

Interview with John Knight: Part 3

Conducted by John Piper

John Piper: John Knight is the Director of Development here at Desiring God, and we've been talking together, this is interview number three, about disabilities and God's sovereignty and goodness. And the reason we started this is because I'll be wrapping up a little series on John 9 this coming Sunday, which will be, I think, June 12, 2011, where Jesus meets a blind man, he's been blind from birth, and his disciples say that somebody must have sinned that he was born blind, and Jesus redirects their attention from the cause to the purpose and says, no, it wasn't that this man sinned or his parents, but that — and we understand — we understand the grammatical issues here, and we believe contextually, grammatically, theologically this means, no, not cause but purpose. This is in order that the works of God would be manifest. In his case, that meant he got healed.

John Knight: Yes.

JP: Years, years later. He suffered a long time because of that decision on God's part to set it up that way, but he got healed. But that's not the only kind of works of God, and we've been talking about that. So, John, what I — what I thought we'd do today is just maybe go in two directions, try to keep it a little bit short, if we can, but let God decide.

You said to me in an email that you love the Bible, you want Bible to be prominent here, and the sovereignty of God is so crucial, and so let me just lob you a ball to say, okay, texts, doctrine of sovereignty — the reason, by the way, John is relevant here is because, if you haven't seen the other videos, he has a son who was born blind. Paul had no eyes when he was born almost sixteen years ago, and so we're talking to a dad like the parents in John 9 who lived with a son who couldn't see. And now also autism is part of his issues, and then more recently some inexplicable seizure activities and some stunted growth. So here's a precious creature of God that you love with all your heart and that God has designed that way — or has he?

What, how — what has helped you, what Biblical texts and what doctrines? And we're speaking this for the sake of parents and for churches, and we'll close off with pastors in a few minutes. But go wherever you want to go. What helped?

JK: Well, of course it begins with the work of the Holy Spirit who came and let me see things that were impossible for me to see. You know my hostility to John 9 those years ago.

JP: Yes.

JK: I did not want to believe that could be possible, that a good God would visit that kind of suffering on a boy and by extension on a family. And the Holy Spirit came and said, “I want you to understand something about Jesus. Jesus suffered intentionally, cruelly, died and rose again victorious to cover every sin. Every sin. And if you claim this Jesus, this suffering, sovereign Lord, you’ll understand some things.”

And so the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to that reality, that Jesus came first, came with perfect foreknowledge about what he was going to experience, asked the Father for another plan, but did it, and he did it to bring glory to God and to serve as the righteous king who could look at a dad like me and say, “I know what suffering is. I know what it looks like, I know what it feels like, so trust me. Trust me on this.”

And then words in the Bible started to make sense. Romans 12:3, The faith you have been given. “You didn’t earn it. There’s nothing that you could have done to earn it. I gave it to you. It was a free gift to you. It was not free to me. I give it to you freely.”

I see — in John 9:1, Jesus saw the man. Okay. He saw the man who was born blind. He didn’t ignore him. He didn’t walk past him. He saw him. And I felt the depths of that. Jesus sees me, he sees my son, he sees my wife with her cancer. He sees us and he understands. And he sees in such a way that other people see too. They may not see with clarity, but they — they see as well.

This — this passage — you’ve done it several times, in Psalm 139:16, usually in the context of your affirmation of life. Here, Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written every one of them the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them. So frequently I get up in the morning, and I think about — we don’t have an answer for Paul’s seizure-like disorder. I wonder. I wonder. And I get sad very easily. And then this text comes to mind. God knows. God knows every day of this boy’s life. He knows my day as well. He will help me. He will help Paul. And that — that reaching up to Jesus at the very beginnings of the day, saying, “I need you. I need you now to help me to get out of this bed and do this thing.”

JP: So your experience of the Word in that regard, that these days are written, this painful day, this seizure day is written, planned by God, strengthens you, it helps you, it carries you. Unpack that a little bit, because a lot of people hear the sovereignty of God there and they’re pushed away by it. You’ve been drawn into it. How — how does a purposeful God, when the purposes are so hard, painful, denying what other kids have, how does that work positively for you?

JK: Oh, it is the — the future hope. It is — Paul is talking about light, momentary affliction when he did not experience light or momentary affliction. His was a significant burden. But in comparison to what he knew God was preparing for him and the freedom that he had in Jesus Christ, he was not a slave to his sin any longer, he was kept by the King of all creation, and someday I’ll be able to see Jesus clearly, I’ll be able — no more darkness between us. It’s that future hope. This is — this — this book is more real than my day today is real.

JP: Yes, that — that passage, 2 Corinthians, what, 4:16-17 —

JK: Yes.

JP: Says this light, momentary affliction is working —

JK: Yes.

JP: For us.

JK: Yes.

JP: So if — if God chooses Paul for his own, and Paul seems to be — I don't know. You may want to talk about that, about whether he can give evidences of faith. My own theology says if a — if a little baby dies or a child has no moral — has no physical ability to process Biblical truth, God has mercy on that child, and that's working, then, for him, an eternal weight of glory. So this is not, oh, he missed out on everything here, and nothing is going to happen to make up for it later, but, rather, there are going to be rewards in his seeing Jesus that — does it work that way, that this is working —

JK: Yes.

JP: A weight of glory.

JK: Oh, amen. It is — because as I have indicated before, I was a very proud, self-righteous, self-indulgent man who knew how to use people and use systems. I was the good boy growing up, therefore I got a lot of what I wanted, which was peace and freedom and things like that in my — in my parents' household. And then being married and working, people liked working with me. And I was just as proud as could be. I didn't need any Jesus. I didn't need any God. My sins were little sins, and I could easily self-justify myself in those little sins. Well, that person made me angry; that's why that happened. It's not that I had a root of bitterness that was wound around my heart and I wasn't dealing with it.

And so God, in His sovereign ability, "Okay, I'm going to give you some things." And my son is entirely a gift today. In those early days, I saw his disability as entirely curse. And I don't see any of it as curse today.

JP: Yes.

JK: His seizures are hard, and we are advocating with doctors and we are advocating with others, "Help us understand this, help us to get rid of this kind of pain that is being inflicted on his body." We are not passive about that in the least. We are not passive about Dianne's cancer. We attacked the cancer. We attacked it with medicine and we attacked it with prayer. We believe God gives good gifts of medicine and nutrition and all kinds of things that help us in our bodies.

But what I really needed was help with my soul, and God used this particular means to rise up, "You're an angry man, John. You're a proud man, John. You're not a good man, John." And He revealed it to me through the means of my son.

JP: So there is a way to have your whole world view structure altered so that what almost everybody in the world sees as not gift but pain and sorrow and something that would cause anger and rebellion and depression, to actually see it — usually it's the word "gift," gift in every way, so gift in sanctifying you. I testify as a pastor that Paul, because of the reverberations of his effects on you and others, is a gift to our church. But you have to see the world a certain way, don't you? I mean —

JK: Yes. Well, I see the world contrary to how most of the world sees my son. He doesn't have gifts. We — we have to take care of him. He's never going to be productive. He's not going to be able to hold a job, you know, those — those kinds of things. They're around us all the time to encourage us, to encourage us that there's no worth to this little human life. And it is the Word that says there is — what God has created has worth and inherent dignity.

JP: You know, I just want to — see if you want to go with this. It just comes to my mind. You have watched parents who don't yet share this shift of seeing God this way, seeing pain this way so that it feels like God's good in this, God's purposeful. Other possible explanations for parents — like if a parent says, "Why did God do this?" if you don't give your answer —

JK: Yes.

JP: — that God is wise, God is good, God is loving and God is sovereign and God has design and purpose, if we could discover it, we could grow with Him in these purposes, where do they go if — what do they believe? How do they stay Christian? What have you found in dealing with parents?

JK: I — I have met men and women of such extraordinary raw courage. They don't believe in the sovereignty of God. They don't believe that there's necessarily anything good in this. They see frequently Jesus as beautiful, that there is forgiveness of sins, things like that, but — I met one dad, his child, with fairly significant disabilities, was in her 20s. And the question came up — it was a small group of dads with a pastor, a very good pastor you know, leading us, and he said, "What would you say to Jesus the first time you see him?" And I was just so overwhelmed I started to weep. I thought, I'll be with Jesus. It will all be done. I'll be with Jesus.

But this dad, who every external evidence was loved his wife, loved his children, was taking care of them, the first words out of his mouth was, "Why did you do this to me? Why did you do this to my daughter?" And I didn't look on him with anything but affection. "Brother, come across the bridge with me. You don't have to carry that anymore. That's a kind of burden —" I just saw raw courage in the face of, "I don't know how I can trust God in this." But he was a good dad. He really was a good dad and loved his daughter, loved his wife.

And I've met lots of people that are — are in between. They've gotten this — this spark of God is for me. God is for me.

JP: Yes.

JK: But it's hard. It's hard to —

JP: Come across the bridge.

JK: Yes.

JP: The bridge of?

JK: Of that disbelief, that embracing all that the world has said, that there's no value in this, there's nothing good about this, this is only pain, only suffering, no purpose. No, come with me. Come — come back to Jesus. Always purpose with Jesus. He's doing things.

JP: You told me that you were recently talking at a conference of younger pastors, the cool variety, who were not as a group excited about ministering to the disabled.

JK: Yes.

JP: They're really into — I don't want to put words in your mouth — growth.

JK: Yes.

JP: And urban impact and so on, and this feels — what? So turn this — turn this to those pastors helpfully. And how can we encourage pastors to move forward?

JK: Yes, well, it was — it was a younger dad who was in ministry. It was actually at a conference recently, but I've felt echoes of it myself, that this is — this is interesting, it's important, certainly. Nobody is ever going to say in any church, "We're against folks with disabilities." You will not hear that in a Bible-believing church.

But in terms of emphasis, in terms of seeking out, publicly proclaiming — let us pay attention to this, let us join with Jesus in seeing the man, seeing the woman, seeing the older saint who no longer can hear as well or see as well or walk as well, or the baby that's born with Down syndrome or like my boy was born or the young person that has the car accident and traumatic brain injury, let's start seeing them too, not just the ones who are smart and sarcastic and you're going to go in there and you're going to — you're going to fight for Jesus, you're going to bring all — all this power that the Holy Spirit has given you. Go where the weak ones are. Go where the ones that people are ignoring are. And you're not going to have the same kind of interactions with those folks. It's going to be different.

JP: Yes. And I would encourage pastors, mostly because of your influence, to say to them, "You don't have to abandon the dream of extensive impact on the culture or the community to devote a sermon or some effort to lifting the awareness of the congregation." I mean, one sermon goes a long way.

JK: Yes.

JP: To saying, "He cares. He cares." And what — what we want to do is unleash the laypeople. So let's close things by — say to pastors — do they need a program? I mean, you said something to me in an email about the happiest couple you met was in a 60-person church. So encourage the guys who have a brand new little church or a 2,000-person church, and both of them are feeling like, oh, we don't

have the sophisticated program or we're too little to do it or —

JK: Yes. Yeah. God places people in churches for a reason. He's brought them to you as gifts. You don't have to have all your ducks in a row. You don't even need to know what you're doing.

JP: Amen.

JK: And that — that little — that little church — I met this couple in January, and they're in a little tiny church with this beautiful little girl, happy couple. They had been embraced by the entire congregation.

JP: Little Down syndrome girl.

JK: Yes, Down syndrome, yes — and been embraced and loved their church, loved how they were being loved by their church. Not all those folks knew what they were doing. When we came back to Bethlehem, there was no program. There were individuals that said, "We see you. We have regard for Big churches, sure, there are big churches that don't have any disability ministry program, but they do have disabled members. They simply do. It might be the family member that doesn't come on a Sunday morning.

JP: Yes.

JK: Or it might be older members who aren't able to get around as well anymore. But they're there. Start seeing them. And then in the seeing them, ask "God, help me. What should I do here?" Sometimes it's one thing. You're right, one sermon makes a big difference. I know of only one really good disability ministry program that didn't have the vocal support of its leadership, and so I take as normative usually the pastor needs to say things like, "I think we should do this," and then preach and lead the elders and things like that.

I've seen remarkable programs that were started by folks that said, "I just have a burden for this." Our disability ministry coordinator does not live with disability in her family, but she loves us, she loves the family, she loves the children, she loves the engagement. She cries with people who are going through extraordinary difficulty. And God has given her as best a skin — she has to go in where there's fire all the time, and she does. And so those pastors, just ask your folks — do the first thing. It might be one thing you're asked to do by God, one thing. Or it might be persistent, fifteen-year relationship like we have with the couple I referenced in the first one.

JP: So we end, it seems to me, where we began, with the sovereignty of God, because the sovereignty of God is designed not simply to help you cope or bear the hard thing God may have given you, but it's also there to help you risk helping that person when you don't know how to help.

JK: Yes.

JP: I mean, that's — that's where I am. I'm so prone not to risk saying something. Here's a person in a wheelchair that I don't think they're going to be able to respond to me, and I don't know what they might say if I walk up to them and greet them. I don't even know if they'll be able to shake my hand, and will that embarrass them, and all these what-ifs

that hinders, that's unbelief. So you said — this little trilogy of statements is where we'll end. It was so encouraging to me. And I don't know — you can say more about it if you want, but I think we're done. You said it's not a program. It's love the child, serve the family, trust Jesus. And that last one, trust Jesus, is where the good sovereign promises of God come in: I'll help you. I'll guide you. I'll strengthen you.

JK: Yes.

JP: Thank you, John. This has been really good. Let me pray with you.

Father, I love John and Dianne and Paul and their family. They've ministered deeply to us. And I thank you for their partnership here. Take what we've spoken of and make it a blessing. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

JK: Amen.

Topic: [The Sovereignty of God](#)

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