

Joni Study Guide

Joni by Joni Eareckson Tada

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Plot Summary

The true story of Joni Eareckson, "Joni," is the account of her life after a tragic diving accident that leaves her as a life-long quadriplegic. Joni (pronounced "Johnny") authored the book with help from writer Joe Musser, sharing her intimate thoughts, physical challenges and psychological trials.

Joni begins life as the youngest child of Johnny and Lindy Eareckson. Joni leads a charmed life—popular, smart and athletic. She represents everything any eighteen-year-old girl might aspire to. After graduation from high school Joni is set to go to college in the fall having earned a partial scholarship at a prestigious college. However, fate steps in when the competitive, athletic and fearless young woman dives into the Chesapeake Bay. Although she does not lose consciousness, Joni lands helpless on her back at the bottom of the bay after ramming her head in a large rock. She cannot move but determines that she must be caught in something—perhaps a fisherman's net.

Just as the immobile Joni is about to run out of air, her sister, Kathy, spots her under the water. Kathy rushes to her and with help pulls her to shore. Before the gravity of Joni's condition is apparent, Kathy chides her younger sister for diving in such a shallow area. Once on shore, Joni is confused—she still cannot move. The orderlies who rush her to the nearby hospital are mute when she asks how long her temporary paralysis will last. The nurses at the hospital are no more help; in fact, Joni finds them cruel and heartless. They cut her new bathing suit off and several hours after admission, shave her head for surgery, her sunlit blond curls falling to the floor beneath. She cannot lift her arms to stop their actions—she is helpless.

Joni grows up in a devout Episcopalian family. Jesus Christ has always been part of the Eareckson's life; however, just before her accident, Joni feels empty and uncertain. She begins to argue with her parents and allow her grades to drop, neither of which has ever happened before. Her attitude is negative and demanding. Joni takes stock of herself and does not like what she sees. She turns to the Lord and fervently prays that God will do something to change her and turn her life around. Soon after those prayers, Joni has the tragic diving accident. At first she wonders if she had received her answer; later, she knows that she did.

Joni relates every painful and depressing phase towards final acceptance of the new, unwanted life inflicted upon her. Paralleling this journey is her quest in faith. Despite her devout Christian upbringing, Joni—as anyone would—immediately following the accident is not able to understand how the God she loves could allow her life to experience such a miserable turn. Yet, just as her tenacity enables her to cope and live with her physical condition, she continues to cling to her faith and eventually is able to trust in the Lord again and grow in His love.

The miraculous journey that Joni succeeds in is an inspiration to one and all. After the tough hurdle of accepting her condition as permanent, Joni finds a way to become a role model to not only others in similar physical states but to other young people who



are trying to find a path to God. Joni is a legend in her own time. The book ends with Joni guest-speaking before a Christian youth group. She is positive and upbeat. She tells her astonished young audience that she is truly happy and fulfilled in life. Finding God was the purpose of her harrowing journey.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1

Joni Eareckson dives into shallow water in the Chesapeake Bay. Her head rams into a large rock throwing her into a state of fear and confusion. Joni lands on her back on the bottom. She cannot move and determines that she must be caught in a fisherman's net. She is panicked as she is running out of air. Finally, her sister, Kathy, discovers her and pulls her out. Joni is frightened when she discovers she cannot feel anything below her shoulders. She begs her sister to hold her hand and is panicked when she realizes that her sister already is holding her hand.

The doctors decide Joni needs immediate surgery. She drifts in and out of consciousness after the operation. During this period, Joni experiences drug-induced hallucinations and nightmarish dreams and memories. In one recurring nightmare, an old high school boyfriend condemns her to death and decapitates her. In brief windows of reality, Joni fears she is losing her mind. Tongs are on either side of Joni's head, restricting her from moving the single area of her body that is still alive. Joni finds herself in a Stryker Frame, a restrictive canvass device where orderlies and nurses turn her over every two hours.

Through snatches of conversations, Joni is able to determine the physical conditions of some of her ICU "roommates." One man, handcuffed to his bed, killed his wife then tried to kill himself. The word was he wouldn't "make it." Another girl is in a coma resulting from a car accident. A young man, Tom, had broken his neck in a diving accident. It never occurs to Joni that she, too, broke her neck—no one told her. A kind ICU nurse happily passes notes between the two young patients. Unfortunately, Tom's resuscitator fails and though the doctors and nurses make every effort to keep him alive with mouth-to-mouth efforts, Tom expires. When Joni hears the words that Tom is dead, she begins to fear for her own survival. Unlike Tom, she can breathe on her own. But, she thinks, what if the tongs holding her brain steady slip—what if her catheter fails or if her IV fails to provide her the sustenance to keep her alive.

Another young paralyzed man is brought in to ICU; however, several hours after his arrival he, too, is pronounced dead. The fear of dying grips Joni and remains a constant during her stay. She hears doctors discuss her condition describing her as having total quadriplegia, caused by a fracture between the fourth and fifth cervical levels. Joni convinces herself that like the other two patients, she is likely to die in the ICU.

Chapter 2

Joni begins to think she may not not die in ICU. She sees patients either die or leave ICU but she remains. Joni neither gets better nor is sent home. Joni's thoughts turn to



better times—to her happy, pre-accident life . There are only happy memories of family and friends. The family had never experienced a tragedy before. When Johnny, her upbeat father, visits, he tries to show her confidence and spirit, but Joni can see the fear and sadness in his eyes. Joni's mom, Lindy, is the strong parent. She refuses to leave the hospital until Joni is out of danger, catching naps on the couch or in a chair. Visits from Joni's sisters help Joni endure her hospital stay. Joni is especially close to her sister, Jay.

Before the accident and as a young teenager, Joni joins a Christian youth group called "Young Life." Through her association with this group, Joni's Christian beliefs begin to mature. She comes to realize that popularity and athletic abilities are secondary to Jesus, who was there to save her. Joni's high school sweetheart, Jason Leverton and she agreed to date others since they were unable to control their passion for each other. At Jason's suggestion, Joni begins seeing one of Jason's friends, Dick Filbert. In her senior year Joni spends time with both boys, trying to maintain just platonic friendships with them. Even though she has been a Christian for several years, she still sees the sins of her ways. She is tempted by the flesh with Jason. With Dick, she is possessive and jealous. Her grades begin to slip and she becomes engaged in arguments with her parents. Joni prays to God that He will do something to change her and turn her life around. Joni says these prayers just prior to her accident. Lying in the ICU, she wonders if God is answering her prayer.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Joni's two close male friends, Dick and Jason, have disparate reactions to Joni's accident. Dick tries to be positive. He tells her that God is working in her life, leading her down His path. Jason begins to lose faith in God, telling Joni she needs to fight to get better and not attribute it to an act of God. In the hospital, the doctors order Joni to have a myelogram procedure. Joni's spinal fluid is drained and replaced temporarily with dye. She is turned upside down and placed in other various positions during the process. Joni winds up with a severe headache after the grueling process and remains sedated for several days.

Dr. Sherrill tells Joni and her parents that she will never be able to attend college. He tells her the most difficult hurdle ahead of her is a psychological one. She should expect depression to settle in as friends stop dropping by. When they ask Dr. Sherrill when Joni will walk again, he ends their confusion. He tells them that her injury is permanent. Joni will never walk again; however, she may regain some use of her hands. Joni's mom turns away, trying to hide her tears. As the doctor leaves, gloom settles over Joni's room. Joni has her first thoughts that death may be the better alternative to her new reality.

Two high school girlfriends stop by to see Joni. These two girls have not seen her since before the accident. They are so shocked by Joni's appearance that they run from the room. Joni can hear one sobbing and the other one retching just outside her door. When her good friend, Jackie, visits she forces her to hold a mirror up in front of her. Jackie reluctantly does so and Joni is shocked by her awful appearance. She has dropped from 125 to 80 pounds. She looks like a skeleton with sunken, dark-ringed eyes and yellow, jaundiced skin. Joni begs Jackie to help her commit suicide. Of course, her good friend refuses to do so.

Joni begins physical therapy and is told by the therapist that they will be focusing on training the active muscles in her shoulders and back to lift her arms. Since her general health is improving, the therapist tells her she will soon be moved to Greenoaks Rehabilitation Center. Joni is still determined to walk again.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Finally after three and a half months in City Hospital, Joni is transferred to Greenoaks. When the orderlies transport her, Joni is overjoyed to be in the outside air again. Even though the orderlies tell her all they smell is pollution, she breathes it in with joy. Joni is quite disappointed when she arrives at Greenoaks. She had built it up in her mind and expected a beautiful building on rolling green hills. Instead, the old, rambling brick building looks more like an industrial complex. Inside is no better.

Joni's parents meet her in her room, a small ward consisting of four other girls around her age. The conditions on the inside of the building are worse than the outside. Her parents do not stay long—Joni knows that her horrid new living space had them on the verge of tears again. Joni introduces herself to the other girls. Ann Wilson is a cantankerous young paralysis victim. She had been at City and was constantly compared to the "great Joni," so she was not happy to see Joni in the flesh. Several of the other girls had accidents similar to Joni's. One girl, Denise, is a multiple sclerosis victim.

Joni is greatly disappointed that none of the patients with injuries similar to her injuries are walking. She is still determined that she will one day walk. Joni is jarred when her roommate, B.J., tells her that she had been there two years. B.J. warns her not to become too close to people at Greenoaks. She tells her that she will find it a lot harder on the outside dealing with wheelchairs, braces and the like. Patients are glad to return to Greenoaks after a visit—it's a lot easier at Greenoaks. B.J. emphasizes that Joni should focus on maintaining her outside friendships to give her the incentive to leave Greenoaks.

Joni especially loves visits from her sister, Jay. Since the grooming of the patients is not a priority at Greenoaks, Jay volunteers to wash all the girls' hair once a week. The gesture is greatly appreciated by Joni and the other four girls. A friend from high school and Young Life, Diana White, begins visiting Joni frequently. Joni enjoys Diana's company and the scriptures she reads to her friend. Jason has stopped visiting Joni. He apparently has met another girl with whom he has become serious. Dick is not able to visit often because of school. Jackie is going through a personal problem herself and her visits have tapered off.

Joni begins physical therapy. She tries to keep a positive attitude during her sessions. The therapists explain to her that they will work her muscles so that they do not atrophy. If the muscles atrophy, they will become stiff and will cause her limbs to retract and become twisted. Exercising the muscles will also increase blood circulation. The first attempt to get Joni in a sitting position is sabotaged by her nausea. The therapists explain that since she has been in a horizontal position for six months, the blood will naturally rush down when they try to have her sit up causing nausea and even



blackouts. The therapists tell her she will gradually be able to sit up and eventually will overcome the side effects.

Joni's church, the Bishop Cummings Reformed Episcopal Church, is holding an all-night prayer service for her recovery. The morning after, Joni is hoping for a miracle that does not come. Perhaps God is still testing her faith.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

After Joni is finally able to sit up, she is given the choice of spending one day at home. She chooses Christmas day. She is so excited about going home that she is unable to sleep the night before. Her sister Jay drives to Greenoaks to pick her up. The orderlies instruct Jay on safety specific precautions when driving with a quad. A quadriplegic cannot sit up alone. If the car swerves or stops suddenly, the quad will be carried by momentum. They can hit their heads or suffer other injuries. The orderlies show Jay how to strap her sister in to avoid injury.

Joni's Dad and Jay carry Joni into the house. Since it would have been impossible for Joni to be carried up the narrow stairway up to her old room, her mom, who had gotten a hospital bed, turns the dining room into Joni's room for the night. The sights and smells of Christmas were at first exhilarating to Joni. Although the visits from family and friends, including Dick, were at first happily anticipated by Joni, a sadness hangs over the gathering. Christmas would never be the same again. Memories of past Christmases only make the current celebration more depressing.

Joni is told that she will not be allowed to visit home again for quite a while. Her bedsores had all broken open from her long hours in a sitting position. Her bones are protruding through the skin. The doctors decide she needs an operation to shave down the damaging bones. The surgeon tells her she does not need to be anesthetized but asks her if she wants to be shielded from seeing the operation. She tells the doctor she can take it but when she sees the blood and hears the scraping of her bones, she looks away and sings as loudly as she can.

Soon after the operation, one of her incisions breaks wide open and she is again placed in the Stryker Frame to allow healing. Joni begins to think of suicide again, hoping she'll one day be able to use her hands so she can take her life. A physical therapist encourages Joni to learn to use her mouth to write or type. She is aghast at the thought, deeming it degrading and disgusting. A bitter attendant, Mrs. Barber, becomes violent with Joni and badly injures her arm. After her mom tells the supervisor about the incident, Mrs. Barber comes to Joni at night and threatens her again.

Dick and Joni acknowledge that they cannot plan a future together and take a try at being just friends. He visits when he can and often reads scripture to Joni. Joni, however, is so distraught that she begins to become bitter and question her faith. Another quadriplegic, Jim Pollard, becomes friendly with Joni and introduces her to various philosophies including existentialism and agnosticism. Despite Pollard's efforts to draw her away from Christianity, Joni is not quite able to let go of her faith and prays to God, if He is there, to help her find strength in her faith.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Summary

Joni's friend, Diana White, tells Joni that she is going to drop out of school for a semester so she can volunteer at Greenoaks to help Joni more. Joni is appreciative, of course, but does not want her friend to jeopardize her education. But Diana insists and becomes a great help to Joni and many of the other patients. Diana is also a help to Joni's spiritual life. In their many discussions, Diana never pretends to know the answers but encourages Joni to stay on the path to God. Diana also convinces Joni to try to learn to write with her mouth as the therapists have suggested.

Joni begins working with Chris Brown, her physical therapist, to learn to write. She surprises her therapist by quickly learning to write, albeit a little wobbly and with big letters. She is excited to write a letter home to her parents. Joni has another surgery on her back to relieve the bedsore problem. This time the surgery is a complete success allowing Joni to begin learning to sit up again. Chris Brown teaches Joni how to paint some ceramic discs which Joni plans to use as Christmas gifts. Chris tells Joni that because she was artistic before her accident the talent is still there. Artistic ability resides in the brain not in the hands. Joni just needs to learn to funnel the talent through her mouth. Joni reluctantly tries a few sketches in some molding clay and is encouraged by the results.

Joni begins to believe more and more that God does exist. She feels that God took away from her all the distractions of a normal life to bring her down to the basics so that she can glorify Him and his Word. Joni sees truth in the words of the scriptures versus the atheistic readings of Marx, Sartre, Kafka and others to whom she was exposed. She began visualizing Jesus standing at the foot of her bed offering love and comfort. Joni knows that Jesus can relate to her physical condition. After all, He was on the cross, unable to move or scratch his nose either. Before the accident she didn't know she needed Jesus; now she does.

Joni has a much better time at home for Christmas this second year. She takes care with her appearance and enjoys seeing her family and friends. She even goes to a movie with Dick, reminding her of old times. The best Christmas gift is her parent's announcement that they had secured a place for her at Rancho Los Amigos in Los Angeles, California. Rancho Los Amigos is a progressive rehab center that has an outstanding reputation. Joni is overjoyed—that is where she intends to get back her hands.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7

Joni and her parents arrive by air in California. Joni tries not to have her expectations too high in case Rancho is a disappointment like Greenoaks was. But Rancho Los Amigos is beautiful and well-staffed. Jay and her daughter Kay rent an apartment near the rehab facility. Joni's parents stay long enough to get her settled. After a week at the facility, Joni is pleasantly surprised by a visit from Diana, Dick and Jackie. They had driven cross country to see her and plan to stay a few days. To Joni's delight, their few days turned into three weeks.

Therapy at Rancho begins immediately and focuses on getting Joni as independent as possible. Much work is done teaching Joni to use her shoulder and upper back muscles to get her arms to move. They fit Joni with first a spoon, then later a fork, bent at angles that allows her to scoop up food and feed herself. The doctors encourage Joni to have her friends and family watch her in physical therapy so they can better understand her condition and needs. Doing so will get Joni out of rehab faster and back home. She is all for that and is willing to work hard to get a ticket home.

Joni finds a new friend in a part-time attendant who is a college student around Joni's age. Judy teaches Joni to move her manual wheelchair herself by manipulating her braces. It is a rigorous process, but Joni succeeds in wheeling herself to physical therapy—although it takes her hours. Joni is given an electric-powered chair. She enjoys the speed and freedom the chair brings her. She even ventures out to Taco Bell by herself. Competitive in nature, Joni finds a like-minded patient in Rick. They challenge each other in electric-powered wheelchair races. Once such race ends when Joni's out of control chair up-ends one of the nurses.

By April, Joni has reached her rehab goals and is told she can go home. She tells the doctor she is disappointed that her hands have yet to return. He tells her the sad news that they never will. Joni accepts his words. She knows that she cannot burden Dick with a life caring for such a dependent partner. She tells him that any thoughts of marriage are over and that he should find someone else with whom to spend his life. Joni's physical condition has improved, but she is now facing the reality that she will be a quadriplegic as long as she lives.

Chapter 8

Cynicism sets in as Joni returns from California. Diana spends a lot of time with Joni helping her and encouraging her not to give up. Dick visits often and broaches the subject of their relationship. He tells Joni that being married to her would be a blessing.



Joni does not see it that way and discourages him. Dick begins dating other girls but remains close to Joni often bringing his new friends by to visit.

Joni is losing the battle against bitterness and decides to shut God out of her life. She fantasizes and daydreams about every pleasure she has in her memory: the way a shower felt on her skin, the squeak of a leather saddle between her thighs, swimming, riding. When she runs out of memories she makes them up. To anger God further, she daydreams about having wild, sexual encounters. But this escapism fails to bring her happiness and she becomes withdrawn and depressed. Diana pleads with her to face reality. Joni is alive and needs to live the life she has. Joni realizes that her escapism is not getting her anywhere and that her attitude and thoughts are just as sinful as deeds. Joni prays to God to let her know what His plans are for her.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

In the summer of 1969, two years after her accident, Joni takes inventory of her spiritual life and finds it mainly lacking. She still questions why God allowed such a horrible turn in her life. Her devoted friend, Diana, is always nearby to support Joni and help in her journey to God. Diana announces that she is having a friend stop by. His name is Steve Estes, a sixteen-year-old who is spiritually gifted and mature beyond his years. At first Joni is put off by his youth, but she is willing to meet with him. Soon after meeting Steve, she marvels at how dynamic and knowledgeable the young man is. Steve shows not a hint of awkwardness about Joni's physical disability. It's as if he doesn't even notice.

Steve and Joni agree to have Bible study every week, joined by Diana, Jay and others. As Steve shares Biblical doctrine with the group, Joni quickly sees how shallow her own faith is. Joni prays that God will bring her back to Him. The Holy Spirit begins to teach her and with Steve's presence in her life she begins to see life from God's perspective rather than from her own narrow world. Joni looks back with remorse at her sinful life before her accident—how she had disobeyed God when she and Jason had sexual relations. She prayed for forgiveness and a life without self-pity and bitterness. Steve helps her realize that she must forget the past and live in the now.

In an effort to do so, Joni sells her horse, Tumbleweed, and gives away her lacrosse and hockey equipment. Steve tells her that those who suffer should especially concentrate on doing right and commit their souls to His care. The Bible makes a point of telling those who suffer fiery trials to especially live for Christ. Of course, Joni relates to this passage.

Joni is learning to accept her present life and situation and not fantasize about things that will never happen or daydream about memories from her life pre-accident. Joni looks at Steve's entry into her life as an answer to her prayers. Upon the second-coming of Jesus, her body will be restored to her and will be more perfect than ever before. Christ's life of suffering is a testament to her. Paul, Job and Jeremiah all suffered. She understands the phrase in the Bible, "fellowship of suffering" and feels a part of it.

Diana who is studying psychology practices on the group. Everyone changes places with someone else. Diana sits in the wheelchair while Joni is carried to the couch. Each person can understand more the other's needs and his own shortcomings. When Diana insists that Joni get her a glass of water right away, Joni realizes how demanding she must have been and promises to change.

Diana and Jay see that Joni starts getting out more. Joni is gratified to spend time outdoors after being shut inside for two years. Steve asks Joni to speak before a youth group at church. Joni agrees but stammers and stutters her way through it and

afterward feels like a total failure. Steve tells her that he was just as bad when he started. He urges her to go to college to become more polished. That fall, Joni takes a few courses that focus on public speaking.

Joni's faith grows and she comes to a place where she no longer needs the sensations she once felt were crucial. She realizes that her faith is the most important thing in her life. Joni is grateful for all that God has given her.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Joni's five-year-old niece, Kelly, dies of brain cancer in February 1970. Her short life is a reminder to Joni of the importance of every soul. The tragic loss of little Kelly brings the family even closer together. Further heartache ensues after Kelly's death. Kelly's mother, Linda, divorces her husband and is left to raise her two sons. As devout as the family is, there are still questions. Why did Kelly have to die? Why is Joni paralyzed.

Joni's faith teaches her that she is special to God. The injury was not a tragedy but rather a gift God is using to help her conform to his image. Joni knows that this path will lead her to peace and even joy. Confirming her thoughts, Steve quotes the Bible: "You are given, in this battle the privilege not merely of believing in Christ but also suffering for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). Day to day trials become easier for Joni to bear knowing that all she needs to do is trust in Him. Joni begins thanking God for her blessings even when she doesn't feel like it. She enjoys the satisfaction that being thankful provides.

Steve focuses on another aspect of Joni's attitude. He tells her she should not put herself down and be ashamed of her condition. God is the artist painting one's soul—the body is just the frame. No one goes to an art museum to look at frames. More and more, Joni begins to see her life as it is as a blessing.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

With her new understanding, Joni decides to take pride in her appearance. Jay and Diana help her with her hair and make-up and buy her better fitting clothes. In the summer of 1970, Joni and some friends attend a Christian seminar in Philadelphia. She learns there that God allows certain circumstances to interrupt lives and thus serve as a rasp to file down the rough edges. Joni is soon put to the test when one of her friends who empties her catheter bag forgets to clamp it shut. Soon a stream of Joni's urine is running down the aisle. Though at first Joni feels anger toward the forgetful friend and then embarrassment, she remembers what she just learned. God was filing down more of her "rough edges."

Joni realizes more each day how much her family means to her. She feels she needs to be more in touch with her sisters and appreciate them more. She asks her friends to pray for her and her family. A good relationship with either family or friends is something that has to be worked at. She vows to no longer take her family for granted and strive to be attentive to their needs.

Joni meets Dick Rohlf and brothers Chuck and Craig Garriott. With these new friends and some old ones, Joni forms a singing group. They practice at Joni's house and become good enough to sing before Christian youth groups. Around this time, Joni becomes a counselor for a youth group at a nearby church. That summer Jay and Joni attend a Christian youth camp in Colorado as counselors. The young girls quickly become accustomed to Joni's disability and, to Joni's delight, treat her like a normal human being. The girls enjoy Joni's uplifting words and are inspired by her story. Towards the end of that summer, Joni is sad when she has to say good-bye to Steve. He is on his way to Bible college. He reminds her that the Holy Spirit has been her teacher, Steve has just been a tool. Joni misses Steve but learns he is right. Her faith is growing stronger even without his presence.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

Most of Joni's friends are getting married. She is not bitter or resentful of their happiness but she feels lonely and apart from them. They have new interests that she does not share, and they have less time for their old gatherings. Joni prays that God will bring a man to her with whom she can share a life. Soon after, Joni meets a friend of Dick's named Donald Bertolli. A darkly handsome man, Donald is of Assyrian-Italian descent. Joni is impressed with his good looks and intelligence as well as his mature Christian testimony.

Joni and Donald hit it off, and he begins stopping by frequently for visits. Donald is very talkative and interesting. Joni is impressed as he describes his work with poor black kids in the Pimlico area of Baltimore. As the days go by, Joni and Donald grow fonder of one another. Joni sees strength and character in the handsome Donald. He tells Joni that he is very attracted to her. Over the next weeks and months, Donald and Joni spend many hours together. He takes her to Ocean City on one outing. She is prepared to stay on the boardwalk while he takes a swim but he has different ideas. Donald wheels her chair all the way to the water, entering it up to her legs. He then picks her up and carries her in so that she can feel the water on her shoulders and face. While others were looking at the strange couple perhaps thinking they should save the poor crippled girl from the crazy man, Donald and Joni are laughing hysterically.

Joni is trying to stem her growing feelings for Donald knowing that they could never get serious. But Donald is seeing things differently. He tells her he is falling in love with her. Joni is afraid and discusses the incident with Diana and Jay. They fear she may get hurt and caution her to not get too involved.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

Joni's best friend, Diana White, marries and moves near the Eareckson family ranch where Joni is living with her sister, Jay. Joni's father builds a wing on the house to accommodate the gatherings that Joni and Jay will hold. Joni is spending much of her time with Donald. They go to the ocean, on hiking trails—everywhere normal couples go. Donald always takes everything in his stride and seems to deal easily with Joni's special needs and care. Jay and Diana are still worried that Joni will be hurt if she gets too close to Donald. They even have a talk with Donald about it. Donald tells the worried women that he is falling in love with Joni and feels that they can have a future together.

Talks between Joni and Donald become more serious, Joni even broaching the subject of sex. He tells her that a sex life is not as important as the love he feels for her. He has no doubts that they can make it together. Joni feels certain that Donald is a gift to her directly from God. He is what she had been praying for for so long. Joni is deliriously happy.

Joni becomes very possessive of Donald. She is upset when he does not come to see her or takes time to do other things. Joni is jealous of other female friends with whom Donald chats and laughs. Donald is tiring of her attitude and announces that they need some time apart. He and some friends plan to travel to Europe and will be gone three weeks. Joni is upset by his planned trip, but Donald does not change his mind. He stays in touch with Joni during his trip—sending postcards from various places in Europe. They are both happy to see each other upon his return.

Donald and Joni begin praying daily that she be blessed with a full recovery. They even arrange for several healing ceremonies at church. Joni begins to believe she will eventually be healed. Steve visits from school and tells her she is lapsing back—dictating to God what He should do for her. Joni eventually returns to reality and acknowledges that unless there is a miracle she will never be healed.

As Jay and Diana feared all along—and even Joni herself—Donald breaks up with Joni. He tells her quite honestly that he reassessed the situation and determined that he would not be able to hold up in the relationship. He apologizes for taking it as far as he did but he is saying good-bye to her. She begs him to reconsider but he refuses. He tells her that it is over. Joni asks why God once again is allowing her to be hurt so badly.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

Dick helps Joni cope with her lost relationship with Don. Don had conveyed his confusion and uncertainty about his feelings for Joni to Dick. Through her conversations with Dick, she gains new understanding into what Don was going through. Joni gets supports from her friends, especially Steve, who is always able to convey the Lord's Word to her in the most succinct and passionate manner. Joni does not allow any bitterness to settle in over the lost relationship. Through prayer she understands that Don was a gift to her. His presence in her life made her realize that since her accident she had always depended on someone else to make her content and happy. Now that most of her girlfriends are married and Don is out of her life, she realizes that she has arrived where God wants her—dependent only upon Him.

There were tough times in healing from her break-up with Don. Youth members they had both counseled in the past share letters from Don with her, not knowing the circumstances of their relationship. But she ultimately succeeds in overcoming the sadness. Joni gets word that Don has fallen in love and become engaged to another woman. She meets the woman, Sandy, at a Bible study and extends only her best wishes for both of them.

Joni's wounds heal quickly by trusting in God and following His Word.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

Joni prays that the Lord will reveal what he has in store for her. It wasn't Don and it wasn't college. What was it? Around this time, Joni begins drawing more frequently. She focuses on sketching outdoor landscapes, people and animals. Joni uses the drawings as gifts and in displays in several local art festivals. She continues to counsel and minister to young Christian girls. Joni tells them that being single is what God has in store for some people. The girls all want to marry and cannot understand how a single life could be fulfilling. Joni has been through the full range of these feelings and understands them but counsels them to concentrate on the Lord and He will see that they are fulfilled in His plan.

One day a businessman named Neill Miller visits her father's office. Neill notices one of Joni's drawings hanging on the wall and asks Johnny about it. Johnny proudly tells Neill about Joni and her artwork. Neill is astonished that Joni is able to create such beautiful artwork by drawing with her mouth. He arranges "a small showing" for Joni's artwork. When Joni and Jay arrive at the showing, they are perplexed by the size of the crowd and the heavy traffic. They figure that there must be an important meeting taking place nearby. Suddenly they see a marching band and a huge banner that shouts, "Joni Eareckson Day." Joni wants to hide but knows she must attend this "small showing" of her artwork.

The showing is a great success and serves to launch her art career. That evening she earned \$1,000 on sales. Joni is gratified with the independence sales of her artwork brings her. Neill brings over a young man to talk with Joni. The man seems nervous and unwilling to speak with her. He finally blurts out his situation. His career as a fireman ended when both his hands burned off. He shows her his scarred stumps. He is going through severe anger and depression over his injury. Joni tells the young man how closely she relates to him. She tells him how God led her through her misery. The man is intrigued by Joni's story and eventually finds his way out of his desolation. He becomes a spokesman in the Baltimore school system for the city fire department.

Joni's art career takes off. She can barely keep up with the demand. She makes arrangements with a greeting card company for the use of prints of her artwork. Joni enters into a partnership with a friend who is opening a Christian bookstore franchise. Joni sells art prints and originals at the store and distributes free brochures about her journey in finding the Lord. Articles about her appear in newspapers, and she is a sought-after guest on local TV shows. In every interview, she relates her story of survival and her journey to the Lord.



Chapter 16 and Epilogue

Chapter 16 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Chapter 16

One day in 1974, Joni receives a phone call from "The Today Show" asking her to be a guest. Joni, Jay and several other friends drive to New York for the appearance. Joni is interviewed by Barbara Walters. As Barbara introduces the segment, the camera pans over a large display of Joni's artwork. Joni tells her personal story and her journey to the Lord. She feels blessed that she is able to provide testimony of the Lord's glory to millions of people at once!

Executives of the PaperMate Company are watching and note that she uses one of their products, the Flair Pen. As a result, they arrange for several showings of Joni's artwork. She is in demand for interviews and exhibits and can barely keep up with orders for her art. She is deluged with people asking questions about her faith and spiritual life. She sees that God is using her in the way He had planned.

Epilogue

Joni has become a popular speaker at Christian youth groups. This final segment of her story has her waiting to go on stage to an audience of 2,000 youngsters. She is looking forward to telling them her story: how an immature and headstrong teenager transformed into a self-reliant young woman who is learning to rejoice in her suffering. She will tell them how privileged she feels that she has received God's special attention and how thankful she is that the Lord answered her prayer so many years ago intervening to change her life forever.



Characters

Joni Eareckson

Joni (pronounced Johnny) is named after her father, Johnny Eareckson. The true story of Joni Eareckson entitled, "Joni," is the account of her life after a tragic diving accident that leaves her paralyzed, a life-long quadriplegic. The reader is privy to her harrowing transformation from a healthy, athletic, happy 18-year-old to a wheelchair bound young woman who will never have use of her arms or legs again. With her whole life ahead of her, Joni has to deal with her physical challenges as well as the potentially more destructive psychological hurdles. Joni Eareckson is forced into a life without motion and seemingly one with very little meaning.

Joni began life as the youngest child of Johnny and Lindy Eareckson, a happily married couple who put God and family first. The family lives in a Baltimore, Maryland, suburb and own a farm some twenty miles away where Joni stables her beloved horse, Tumbleweed. Joni is an excellent rider earning medals for her riding and jumping skills. Joni represents everything any eighteen-year-old girl would strive to be. She does well enough in high school to earn a partial scholarship to a prestigious college. Over the summer before her first year of college, Joni dives into a too shallow area of the Chesapeake Bay. Although she does not lose consciousness, Joni lands helpless on her back at the bottom of the bay after ramming her head in a large rock. She cannot move but determines that she must be caught in something—perhaps a fisherman's net.

Luckily her older sister, Kathy, spots her under the water right when she is about out of air. Kathy rushes to her and with help pulls her to shore. The orderlies who rush her to City Hospital do not respond when she asks how long her temporary paralysis will last. After some initial confusion, Joni and her parents are given the tragic news that Joni is permanently paralyzed and will never walk again.

Joni grew up in a devout Episcopalian family; however, just before her accident, Joni is feeling empty and uncertain. She begins to display an "attitude," negative and demanding. Joni is sensitive enough to know that her new personality is not something she wants to keep. She fervently prays to God that he will intervene and do something to change her and turn her life around. Soon after those prayers, Joni has the tragic diving accident. At first she wonders if she received her answer; much later in life, she knows that she did.

The miraculous journey that Joni succeeds in is an inspiration to one and all. After the tough hurdle of accepting her condition as permanent, Joni finds a way to become a role model to not only others in similar physical states but to other young people who are trying to find a path to God. Joni is a legend in her own time. She becomes an outstanding artist, drawing remarkable renderings by holding a pencil in her mouth. The book ends with Joni guest-speaking before a Christian youth group. She is positive and



upbeat. She tells her astonished young audience that she is truly happy and fulfilled in life. Finding God was the purpose of her harrowing journey.

Johnny Eareckson

Johnny Eareckson is Joni's father. She is named after him and in many ways is very much like him. He is a generally positive, up-beat man but is heartbroken by his daughter's accident. Johnny Eareckson was born in 1900. Joni writes that her dad took the best of each century by being born on the precipice of both. Joni undoubtedly inherited her artistic abilities and love of outdoors and athletics from Johnny. He was a complex man who was an incurable romantic and a creative artist but who was intrigued by modern technologies.

Although his father was the owner of a coal business, Johnny from a young school boy on, always worked. One job he enjoyed was caring for horses, which was the start of his life-long love and appreciation for the majestic animals. Johnny did not shy away from challenges; in fact, he sought them out. He felt that the "school of hard knocks" was where one could learn the most. Joni drew from this characteristic of her father in dealing with the harrowing hurdles she faced in life. Johnny hated to waste time. During the depression when most people were sitting around feeling sorry for themselves, he took the opportunity to turn free wood scraps into artwork. Using this time to learn to carve wood art led to his painting and sculpting abilities in later years. Before proposing to his wife, Johnny built a house by himself. Still during the depression, Johnny would sweep the neighborhood and find free wood, rocks, and other material. The house was well-built—Johnny and his wife lived and raised all four daughters there.

Johnny felt that the most important things to build in life were not objects. Rather, the legacy he built to leave for his children consisted of personal character, individual happiness and spiritual maturity. When Joni complains that she will not be able to leave behind a legacy of artwork like he will, Johnny tells Joni that the development of her own character and spiritual faith are the key ingredients in a successful and happy life and are the most important things one can leave behind.

Johnny led a full life. He was a sailor, an Olympic wrestler and owned and managed his own rodeo. His hobbies included horseback riding, sculpture, painting and woodworking. Although Johnny's life was full and even overflowing, he always found time to worship the Lord.

Margaret

Margaret "Lindy" Landwehr Eareckson is Joni's mother. For her daughter's sake, she tries to stay strong after the tragic accident and is always supportive.



Kathy Eareckson

Kathy Eareckson

Kathy, Joni's sister, pulls Joni from the Bay after her diving accident.

Jay Eareckson

Jay is another of Joni's sisters. Jay and Joni have a close relationship. When Joni is in Greenoaks, Jay volunteers to wash Joni's hair as well as her four roommates on a weekly basis. Joni eventually moves in with Jay.

Dick Filbert

Dick is Joni's boyfriend at the time of her accident. He remains caring and supportive of Joni throughout her ordeal.

Tom

Tom is a young fellow patient in ICU who also became paralyzed as the result of a diving accident. To Joni's horror, he dies just a few days after his arrival.

Mrs. Barber

Mrs. Barber is the cruel attendant at Greenoaks who becomes violent and threatening to Joni.

Diana White

A loyal friend to Joni, she visits often and ultimately takes a semester off to volunteer at Greenoaks so she can help Joni more.

Steve Estes

Steve Estes is a charismatic, sixteen-year-old and devout Christian who helps the twenty-year-old Joni find her faith in God.

Donald Bertolli

Donald Bertolli is the 27-year-old man who becomes quite serious with the twenty-one year-old Joni. They even speak of a future together; however, he decides he cannot cope with the relationship and breaks up with her.



Objects/Places

Chesapeake Bay

Joni has her diving accident in Chesapeake Bay.

Baltimore, Maryland

Baltimore, Maryland, is the location of the Eareckson family home at the time of Joni's accident.

Cheyenne, Wyoming

The Eareckson family went on family vacations to Cheyenne, Wyoming. It was there that the four-year-old Joni completed a 100-mile horseback ride with her family.

Sykesville Family Ranch

The Eareckson's have a family ranch located about twenty miles from their suburban home

Greenoaks

Greenoaks is the rehabilitation center Joni was assigned to after it was safe for her to leave the hospital.

Bishop Cummings Reformed Episcopal Church

The Eareckson's family church, Bishop Cummings, holds an all-night vigil praying for Joni's recovery.

Rancho Los Amigos

Rancho Los Amigos is a progressive rehabilitation facility in Los Angeles, California. Joni's parents secure a spot for her around her second Christmas after her accident.

Philadelphia, PA

Joni and her friends drive to Philadelphia to attend an important youth seminar.



Pimlico

Joni's friend, Donald Bertolli, works with poor black kids in the rough Baltimore neighborhood of Pimlico.

New York City

Joni appears on the Today Show in New York City. She is invited on the show to tell her story and show her drawings.



Themes

Quadriplegia/Disability

The book, "Joni" is a compelling story of a young woman who permanently loses movement from her shoulders down after a tragic diving accident. The story of the brave Joni Eareckson serves as an educational tool in understanding in vivid detail the life of a quadriplegic. It tells the long, harrowing journey that a formerly mobile person is forced to take after becoming paralyzed. Not only are the physical demands Joni must face unthinkable, it is her private thoughts, fear and anger that at times are more unbearable.

The reader learns that the trials a quadriplegic must face go far beyond just being immobile—they are multi-faceted. For example, since the quadriplegic cannot move, there are times when she must be placed in a device called a Stryker Frame. It is a canvass contraption that is flipped every two hours to avoid bedsores and to encourage circulation. The patient typically stays in the Stryker until she makes appropriate advancements in physical therapy. The patient has two views: the floor and the ceiling. Bedsores are caused from lack of movement and are still an issue even when using the Stryker. In Joni's case, she became so thin that her hip bones and tail bones were protruding and causing serious bedsores. She undergoes several operations where her bone is actually shaved away. When she is operated on, she is not given anesthesia since she cannot feel—yet she can see the blood and hear the horrid sound of her bones being filed away.

There are many other horrors that quadriplegics face that are unknown to most people. One can fathom the nightmarish scenario of losing any of the senses. However, only those with the actual experience can actually know the terror and depression after the new, unwanted life is thrust upon him.

Christian Religion/Faith

Joni Eareckson grows up in a devout Episcopalian family. Jesus Christ has always been the focus of the Eareckson family. Teenagers are famous for trying to find who they are. In her senior year and before her accident, Joni cannot shake feelings of emptiness and uncertainty. She has been fighting with her family and in her last semester experiences a drop in her grades at school. Joni is smart and sensitive and instinctively knows that something is missing, that she is not on the right track in life. She turns to the Lord and fervently prays that God will do something to change her and turn her life around. Soon after those prayers, Joni has the tragic diving accident. At first she wonders if she had received her answer; later in life, she is sure it was His answer.

While the story is one of carving out a new life after a tragedy, Joni ultimately sees her journey to find God and trust in Him in faith as the more important and difficult part of her story. Despite her devout Christian upbringing, Joni is unable to understand how the



God she loves could allow such a life-altering tragedy. She will never be able to move, to wipe her tears away, scratch her nose, marry, have children. God took everything away from her. Yet, just as her tenacity enables her to cope and live with her physical disability, she somehow clings to her faith and eventually is able to trust in the Lord again and grow in His love.

After the tough hurdle of accepting her condition as permanent, Joni finds a way to become a role model to not only others in similar physical states but to other young people who are trying to find a path to God. The book ends with Joni guest-speaking before Christian youth groups. She is positive and upbeat. She tells her astonished young audience that she is truly happy and fulfilled in life. She is able to say with certainty that finding God was the purpose of her harrowing journey.

Surviving a Tragedy

Joni Eareckson's life is shattered when a diving accident leaves her permanently paralyzed from the shoulders down. Although she goes through the stages of grief which one goes experiences when presented with such a life-altering tragedy—denial, anger, grief for the old life—eventually Joni accepts her fate. However, she does not allow herself to withdraw into the background and become a depressed, bitter person with no purpose or joy. Joni makes lemonade out of those lemons.

When a rehabilitation nurse encourages her to learn to write by holding a pencil in her mouth, Joni finds the idea demeaning and disgusting. But the nurse persists and Joni finally learns to write, albeit with wobbly, large letters at first. She feels pride when she is able to write a letter home to her parents herself—not dictated to someone else. Joni advances from writing to artwork. At first she thinks it ridiculous to "slop" paint on clay discs. The nurse is aware that Joni was an artist before her accident. She tells Joni that her talent is still there—the artistic ability that Joni had before resides in her brain not in her hands. She encourages Joni to start sketching thus allowing the talent to be funneled through her mouth rather than her hands. Joni begins by making a few simple sketches but eventually creates remarkable pieces of art. Photos of some of her post-accident artwork are included in the book.

More important to her than her artwork is the inspirational work she does with Christian youth. She becomes a sought after speaker for groups around the country. Through her strength and faith, Joni finds purpose and joy in life after tragedy.



Style

Perspective

The true story of Joni Eareckson entitled, "Joni," was written by Joni Eareckson with help from Joe Musser. "Joni" is the account of her life after a tragic diving accident that leaves her a life-long quadriplegic. It is written, of course, from Joni's point of view (which would be first person) and offers the reader the intimate thoughts and psychological agony of a young woman whose whole life is ahead of her but is forced to face the realization that she will never walk again.

The reader can easily relate to the horror and desolation and anger that Joni must feel. However, no one can truly grasp the enormity of the tragedy as well as the one who goes through every painful and depressing phase towards the final acceptance of the new, unwanted life inflicted upon her. Paralleling this journey is her quest in faith. Raised in a devout Christian family, Joni—as anyone would—at first cannot understand how the God she loves could allow her life to experience such a tragic accident. Yet she continues to cling to her faith and eventually is able to trust in the Lord again and grow in His love.

The miraculous journey that Joni succeeds in is an inspiration to one and all. After the tough hurdle of accepting her condition as permanent, Joni finds a way to become a role model to others in similar physical states and to those who are trying to find a path to God. Joni is a legend in her own time. The book ends with Joni guest-speaking before a Christian youth group. She tells her astonished young audience that she is truly happy and fulfilled in life. Finding God is the most important part of her harrowing journey.

Tone

The overall tone of "Joni" is one that is positive and inspirational. The book begins with an account of Joni's diving accident. The reader is privy to every thought the injured young woman has. After she dives in the Chesapeake Bay and rams her head against a rock, she is unable to determine why she cannot move. She thinks she must be caught in a fisherman's net. The reader, of course, knows that she broke her neck and that she is paralyzed.

Although the reader feels great sympathy for this young, eighteen-year-old girl with a life-time ahead of her, stricken with such an awful fate, the tone of the book does not engender pity. Even in some of her darkest hours and days, there is a spirit that breaks through the depressing narrative. It is the strength of this young woman that drives this inspirational story. Although Joni at first vows she will walk again and have use of all her limbs, she comes to realize that is an impossible dream. But she is resolved to make the best of her life. She strengthens her physical self as best she can and does not give



way to the psychological downside of her situation which undoubtedly would be easy to do.

Rather than ruining her life, Joni's strength leads her to a deeper faith in God and a way of life that proves to be an inspiration to her family, friends and even strangers. After coming through the toughest hurdles of her physical condition, Joni emerges as an inspirational speaker for Christian youth groups. The reader at first pities Joni but in the end admires and even envies her tenacity and strength of character.

Structure

The book, "Joni," is separated into 16 chapters and an epilogue. There are 16 pages of black and white photos of Joni and her family and friends. There are also photos of some of her remarkable artwork. The story is told in blocks of narrative that are not necessarily in chronological order. The story begins with the diving accident that leaves the teenager a quadriplegic. The reader is taken through the horror of the accident, her thoughts about not being able to move, her certainty that her condition is temporary, and her gradual realization that she is seriously injured and at one low point, even near death. To understand who the person "Joni" was before her accident, there are portions and episodes that flashback to her former life as a happy, popular and healthy young woman.

One pivotal episode in the story, almost a jumping off point from her former to latter life, is the empty feeling she describes that seems continually to dog her. Although she does well at school, is popular, has many girlfriends and several boyfriends, Joni feels a vacuum that is bothersome and something that she cannot shake. She begins doing badly at school, fights with her parents and generally develops a negative attitude. Joni prays God will bring her peace, change her and show her the path to Him. Shortly after that prayer, Joni dives into Chesapeake Bay and, as she requested, her life changed forever. Joni often thinks of that prayer. It gives her strength and perhaps provides an answer.

The rest of the story deals with the life Joni must adjust to after the accident. Once she is past the false hope that she will fully recover from her accident, the story is laid out in a straight forward, chronological manner.



Quotes

"In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it." Oscar Wilde. Preface.

"In a jumble of actions and feelings, many things happened simultaneously. I felt my head strike something hard and unyielding. At the same time, clumsily and crazily, my body sprawled out of control. . .yet. . .I felt no pain." Page 7.

"Everyday doctors came to see me. Sometimes they came in pairs and discussed my case. 'She has total quadriplegia' one doctor explained to an associated, 'the result of a diagonal fracture between the fourth and fifth cervical levels.'" Page 20.

"'Lord if You're really there, do something in my life that will change me and turn me around.' . . .I had prayed that prayer just a short time before my accident. Now lying encased in my Stryker Frame, I wondered if somehow God was answering my prayer." Page 35.

"By December I was still weak, thin, and covered with bedsores, but my physical therapy gave me enough sitting-up time so I could go home for one day. I chose Christmas day and began to get excited planning for it." Page 71.

"Who, or What, is God? Certainly not a personal Being who cares for individuals, I reasoned. What's the use of believing when your prayers fall on deaf ears?" Page 81.

"Weary from thinking, my eyelids fell shut. Then, from somewhere, a calmness took over. A thought—or memory—'a still, small voice'—reminded my troubled brain: Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee. And I slept." Page 85.

"I did not understand what god was trying to show me, so I prayed: 'Lord, I know now that You have something planned for my life. But I need help understanding Your will. I need help in knowing Your word. Please, god, do something in my life to help me serve You and know Your word.'" Page 131.

"If a guy knows a lot of Bible verses, he's often thought of as spiritual. But having head knowledge of Bible truth isn't spirituality. True spirituality is putting God's Word into practice—making His truth valid by actually doing what He says and not just pointing to it as a nice standards." Page 136.

"And now, dear friends of mine, I beg you not to be unduly alarmed at the fiery ordeals which come to test your faith, as though this were some abnormal experience. You should be glad, because it means that you are called to share Christ's sufferings. Once day, when he shows himself in full splendor to men, you will be filled with the most tremendous joy." (1 Peter 4:12, 13). Page 139.



"I believe it's god's will for everyone to be healed. But maybe we just can't agree as to timetable. I believe it is His will, but apparently it doesn't have priority over other things. You will be healed, but probably not until you receive your glorified body." Page 177.

"The suffering and pain of the past few years had been the ingredients that had helped me mature emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I felt confident and independent, trusting in the Lord for my physical and emotional needs." Page 189.



Topics for Discussion

Describe the circumstances of Joni's diving accident. What bad judgment did she use that figured into the tragedy? What were her initial thoughts afterward?

Joni has trouble with bedsores during her hospital stay. What are bedsores? How did the doctors try to remedy this condition and with what results?

When a quadriplegic is riding in a car, what precautions need to be taken for his safety? How and such a disabled person be injured in a simple car ride and why?

What hope does Joni cling to when she enters the Rancho Los Amigos rehabilitation facility in Los Angeles? What is Joni's reaction when she realizes the enormity of her physical condition?

Joni is encouraged by a rehab nurse to learn to write using a pencil in her mouth. Later she begins to draw using a pencil in her mouth. What does the nurse explain to her about one's artistic abilities?

Describe Joni's relationship with Don Bertolli. What emotional risks did Joni take? What did her friends and sister think of this relationship?

How was Joni's art career launched and who was instrumental in the kick-off? Describe this first artwork showing. Joni meets with someone that night who needs help. Why did the person need to talk to her and was she able to help him?