



This Undone Life Together Podcast
Season 2 – Relentless

A God Who Always Promised to Be With You
April 7, 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 Unshakable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*. My goal is two-fold. First, to help you feel less alone and, secondly, to, hopefully, help you discover evidence of God's presence in your story even if your story doesn't look like you thought it would.

Today, we are talking about chapter 2, "A Smoking Firepot and a Blazing Torch." Now, this one is... Well, how should I say it? This is one of my favorites, but this one is such an anchoring chapter. There is a concept in this chapter that is so essential to building your faith, and it is this crazy story, and it seems so bizarre, but when you understand the history and significance of it, it will completely revolutionize your faith.

It's the story of God cutting a covenant with Abraham. The whole theme of this story is a God who has promised to always be with you. However, here's my question for you. What do we do...? Promises have always been important to me, but what do we do when the people who claim to love us don't show up like we expect, when they break their promises or they break their vows and commitment and they don't do what we expect them to do? What do we do when it seems God is doing the same?

Relationships are supposed to be built on promises and commitments (keeping our word that we are going to love and show up and be there for the person we say we care about). Yet, more often than not, relationships fail us. Right? I'm sure and I have no doubt that you have experienced a relationship that didn't quite turn out the way you thought it would, and it's darn painful. It's just downright painful.

Promises are very important to me (I already said that), but my experience with a promise-keeping relationship is a little spotty at best. That's all I'll say. Well, let me do it this way. I have walked down four different aisles in my life. First, I walked down the aisle at church when I was 7 years old for my baptism. I write about that in *Relentless*.

Secondly, I walked down another aisle at 15 at a Christian youth conference, and at this conference I felt called to commit my life to full-time Christian service. In other words, I loved Jesus so much I wanted to commit my entire life to serving him in some full-time capacity. The third aisle I walked down was at the same church where I was baptized.

I walked down an aisle at 21 to get married to a man who was a pastor, and that was in my mind the fulfillment of my commitment of, first of all, my baptism at 7 and my commitment to full-time ministry at 15. Marrying a pastor seemed the culmination of those prior-to promises. Right?

The fourth aisle was walking down an aisle in a Colorado courtroom to finalize my divorce. Let me tell you. When you have this commitment to follow Jesus... I started praying for my husband someday when I was still in grade school and my commitment to full-time Christian service and my commitment to my marriage and then I end up 27 years old and divorced. That will mess with you.

I have had promise-breaking in my life. Those people who have claimed to love me haven't always followed through on that commitment. They didn't always stick around. Because of that, I have a pretty intrinsic wound. I have an internal wound. You would never see it if you met me, but this wound is a chronic fear of abandonment.

There is this kind of ongoing sense in my head of, "You might like me today, but you'll change your mind tomorrow. You may say you're my friend today, but you'll disappear tomorrow." I'm just waiting for someone to leave. I'm just waiting, and there are multiple reasons for that. Don't worry. My therapist and I are working on it, but this has been a theme in my life. I think it is a theme in a lot of our lives, because every human relationship fails us in some way. Right?

These relationships, as much as we love them and even if they're well-intentioned... Even if we are in relationship with people (spouses, parents, siblings, children, neighbors, or friends)... You name it. Even if they are the best-case scenario relationships, they're never perfect. Right? They fail us again and again and again. There are times we forgive and forgive and forgive, and then we just don't want to trust anymore. Right?

What happens is we translate our experience in human relationships to our relationship with God, a God who at times doesn't seem to always keep his promises. We'll get more into that theme later, but there is one story in the Bible that sets the stage for God being a promise-keeping God.

This is so critical. It's pretty huge. It's a big promise. It's even bigger than the promise you make when you walk down an aisle to marry somebody. It's even bigger. It's a story of covenant. You can find this story in Genesis 15. I talk about this a lot in chapter 2, because it is so essential to our understanding of God's character and his role in our stories, but it's a bizarre story.

God meets with Abraham. He tells Abraham, "I have chosen you to be the father of my people." For whatever reason, he saw Abraham and said, "You're it. I'm going to build a nation through you." He tells Abraham, "You are the one I've chosen. I'm making a promise to you that you will be the father of many people. You will be the patriarch of my people, the Israelites."

Abraham was like, "What?" Maybe he didn't say it quite that way, but Abraham is not quite... He knows God. He believes God and has a pretty healthy fear of God. He's like, "All right." God tells him in Genesis 15... It's so odd. It's not anything we could relate to here in the twenty-first century.

God says, "**Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.**" I love that, because, first of all, he addresses the immediate issue, which is fear. That's the immediate elephant in the room. He addresses that. "**Do not be afraid...**" Then, rather than present himself as the enemy, he lets Abraham know, "**I am your shield...**"

"I am your protector. I have your back. Not only do I not want you to be afraid but I want you to understand this relationship we have. I am your shield. I am your protector, and thirdly, your very great reward. Not only am I your shield, but I am your jackpot. I am the lottery. I am it, and I am yours. I am your reward, so even if you lose everything else, you have me, and I'm the best thing that could ever happen to you."

It's so interesting to me. This so sets the stage of our relationship with God. What if we could receive that and listen to God say that to us, too? "Michele, don't be afraid. I am your shield. I have your back. I am your protector. I have you, and I'm your very reward. Even if you lose the whole world, you have me. It's the best thing you could have."

He sets that stage, and he goes on to tell Abraham that he wants to make an agreement with him. Abraham is concerned because God has promised to build a whole nation through him, but he doesn't have any children. He's like, "Hello? How are you going to populate an entire nation with my genetics when I don't even have a single child?"

God is like, "I have it covered. We're going to take care of it. You're going to have more offspring than the stars in the sky." You can see that in Genesis 15. He says, "**So shall your offspring be,**" and Abraham believed him. That's pretty big. Without any evidence, Abraham believed him. He just took God at his word.

Then, to reassure him, God cuts covenant with him. This is what he did. He told Abram in verse 9, "**So the Lord said to him, 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.'**" Basically, "Bring me a zoo." Okay. "**Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other...**"

Abraham brought the animals, cut them in two, and arranged the halves opposite each other. "**...the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.**" Okay. You can see this. They're outside. Abraham has cut these animals in two and arranged the halves opposite each other, basically creating an aisle down the middle.

"**As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain...'**" He then kind of gives him a list of things that were going to happen but then lets him know he's going to keep the promise to Abram. God is cutting a covenant with him and going to keep a promise. But the most profound part of this entire story is in verse 17.

"When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates...'"

In other words, Abram is asleep, and God showed up as a fire and passed between the pieces. He walked down the aisle and passed between the pieces. The reason this is so profound is because, first of all, this kind of ceremony was very common in that culture. They didn't have banks and legal teams and attorneys to draw up contracts, so whenever somebody made an agreement with somebody else about livestock or animals that was what they used to create an agreement.

It was very common to cut an animal in two in order to make that agreement, because, in essence, what it was saying was, "I agree to these terms, and this is what you can do to me if I don't keep up my end of the bargain." This kind of ceremony was very, very common. It was normal. This is the kind of situation Abram would have understood, because this is what people did. They would cut an animal creating a blood agreement like a blood oath saying, "If I don't keep up my half of the agreement, you can cut me in two." Each person did it.

In a typical blood ceremony like this, both parties would walk between the pieces, because as both parties walked through the pieces they were submitting themselves to this agreement saying, "This is what you can do to me if I don't keep up my end of the deal." Both parties walked through. However, when Abraham fell asleep...

He cut the animals like God had said. He was waiting for his next instructions, but Abraham was asleep. God walked through the pieces alone. He did not tell Abraham to get up and walk through the pieces. God himself walked through the pieces. This would have shocked

Abraham, because they were making an agreement, but what God was basically saying was, "This is what you can do to me if I don't uphold my end of the bargain."

At the same time, because God is the only one who walked through the pieces, he is also in essence saying, "This is what you can do to me if *you* don't keep up your end of the bargain." God was putting himself on the hook only for the agreement. It was a normal ceremony, but it was shocking and significant because only God walked through the pieces.

I want you to take into consideration the five characteristics of God's promise, because it is different than any other promise anyone has ever made to you. The purpose of this covenant ceremony is a relationship between God and us. The entire purpose of this covenant ceremony was to establish an unbreakable relationship between God and humankind.

The parties involved... This is like any contract. You have to know the purpose, the parties, the terms, the acceptance, and the payment. The purpose is a relationship between God and humankind. The parties are God and us. The terms were our obedience and God's protection. He was saying, "This is our agreement. We cut a blood oath here. You need to obey me, and I will protect you. You need to obey me, and I will protect you."

The acceptance of this contract or this covenant is voluntary. We both voluntarily enter the agreement, but what was so shocking about this is the payment. The payment of any kind of blood oath or any kind of agreement like this is life. The payment was life. In these times, if you could not keep your end of the agreement, the cost was life (your life). It was bound in blood, but the difference in this covenant ceremony is that God put only his life on the hook for both parties. God put his life on the hook for both parties.

Remember, the terms were our obedience and God's protection. God was saying, "I put my life on the line if I don't protect you. I also put my life on the line if you don't obey me." Even if we fail to obey, he is on the line for it. It's his life and his blood. This is crazy, you guys, and it's hard to even describe the significance, but I want you to go back and think about the whole story of Joshua and the Jordan.

When Joshua and the Israelites crossed the Jordan, the language in that... This is in Joshua. The language is that they were to go back to the center and pull out the 12 stones from the middle of the Jordan and to shut it up. The reason it says God had them serve up those 12 stones (this is back in Joshua 4, verse 6) is "**...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.**"

The phrase *cut off* there is the same term as cutting covenant, and the Israelites would have understood that. God cut off the Jordan. Once again, God is showing the Israelites in that moment and showing us that he's keeping his promise. That covenant he cut with Abraham years and years and years before he's still keeping. He intentionally used the phrase *cut off*, which is the same Hebrew word used to cut covenant, to remind them that he made a blood oath and he alone would be on the hook for this relationship with us. He alone is on the hook.

Over and over again throughout the Bible, if you start looking for it, you will see the word *covenant* (cutting covenant) over and over again. As we get through *Relentless*, eventually we're going to be talking about the cross. Jesus died. God in flesh was cut in two (was cut or was killed) as the payment for this covenant that was broken.

He alone was on the hook for our obedience and his protection. He paid the price (a blood oath), and he said, just like in that covenant with Abraham, "If you don't keep this oath, I will

be on the hook for it, just like if I don't keep it I'm on the hook for it." He said, "Either way, it's my life that is on the line."

Ultimately, when we go throughout all of Scripture, we see God kept that promise. This is so important, because, my friends, whether it was your mom or your dad or your brother or your sister or your child or your spouse or your church or your pastor or a friend or a neighbor, there is someone who has failed you who did not keep their promise.

They went into an agreement, whether formal or informal, with you saying they loved you, and somewhere along the way they have failed, and you and I are all walking through this life with these wounds of broken promises. We carry around the evidence of being cut by relationships that don't work, but God has said, "I cover even that."

Through his covenant with Abraham and all of his ongoing proofs of keeping his promises, he's letting you know that he is the one relationship that will never fail. A promise-keeping God doesn't mean he's always going to give you everything you want and everything you prayed for.

It doesn't mean he will always protect you from all pain and all harm, but it does mean he will never, ever leave you. You and I, no matter what happens, will never be alone. He will never walk away and break this bond, because he has made a promise bound in his own blood, and the good news is he already shed it for and he already shed it for me, which means this relationship between God and us is secure. It is solid. It will not fail. He has us.

This is what I want you to do for the second Altar Stone. I want you to go back and look for God's presence in his kept promises. This doesn't mean he has delivered you from all harm, but it means he has been present with you in it no matter what comes. I want you to look for him in his promises. I want you to go and see if you can find him in the ways he has been

faithful to you even when you did not deserve them. I'm going to read from *Relentless* on page 42, if you have your book.

"Although I may have been 7 years old when I walked down a church aisle to show God how much I loved him, God's love walked down an aisle for me long before. His is the first love, the resolute and relentless love that promises to heal us from our traumas. His love bridged the divide and determined to restore the relationship long before you and I knew we needed him to do that, and for reasons we can't possibly comprehend, God put himself alone on the hook for the keeping of that promise.

From Eden until today, humankind has lived marked by the wounds and wars that have changed us. We see evidence in the abundance of broken families, abused children, struggling churches, and the ever-growing epidemic of addictions and diseases. We see it in the day's breaking news, coffee-shop conversations, and social media rants.

This isn't the way it's supposed to be, and we know it. Of course, when we're not blaming someone else, we work hard to heal ourselves. We read books, take medication, find counselors, eat healthy, practice yoga, join a gym, attend church, and vote. We learn, we grow, we mature, and we keep trying, but in spite of our best efforts, we know there must be something more than the patched-up complex lives we cling to.

We can feel it in our bones. We need an all-out rescue, one we can't orchestrate or affect. We have it, and it started with a covenant cut in an ancient ceremony binding God to us at the cost of his own blood, a covenant promise that cost God everything he had and, in the process, gave us everything we lack."

Thank you for joining me today, friends. Life is so much sweeter and more bearable when we don't have to do it 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." 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.