

# Disability & the Church

BY JEFF STRAUB

John 5 tells us of a man paralyzed for thirty-eight years whom Jesus met at the pool of Bethesda. This man's lament was that he had no one to help him into the supposedly healing water. Whether or not the water had any therapeutic value, the great sorrow of this passage is the picture of a man disabled for nearly four decades with no one to assist him. When you are as disabled as this man apparently was, even daily living routines require help, sometimes significant help.

Quite likely, this man received help in his early life from his parents. The stark reality is that disabled children are generally cared for by their parents and family members, often until the parents age to a point when they can no longer provide help or death takes the child. In the case of significant disability, which apparently was the case with this man at the pool of Bethesda, his prospects for recovery seemed bleak. Only a miracle would improve his lot in life. So by the pool he waited, hoping to enter the water first when it stirred to gain the healing he thought the water provided. Happily, he met Jesus, and Jesus was the one who provided the healing.

The problem this narrative points out is that some people have great needs that are difficult to meet.

Years ago, when my wife and I were first dealing with our son's disability (he was born ten weeks premature and was diagnosed with cerebral palsy when he was about one year old), our Pentecostal neighbor, a pastor, offered to heal him. Whether he thought he could do the healing or that God would do the healing through him, I don't remember, but I didn't believe then and don't believe now in miraculous faith healers. The older generation of faith healers—Oral Roberts, Kathryn Kuhlman, etc.—are all dead, so I don't hold out much hope for divine healing in this world. Kuhlman died of heart issues at sixty-eight, and Roberts died after suffering pneumonia in his nineties. Even faith healers die, which seems odd if they supposedly have an inside track with God to gain physical healing. Isn't death our ultimate sickness?

God, of course, is free to do what He wishes with His creation, but the Bible is filled with examples of individuals who weren't miraculously healed. Paul, for example, had a thorn in the flesh, which many think may have been an issue with his eyes. He sought the Lord three times for an answer to his prayers, to no avail. "My grace is sufficient to you," God told him (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

While we believers pray for God to heal (and we should), we take our children to the best medical care we can find. Despite our prayer and our best efforts, the reality is

that my wife and I may have to live long term with a disabled child who becomes an adult. My wife and I are now in our thirty-third year of caring for our son. As we age, we increasingly need help bearing this burden. I hesitate even using the word *burden*, because our son does not want to be a burden to us and we don't think of him as a burden. Some burdens we happily bear, and others we would choose not to bear if we could. So where do we, as parents of a long-term disabled child who becomes an adult, look for help? What kind of help do we need? Who should we turn to and what should we expect of those people?

Before I even attempt to answer these questions, we need to understand that help for families who care for the disabled comes in many forms. Of course, there is the help that meets the disabled person's immediate needs. Some needs can be challenging and require medical training. In the case of our son, little actual medical training is needed, but his adult size and the degree of his disability make the meeting of his daily needs profound. So where do we turn and what should we expect from those we turn to?

In many states, perhaps all, personal care attendants can be hired with state support to assist parents like us. But the wages are often low and PCAs come and go. My son's needs remain constant. If a PCA is sick, decides the work isn't for that person, finds a better job with better pay, or gets tired of the job and just quits (we have had this happen more than once; one man quit fifteen minutes before his shift was to begin), what do we do?

First, perhaps help comes from family—siblings, parents, relatives. But what if you have no extended family nearby to help? In our case, our two other children live far from us, one in the South and the other in Africa. While the government is another resource for help, this help will likely be limited, restricted, and insufficient to meet a family's broad range of needs. Service organizations in the family's community may offer help too, but likely this help will also be limited. Neighbors are another source of help. Thankfully, we have a neighbor who will gladly respond to a call for something he can do—plow the driveway, cut the grass, dispose of our junk. When you are a long-term caregiver, every bit of assistance helps! A meal can cut down on work in the kitchen so time may be devoted



to the special needs of the disabled. The help may not be direct help *with* the disabled person, but indirect help is still help and is still welcome, very welcome.

This brings the challenge of the disabled to the door of the church—one of the greatest resources a Christian family should have at their hour of need. The Bible commands Christians to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). The idea of this verse is to help carry the weight. Caring long-term for a disabled person is a weight, but it can be made lighter by a compassionate Christian community. I need to point out that there is a difference between caring and helping. Many say they *care*, while a few actually *help*. Of course, not all are able to help, but all are in a position to care. We have four friends dealing with serious cancer in other parts of the world. We are too far removed to help meet their needs, but we can show we care through notes of encouragement and expressions of prayer.

In many cases, the help needed may require special training or physical strength. Many may wish to help, but if they lack the physical ability, they can do little to help. Still, others could help if they cared enough to do so. True Christian compassion is caring enough to see a need and considering what might be done to meet that need. If someone wants to help, what should that person do? Remember that any help would be a blessing to a family in need. By doing or attempting to do something, you show you truly care.

## True Christian compassion is caring enough to see a need and considering what might be done to meet that need.

I wonder, in the case of the man by the pool at Bethesda, if his lack of help came from indifference to his needs. It’s not *my* problem. He’s not *my* child. I’m too busy. It’s his burden to bear or his family’s. I don’t know how I could help. Someone else should step up. Where is the government? Aren’t there organizations that do this sort of thing? I have my own burdens to bear.

These attitudes show a general indifference. Of course, some truly cannot help, but all should at least care.

One evidence that the Christian community is failing in this area is that so few churches have meaningful, organized ministries for the disabled or their families. I once asked a pastor whose church had a family with two severely disabled children approaching adulthood what his church did to help that family. His reply? He looked at me rather blankly and said, “What do you mean?”

I’m not saying that his church had no specific plan in place, but it was an odd answer. Families with long-term disabled members carry unique burdens that never quit. My wife and I have been caring for our disabled son for thirty-two years with no end in sight. There is a good prospect that he will outlive both of us. One of the things that weighs heavily upon me is the question of who will care for him when my wife and I can no longer manage his care. Those days are fast approaching, and the concern is real. Here in Minnesota, where we call home, we have no safety net. If we suddenly died, as in a car accident, he would be taken to a hospital until the state could determine where to place him. Likely he would be placed in a nursing home with a minimum of care.

Sadly, many churches have no real burden to come alongside families like ours. Churches have many other ministry opportunities (or sometimes distractions) that consume their focus, so families like ours suffer silently. We are acquainted with a young family with an autistic son. The challenges these parents face with their son are complicated enough, but they also have healthy children to care for. Sometimes parents’ time is so consumed with their special needs child that their other children feel neglected. A loving church can come alongside the family to help these other children so the parents can meet the needs of the special needs child.

So what can you do if your church does not have a special needs ministry? Talk to the leadership, and offer to start a welcoming, open ministry for those who have special needs. Organize this ministry in advance of families with special needs attending. Be flexible. Your church services don’t need a deaf interpreter if no deaf attend, but your Sunday School may need a special class for an autistic child. Come alongside families who have a disabled child. What do they need, and what could you or your church do to help? Is there a way you can bear one another’s burdens? How can you show you care?



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# Resources for Your Church

## Ability Ministry

Informational and training videos to start or strengthen a disability ministry  
[abilityministry.com/disability-ministry-training-videos](http://abilityministry.com/disability-ministry-training-videos)

## Guidelight

Videos offering churches guidance to serve people with special needs and their families  
[theguidelight.org/training](http://theguidelight.org/training)

## Buddy Break

A respite program for special needs kids and their siblings while their parents get a break  
[nathanielshope.org](http://nathanielshope.org)

## Disability and the Church: A Vision for Diversity and Inclusion

by Lamar Hardwick (IVP, 2021)

## Every Child Welcome: A Ministry Handbook for Including Kids with Special Needs

by Katie Wetherbee and Jolene Philo (Kregel, 2015, [rbpStore.org](http://rbpStore.org))

## Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability

by Stephanie O. Hubach (P & R, 2020)

