



## Disability, Vocation, and the Grace of God

*By Jason Forbes*

Presbyterian Churches are being asked to recognise Sanctity of Life Sunday. Given the public discourse around abortion and euthanasia, this is particularly prudent. Changes in NSW legislation concerning abortion have drastic implications for those unborn persons found to have a disability or some other anomaly. Aborting such pregnancies were standard procedure before the changes, and now it's more the case. Those who advocate abortion and euthanasia are working hard to make human life even more disposable. This is why it is so important for the Church to proclaim that all human life, at all stages, is sacred.

But why is human life, particularly in a disabled form, sacred? In response to devaluing disabled life, there are those, both in and outside the Church, who strive to give life with disability a heightened sense of meaning and purpose. As a result, disability is either romanticised, or even deified. That is to say, the disabled life is made out to be more blessed than what it really is, or it's viewed as a divine commissioning of that person for a special purpose.

I once saw a video of a man on the verge of tears of joy at the thought that God had given him cerebral palsy. No doubt, the thought would have given this man a great sense of meaning and purpose in life. However, as one who also has cerebral palsy, I can't say I share his sentiments! Life with disability can be amazing, and God can fulfil his divine purposes through disability in ways that probably would not happen in the absence of disability. But in reality, disabled life can be tremendously difficult. For the past several weeks, social isolation measures have been implemented due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Some have found these measures difficult and stressful. Yet, social

isolation is the daily reality for many people with disabilities and those who care for them year in and year out. While there is a sense that people become accustomed to their circumstances, there is still a stress that can take its toll.

The difficulty with romanticised views of disability is, they have a tendency to invalidate the difficulties the person may experience, and to acknowledge these difficulties (i.e. complain) is seen as an act of unfaithfulness towards God. This is unhealthy and can be spiritually dangerous. What is required is a more robust view of disability, vocation, and the grace of God to see that disabled life, as with non-disabled life, is sacred.

### WHAT IS DISABILITY?

In the past, disability has been regarded as something inherent in the individual's body. Such individuals were seen as abnormal and could be separated from broader society. Commonality with those who had disabilities was seldom recognised. More recently, disability is seen as something we all have, and so disability should not be regarded as anything peculiar. Both views have their pros and cons.

The first view rightly recognises that people with disabilities have needs which aren't held in common with most of the population. However, it is wrong to assert that those who have such needs should be separated from broader society. The second view rightly recognises that there is commonality between those who have disabilities and those who do not. However, in overemphasising this commonality and insisting that we all have disabilities, this minimises the experience of difficulties people with disabilities have.

The dilemma between these two views of disability is

resolved when it's understood there is both a biological and a social component to disability. That is to say, because of a person's uncommon biological limitations, this results in social disadvantage. In practical terms, this may mean the person cannot access some spaces, or have fluent forms of communication, or not have the same career opportunities as others.

So, to say that God has given someone a disability requires a more nuanced discussion. While it may be said that God gives disability to individuals (Exo 4:11), care must be taken to recognise that a person's experience of their disability very much depends on their environment and their society. There may be legitimacy to the persons' complaints if their difficulties are exacerbated by their social environment. A disabled person's complaint may not be a reflection of his or her own unfaithfulness, but a reflection of the unfaithfulness of the society around them in refusing to change social structures to accommodate their biological limitations.

### WHAT IS VOCATION?

Our vocation, or our calling, tends to be closely related to our occupation, what occupies our time; our occupation tends to define our identity. The same can be true for disability - the disabled life is seen as a vocation from which people then derive their identity. However, our occupations and abilities, or disabilities, are only the circumstances in which we pursue our vocation. Our vocation can, and often does stand apart from our circumstances.

This is important because as we progress through life, our circumstances and identities change, but our vocation, as Christians, remains consistent. So, what is our vocation as Christians? Ecclesiastes 12:13 states: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man". Putting it succinctly, to honour God. So, whether you're a tradie, a professional, garbage collector, entertainer, student, retailer, stay-at-home parent, retiree or whatever, your vocation is to honour God.

In life, I have ended up in ministry, which has been great. But I could have also pursued a career in the information technology industry or remained on a full disability support pension. These are vastly different circumstances. But regardless of which direction my life went, my vocation would have remained the same - to honour God.

Ability and disability also change as we progress through life.

As a person living with cerebral palsy, I'm much less dependent on others in my 40s than I was in my 20s. Yet my vocation is the same - to honour God. Even as I get to my 60s and my abilities begin to deteriorate, then into my 70s and 80s - assuming that the government permits me to live that long! - I may well be lying on a nursing home bed, but my vocation will still be to honour God.

While it is true that God has called specific people for specific tasks, and one may think of characters in the Bible - Noah, Moses, David, Isaiah, Paul - these do not set a precedent for the norm. It seems, for the most part, God's desire is for his people to honour him in the circumstances they are in. Disability, for the most part, is just another circumstance. So, it should not be romanticised as an extraordinary vocation.

### WHAT IS THE GRACE OF GOD?

We need to understand that God deals with us on the basis of grace. This means everything that we have or enjoy we do so on the basis of his grace. One life isn't more valuable because of ability or potential. This is the opposite to what is increasingly believed in our society that in order to have a quality life, a person must have a fully functioning body and mind. This must be refuted in the strongest possible terms. A full life, or shalom (to use a Hebrew term), begins by being in a saving relationship with God, and this is something that God must initiate, and makes available in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus (Rom 5:6; 8:3; Eph 2:1, 4-7). God's grace, therefore, should compel us not to see life as any less valuable simply because it is less able. But, to understand and assert that just as our life is subject to grace, all human life is subject to grace. It is because of God's grace that Christians are compelled to honour him in all of our circumstances.

Human life is sacred, even when it is in a disabled form. But there is no need to regard the disabled life as an "extraordinary vocation" for it to have value. All human life is sacred because its end is to honour God. We can acknowledge the sacredness of disabled life by recognising the differences and difficulties that come with disability and being prepared to make changes to our social structures within churches to accommodate such difficulties. By doing so, we'll proclaim by word and deed that life is sacred.

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