

# Theology of Disability

Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability

[www.wheaton.edu/faithanddisability](http://www.wheaton.edu/faithanddisability)

If you've ever wondered what the Bible has to say about people with disabilities or how disability shapes our faith as well as our understanding of God and others, you aren't alone. Rooted in scripture from Genesis to Revelation, The Wheaton Center for Faith and Disability exists to help your understanding of disability to become more biblical, normative, and transformative so schools, congregations, camps, and parachurch ministries become communities of belonging and flourishing for all. To steward this mission well, the Center's leadership has called on Christian scholars and those whose lives are impacted by disability to write a biblical theology of disability in the form of the Ten Pillars below.

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## Preamble

*Though disability affects every race/ethnicity, religion, age, sex, and socio-economic class, what is perceived as a disability and who gets labeled accordingly varies from culture to culture. When measured against some level of minimal or average performance or standing, we must acknowledge the arbitrariness of such standards. Given the prevalence of disability in society, even those whose loved ones have not yet been touched by disability (whether physical, intellectual, developmental, or neuro-atypical), or by mental illness, will likely be impacted on some level eventually.*

### 1. God's Image Bearers: A Glorious Reflection



We read in Genesis that as the pinnacle act of creation, all people are made in the image of God and are designed for intimate relationship with him and others. No matter our capacities, we each bear God's image individually as integrated persons of body and soul/spirit. We also image God collectively. Our glorious purpose as image-bearers is to reflect God's character into the world individually, as families, and as communities. (Genesis 1:26–27; 2 Corinthians 3:18)

### 2. God's Image Bearers: A Distorted Reflection



Since creation's corruption, our ability to reflect God accurately has been fractured. Though as humans we still image our Creator, this reflection is now cast in distorted ways. We have all been alienated from God through rebellion. Our hearts have become bent toward our own wills, and our purposes have become focused on glorifying ourselves. We experience elements of brokenness in every aspect of our lives—in our bodies, minds, emotions, and our relationships—as well as externally, as we live in a world that groans to be freed from the bondage of sin and decay. While brokenness is now inherent to the human condition, disability often draws unique attention to our difficulties. Disability is experienced both functionally, through bodies that do not work as some might expect, and socially through relationships that do not respect, support, and affirm. (Genesis 3; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 8:19–23)

### 3. God's Promise to Remedy Creation's Corruption



God does not leave us without hope. Even in the Garden after the fall, God proclaimed that a woman would bear a Seed who would crush Satan's head, overcoming all alienation that separates us from God and each other, and bringing restoration to the brokenness and difficulty experienced in this age. Building on this promise, Isaiah prophesied that when this Seed came, he would have no beauty or majesty that we should desire him. He would be despised and rejected; a man of sorrows acquainted with the deepest grief. The One who would crush Satan's head would himself be crushed to redeem us from our sin and to heal our brokenness. He would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. (Gen. 3:15; Isaiah 53; Matt. 25:31; Rom. 16:20)

### 4. God's Remedy Is Jesus



The Gospels tell of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension as the initial installment of God's promise of full restoration in his future return. In the testimony of the apostles and prophets, we see Jesus as the Messianic Seed, a resurrected Jewish God-man, who opened the door to both Jews and Gentiles, including the "poor, crippled, blind, and lame," for salvation, adoption, and ultimately, the redemption of our earthly bodies. (Job 19:25–27; Luke 14:12–23; Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 15)

### 5. God's Goodness and Sovereignty in the Face of Trials



Through the story of Jesus' encounter with a man born blind, we see Jesus addressing the societal ramifications of disability in addition to the functional ramifications. Jesus first corrects his disciples' misconceptions that this man experienced disability because of personal sin (which would have created social barriers for the man born blind). Jesus instead declares, "This happened that the works of God might be displayed in his life." The man's disability was recognized as purposeful in the hands of a good, loving, and sovereign God at work in the context of a broken world. Jesus then restored the man's vision. This demonstration of God's power and purpose offers us perspective into God's work among and through us despite the brokenness of the fall. We see Jesus holding in tension human brokenness and difficulty with divine value and purpose. We must do the same. (Job 2; 42:1–6; John 9)

### 6. God's Economy



In God's economy, human value is not measured by what we can or cannot do, but instead by whose we are. When Moses hesitated to accept God's commission to deliver his people by citing a self-perceived limitation, God responds, "Who made the human mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go! I will help you speak, and I will teach you what to say." God sees no barriers to using those with disabilities to accomplish his purposes. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul declares that the seemingly weaker members of the believing community are

indispensable and to be given double honor. Furthermore, human weakness is actually portrayed as a platform to display God's power. Those perceived as weak and less worthy of praise by human standards are not only suitable, but at times, they are uniquely gifted conduits of God's grace, mercy, and love. (Exodus 4:10–12; 1 Corinthians 12:20–26; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10)

## 7. God's Law of Love



God is love. When Jesus walked the earth, he said, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This sacrificial love necessarily makes demands on how we treat other people. As finite creatures, human beings are all limited in various ways. Additionally, none of us are autonomous or completely self-sufficient—nor are we meant to be. Disability can enhance the visibility and tangibility of God's love within a community by focusing love's demands where they reflect God's character best. Additionally, people with disabilities can lead others into loving well by demonstrating God's love in unique ways. (Leviticus 19:18; John 13:34; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 3:16–20; 4:7–12)

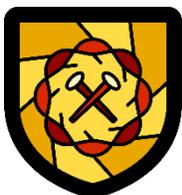
## 8. God's People Respond



As God's people, what is our role in responding to disability? The church is to manifest God's love to a watching world as we live in counter-cultural ways that reflect the values of God's kingdom on earth. With Jesus as our Head, we constitute his body. We are called to preserve unity in diversity (including diverse abilities)—until we grow into the maturity and stature of Jesus. (Ephesians 3:10–11; 4:13)

The unity of God's people does not depend upon talent or intellect. It depends on our union with Jesus. This is a relational oneness in Messiah (who himself is one with the Father) and with one another. Furthermore, as God has placed each part in the body just as he wanted, so each has a divine purpose and gift that serves the body. Indeed, God has “put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other so that if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” (Psalm 133; John 17; 1 Corinthians 12:12–26; 1 Peter 4:10)

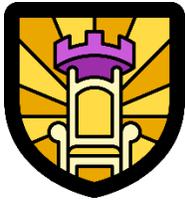
## 9. God's Presence and Purpose in Suffering



Every one of us experiences suffering at some point in our lives. For some, disability itself—or society's response to disability—may create a source of physical or emotional suffering. Where is God when it comes to suffering? This question becomes especially poignant when disability is in view. While God does not promise to remove all sources of suffering in this age, our present trials need not be eternal! Because of Jesus' own personal suffering on behalf of all people, his comfort, love, and actions now flow through us to help others in their distress (and vice-versa!). His Word also reveals how he has used human suffering for his purposes—whether turning wayward hearts back to God, displaying God's power and works, or sanctifying believers in holiness—we trust he works all

things together for the good of his children. Amid even our deepest suffering, he has promised to be with us always—to eternally save, heal, and deliver us. (Psalm 34:18–19; Proverbs 3:11–22; John 16:33; Romans 8:18–28; 2 Corinthians 1:3–5; Hebrews 12:5–8)

#### **10. God’s Ultimate Restoration of All Things in the Age to Come**



The Seed predicted in Genesis came into the world the first time to crush the serpent’s head and bring salvation to all who put their faith in him. Jesus, this King of the Jews, and desire of all nations will come again to subject the enemy to final judgment. In the days of Messiah’s reign there will be no more mourning, crying, pain, or death. As this glorious truth relates to disability, whatever brings us loss, sorrow or discomfort in this life will no longer have the power to do so—whether that source be the functional impairment associated with disability, the socially-induced aspects of disability, or some combination of both. Together, as the redeemed people of God, we look to the coming of the Messiah to earth. The Spirit and the bride say, Come! (Isaiah 25:8; Matthew 19:28–29; Acts 3:13–21; Haggai 2:7; Revelation 21–22)

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