



This Undone Life Together Podcast
Season 2 – Relentless

Introduction
March 03, 2020

Are you aching for a love that will never leave, a presence that will push back the dark? If so, I have good news for you. God's love is relentless even when your faith isn't.

Welcome to the *Relentless* podcast, a 15-episode podcast designed to give you a behind-the-scenes look at the stories and biblical history that make up the pages of my newest book, *Relentless: The Unshakeable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*. My goal is two-fold. First, to make sure you know you're not alone and, secondly, to help you discover evidence of God's presence in your story even if your story doesn't look like you thought it would.

My name is Michele Cushatt, and today we're going to talk about the introduction. I feel like we need to insert a clip of the intro to *Law and Order* right here, because... Hello! That introduction is intense. If you haven't read it yet, I highly recommend that you pick it up. Today, we're going to just dive right into the deep end of the pool. That's where the story starts, but it would be helpful if you had read the introduction before you listen to this podcast.

If you don't have a copy of the book yet, just so you know, you can get a copy of *Relentless* at any major book seller, including Amazon. You can order it right now and have it delivered within a day. You can also order it on Kindle and have it delivered to your Kindle or e-reading device immediately. You could get it right now.

I also have recorded *Relentless* on Audible as well, so you can find the audio recording of me reading the pages of *Relentless* on Audible and get that right away as well, just in case you need more of the sound of my voice. Maybe not. There is such a thing as too much Michele. Back to the introduction...

To begin with, that introduction was very difficult for me to tell (that opening story). I wrote it. It has been a couple of years since I wrote that opening story, but I have spent quite a bit of time over the last few years trying to decide if I was actually going to share it. There were many, many times during the editing process that I thought about cutting it out.

It's not easy disclosing that kind of frank honesty and that kind of vulnerability in this very public sphere, and to be quite honest, I tend to be a pretty private person. You wouldn't know it based on the books I write, but there is a lot that I keep close to my chest. I don't feel a need to just throw up all of those details everywhere, so it's very difficult for me to do that.

In addition, my husband advised me not to. At first, when I wrote that, he didn't think it would be a good idea because he knows vulnerability tends to invite criticism, and he knew I'll probably be crucified online for sharing that. I had one friend say she couldn't even read the whole introduction without walking away. It was too much for her. Another friend said she was just shocked that I would go to that place at all, but ultimately the reason I chose to leave it in the book and to really tell the truth about that basement despair is for you.

Over the last several years, I have heard from hundreds of you through email messages and direct messages on social media or public messages on social media or handwritten letters. I have a whole file in my cabinet of handwritten letters from men and women just like you letting me know of the deep, dark struggle they've had with their faith as a result of very difficult life circumstances.

For whatever reason, those who have written me felt safe to tell me that, but what it also told me is they didn't feel safe in their home community and in their church community and their families and their friendships to tell the truth about their struggle with their faith, trying to understand the God who doesn't always heal and doesn't always take the pain away and doesn't always dot all of the *Is* and cross all of the *Ts*, so ultimately I did this for you.

If you hit a moment when you are in your own dark basement struggling with the will to live, I want you to know you're not the only person who has ever been there. I want you to know there are some of us who have been there and still get there on occasion but who have found God to be faithful and present even there. It has not been easy. It has not been nice and neat and pretty. I have lots of questions I don't have answered, but I want you to know you're not alone.

The other piece is I think we need to talk about this. This whole concept of suicide and suicidal ideation, the very real impact of trauma, whether early-childhood trauma or adult trauma, or like for me, medical trauma, PTSD, and the resulting depression, anxiety, and despair that comes from these kinds of circumstances, we need to talk about. It's real. Choosing to ignore it or minimize it or numb it or stuff it only makes the problem worse. We have to create spaces to tell the truth about our suffering. When we can do that in community, it takes some of the pain away.

The other thing I want you to know as we talk about this is this is not my typical MO. I'm a firstborn type-A, very driven, achiever-oriented woman. I tend to be very positive and upbeat. I have a good life. I have much to be thankful for, but what happened was I had multiple consecutive years of trauma and loss.

I had what I could describe as cumulative losses over about two decades (multiple and significant losses) including divorce, single parenthood, betrayal, church conflict splits,

ministry changes, three rounds of cancer, adolescence with my three boys, and then taking in three kids from an abused and neglected background and raising three trauma kids.

All of that on top of almost dying happened in a span of a relatively short amount of time, and the cumulative effect of all of those losses and all of that trauma is that I lost my will to live. I lost my fight. I remember multiple times telling my husband, "I have no fight left. I have nothing more to give. I have no more fight." It was all I could do just to wake up and make it through a day. I had no fight left. The other thing I want you to know in this place, because I know some of you are wondering, is that at my lowest moment...

At my most difficult moment when I was really struggling the very most I was running four miles a day. I was reading my Bible and praying every single day. I was journaling. I had a Christian counselor. I was eating very healthy (mostly a plant-based diet with lots of vegetables and fruit). I was taking supplements and eating very little red meat and very little sugar. I was taking very, very good care of myself. I was sleeping eight to 10 hours a night and taking a nap every single day.

I was doing all of the things you're supposed to do to be as mentally, physically, and emotionally healthy as possible. I was doing all of the right things. Even then and even there in spite of all of that effort, I was continuing to sink. The reasons for that are myriad, but part of that was the cumulative effect of so much pain, trauma, chronic pain, permanent functional disabilities, and all of the losses. I had some biological things that were going on that were impacting my mood.

All of these things were happening, but the reason I wanted you to know that I was doing "all of the right things" is that sometimes we like to blame people for their pain. Sometimes we want to point a finger at something that somebody is doing to cause their own situation, because if we can point a finger and we can find a reason or a cause/effect relationship

between their suffering and what they're doing or not doing we think we can avoid it ourselves.

It is so important for me that you understand at times there are times when people suffer and it's not their fault. There is a suffering that happens at times that is beyond a person's ability to bootstrap themselves through it, and that's where I was in that opening chapter of the book, and that is really a big part of the reason why I chose to share it.

We need to step back and pause before so quickly rushing to a place of accusation and judgment. There are people, and you know some of them, who have had a lifetime of dealing with depression, mental illness, chronic anxiety, and multiple other different factors. Some have had early childhood trauma that they have been dealing with in therapy for decades, and they still struggle with it, and we are so quick to judge them because they don't just get over it and because they don't just get better.

Yet, I have personally experienced it firsthand. I would have never guessed 10 years ago, but here I am, where I was doing everything I possibly could do to dig out of my own hole, and I couldn't dig out. What happens when you and I rush to judgment and blame rather than sitting in a place of compassion is that we make people feel more alone.

This is the universal problem. Behind all of the mental illness, depression, anxiety, the suffering, the PTSD, the trauma, and all of this is the bigger problem is aloneness. We feel alone. It is killing us (this isolation and aloneness). This is what almost took me under. It wasn't cancer. It wasn't even the pain but the fear that I was completely alone in it.

In spite of my family and friend's attempts to help me and to support me, suffering created this gap or this distance between my experience and theirs, and this was only complicated by judgment or criticism or even my own internal sense of personal shame for feeling the way I did.

I remember I kept telling myself, "You shouldn't feel this way. You shouldn't feel this way. You should be grateful. You should be happy you're alive. You should be thankful." All of those messages of shame and others around me saying, "You're fine," and "It's not that bad," just piled up, so on top of cancer and pain and losses and the mourning and the trauma, we had all of this judgment, criticism, shame, and denial, quite frankly, that was weighing down on me to leave me in this hole of despair that I was struggling to get out of.

Today, I just wanted to give you some of the ways and some of the strategies that I used to climb out of it. You need to know, first of all, that I'm not in as bad of a place as I was a couple of years ago. However, I still have really bad days here and there, more often than I would like. I still have days when the pain and the losses are too much. They wear me out. I'm tired, so I use these strategies on a regular basis because I know those bad days are not going to go away.

It's not like all of a sudden everything is going to be fine and I'm going to be great and everything is going to be hunky-dory. These are the strategies I use when I know I'm in that place of despair. I want to share them with you today, because chances are you're going to have a day or two here and there or maybe every day when you feel buried. You feel buried by life, by questions, by doubt, by pain, or whatever it is. If you are not there but you know somebody who is, these are also strategies for you to help the person who is in that place of despair.

To begin, it begins with acknowledging it or noticing it. You simply have to notice and acknowledge the reality. Rather than telling yourself, "You shouldn't feel this way," tell yourself, "I see you. This is how I feel. This is where I see you. I recognize you. We've been here before."

If you are a loved one of somebody else who is in that place, simply notice and say, "I see you. I see how hard this is for you. I see how painful this is for you. I recognize it. I'm not going to ignore it." We need to notice it. The brain acts like a smoke detector. If you don't acknowledge that it's going off, it's going to keep going off.

I actually had a smoke detector going off in the house this week, and I was in the middle of interviews, so I couldn't do anything about it. Let me tell you. I kept ignoring it, and it kept going off. What happened was it started getting louder and louder and more frequent and more frequent until I was about ready to scream. Your brain is the same way, so if you are feeling sad, full of grief, full of despair, or overwhelmed, or if you are struggling with depression or sadness or whatever it is, you have to notice it. You have to acknowledge that your brain is going off. It's telling you something.

Secondly, you can't just stop with the noticing, but you need to connect. This is what I talked about before. Really, the biggest pain behind the different kinds of pain we experience is aloneness. This is what causes the most grief. We have to connect, so tell one trusted friend. Tell at least one trusted friend. All you have to say is, "I'm not okay right now."

I have a couple of friends who I can text when I'm having a tough day, and I tell them, "I'm not okay right now. I'm safe. I'm not going to do anything rash, but I'm not okay. I just needed you to know I'm not okay." Isolation is the worst thing you can do in a place of pain, because isolation makes the pain worse.

Instinctually, unfortunately, it's what we want to do. When we're in pain, we want to hole up and isolate. We want to kind of pull away, shut down, and self protect. It's the worst thing we can do. Instead, what we need to do is to tell one trusted friend, "I'm not okay right now." If you are a loved one of someone who is suffering, what you need to do is simply say, "I'm here."

In addition to that, it's not easy being the support person for somebody who has long-term mental illness or depression or is really suffering, so make sure you reach out and connect as well. Find somebody you can trust to say to, "I have a child with depression, and she's really struggling. I just need you to know I'm tired, I'm weary, and I need your support."

Thirdly, move. I need to do something to interrupt the thought loop. If I'm really in that despair cycle or that sad cycle or that pain cycle, I need to do something to interrupt the thought loop. On my good days, I can go for a walk outside. I can go for a run, or I can do something physical, but most times it's simply that I need to move.

I need to change the room I'm in. I need to do a different activity. Sometimes it's as easy as reading a good novel or something simple to change the thought loop, play Solitaire on my phone, or something to interrupt that thought loop. If you're a loved one, you can push in. You can stay close. You can sit next to the person who is in a bad place.

You can refuse to take things personally. That's a really big one. Don't take their lack of ability to connect personally. You may need to enlist the help of a professional, but whoever is suffering needs to know they're worth coming after and they're worth pursuing and they're worth being with even if they are crying the whole time. Move.

Fourthly, say to yourself, and I do this quite regularly, "This will not last forever. I will not feel this way forever. This is how I feel tonight, but chances are by tomorrow morning, I will feel differently. This will not last forever."

Finally, and this is after I interrupt that thought loop, I move, and I remind myself it won't last forever, I identify any extraneous factors that might be contributing to my mood. If I'm in a particular moment that feels crushing, I go back to the acronym *HALT* (hungry, angry, lonely, and tired). Am I hungry? Am I angry? Am I lonely? Am I tired?

What time of day is it? I notice the hardest times of day for me are after the sun goes down. By then, the pain is higher, I'm tired, and I have less ability to deal with all of the things, so I try to look at extraneous factors and do what I can to meet those needs. If I'm hungry, I eat. If I'm angry, I process somehow. I journal or talk to my husband or I do something to process like go for a walk. If I'm lonely, I reach out and make a connection. If I'm tired, I sleep. More times than not, I'm tired, and I just need sleep.

For me personally, I ended up finding out that I had pretty severe hypothyroidism based on radiation killing my thyroid, so I have to do regular doctor's appointments to stay on top of my physical health. On top of that, I most likely have celiac disease, so I had to change my diet, but all of those different biological factors were contributing to my despair. Resolving those biological factors didn't take care of all of my despair (I still have deep sadness and lots of chronic pain), but it certainly helped.

The final thing I do is I create index cards with verses on them or truth statements on them that I can carry around with me and have at the ready at all times. I need to remind myself of truth. If that's where you are, these are some strategies I use. I notice it or acknowledge it. I connect with at least one trusted and safe person. I move and do something to interrupt the thought loop. I remind myself and I say out loud, "This will not last forever. I will not feel this way forever." Then, I identify extraneous circumstances that might be contributing to the despair, depression, sadness, or grief loop that I'm in.

To give you an update, it has been a few years since that story that takes place in the introduction of *Relentless*, and I am in some ways doing much better, but as I mentioned before, I still deal with a lot of physical and emotional fallout from trauma. That's just the reality of it. It's still there, and I know for a fact this isn't the last time I'm going to have a dark night, a difficult day, or a hard story I need to process through, so the question is...*How do you and I anchor our faith so it will stand no matter what comes?*

How do we anchor our faith in such a secure and tangible way that it will stay strong even when we deal with the worst of circumstances? That's really the message of the whole entire book. In *Relentless*, I walk through the 12 Altar Stones. In the next episode, we're going to dig into the first altar stone. It's a story in Joshua. Let's talk about that really quickly.

Joshua 3 and 4 is the story of Joshua and the Israelites crossing the Jordan. They had escaped 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Then, they had spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. That's not super fun, let me tell you. I imagine camping out in the desert, eating the same food every day, and not having a place to call home. That's what it was like for them.

Finally, God was going to take them to the Promised Land, this place that was basically what you and I would dream of. It was in their minds the life they had always wanted. It was up ahead. The Promised Land was up ahead. As they were on their way to this Promised Land, this dream life, they bumped up against the Jordan River.

Now, the Jordan River was running at flood stage. It wasn't a creek. It wasn't a tiny, little stream. It was a raging river, and it was terrifying. It was impossible. There was no way they could get through. Yet, the only way to get to the Promised Land was to walk through the Jordan River, which would drown them. I mean, that's just the fact. They would have drowned.

What God told them to do... They had priests within this whole group of Israelites. He told the priests to walk into the middle of the Jordan River. The priests were carrying the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant was the tangible evidence of God's presence with them. God's presence was said to dwell in the ark. The priests were carrying the ark. Basically, God said, "I want you to carry my presence into the center of the Jordan."

The minute the Israelite priests' toes touched the water the Jordan River split in two. The water piled up high on the sides, and the Israelites were able to cross through the river to the other

side. I mean, a miracle! Right? Incredible! Wouldn't we all like to have that kind of deliverance? What is most fascinating about this story is what God told the Israelites to do after they got to the other side, and that's what I'm going to read. Joshua 4:

"When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, 'Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.'

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, 'Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you.

In the future, when your children ask you, "What do these stones mean?" tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

In short, God told the Israelites to go back to the middle of the Jordan, the center of their harrowing experience and the center of that impossible circumstance they would have never survived without God's intervention, to pull out 12 stones from that center, and to set those 12 stones up as an altar or a memorial of what God had done.

He wanted them to set up those 12 stones as a memorial because he knew this would not be the last time their faith would be tested. He knew there were more hard things to come and there would be other things in their lives that would seem impossible, and he wanted them to

remember his presence in the middle of their worst circumstances, so he had them set up those 12 stones.

Now, it's your turn. This is what I want you to do through the pages of *Relentless*. With each chapter, I want you to go back to a different part of your story (an impossible circumstance, a harrowing experience, something that seemed impossible at the time), and I want you to find evidence of God's presence in the middle of it. I want you to pull a stone from that story.

That can be a literal stone or it can be a figurative stone. It doesn't matter what it is. It can be a stone that you write a word on. It can be a piece of paper. It can be a trinket that you remember. Whatever it is, I want you to collect 12 items that represent God's presence with you in the middle of an impossible circumstance.

Then, by the time we finish reading the last page of *Relentless*, you will have a 12-stone altar testifying to God's presence with you even in the middle of the impossible. This is what it's about, because sooner or later you and I will have more difficult things to face that will make us question our faith, and I don't know about you, but I want the kind of faith and I want the kind of belief in God that stands no matter what comes and no matter what happens.

Whether or not I get another diagnosis, regardless of the choices my children make, or what happens with my family, my marriage, my home, my work, or my health... No matter what it is, I want to remember the faithfulness of God in the middle of it even if my story doesn't look like I thought it would.

We have work to do. I'm so excited. Thank you for joining me today, friends. Life is so much sweeter when we don't have to do this alone. Even better, we have a God who will never leave

us and will never stop loving us. "I will not leave you as orphans," he promised. "I will come for you," and I believe him. Now, that's something worth living for.

Are you aching for a love that will never leave, a presence that will push back the dark? If so, I have good news for you. God's love is relentless even when your faith isn't, and the circumstances you fear might drown your faith could become the stones giving testimony to it. Join me, and let's find evidence of him together.