There are at least three options. Notice the difference in meaning.

1. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.
2. God makes all things work together for good.
3. In all things, God works for good.

The first translation implies that Christians should be grateful for “all things” (even suffering) because all of them are part of a recipe for good. The second emphasizes that while not all things work together for the good on their own, God can shape things toward the good. The third one emphasizes that no matter what, God works toward good. To say that God can redeem a sorry situation is quite different from saying that God causes a sorry situation. I am grateful that the former is always true. As Bethany Hamilton shared in the movie, *Soul Surfer*, after having her arm bitten off by a shark, “It was a terrible thing that happened to me, but so many good things have come out of it that it has turned into a beautiful thing.”

Two important points related to disability are crucial here. First, not everyone who has an impairment finds it to be a sorry situation; that is, not every impairment needs to be overcome. But all disabling attitudes and practices are sorry situations that do need to be overcome. Second, Christians (especially non-disabled ones) should ask themselves how it is that God works for the good of justice for people with disabilities. As soon as we ask it, though, we will probably discover that God expects us to be doing the work quite proactively.

5. One hopes that an appeal to justice for the sake of justice is enough to compel Christians to pay attention to disability issues; if not, then raw self-interest just might. Unlike feminist or African American or LGBT positions (which are all legit angles, of course), every last one of us, if we live long enough, will eventually become people with disabilities.

In the end, the gospel levels us all, every last one of us, with the promise of hope. Not only did the Blessed Apostle Paul labor to come to terms with his “thorn in the flesh,” whatever that may have been, he also regularly lists his various hardships. But in his final magisterial letter, he proclaims:

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:38-39 NRSV).

As Hazel Grace and Gus would say: “Okay.”

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## **Study Questions**

1. How are people with disabilities integrated into your church? Are they “ministered with” or “ministered to”? Is the architecture of your church accessible to people who use wheelchairs?
2. The Apostle Paul struggled much with his “thorn in the flesh” (some scholars think he had eyesight issues; or epilepsy; or something else); three times he asked God to remove it but God said to him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NRS). Do you agree with Paul about this? Why or why not?
3. Most people with disabilities have had someone come up to them, out of the blue, and either ask to pray over them or state that with enough faith, they could be healed. What is your reaction to this?

## **Additional Reading**

- Eiesland, Nancy L. 1994. *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

- Schipper, Jeremy and Nyasha Junior. 2013. “Disability Studies and the Bible.” In Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner, eds. *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications*. Louisville: WJK. Pp. 21-38.
- Yong, Amos. 2011. *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.

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