



This Undone Life Together Podcast
Season 2 – Relentless

A God Who is With You When You Wander
May 26, 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 the biblical history that make up the pages of my newest book, *Relentless: The Unshakeable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*. My goal with this podcast is simple. First, to just make sure you know that you're not alone, and, secondly, to help you discover solid 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 4, "A Pillar of Cloud and Fire: A God Who is With You When You Wander," in the book *Relentless*. It's so interesting. When I started outlining this book, it was probably two years ago when I first did the proposal and the outline of everything I was going to do.

Of course, what I thought I would be writing is a little bit different than how it turned out. It's still the same general theme, but the writing process is interesting, because you end up going places you never thought you would go. Right? I had a general idea, but the actual adventure looked different than how I had mapped it out. What's so interesting to me is I always planned to tell my story of my faith journey.

What I didn't expect was in just the last few weeks leading up to the launch of the book that the headlines would be filled with stories of people (former pastors, former church leaders, former Christians with big platforms) who now have said they either denounce their faith (they're not Christians at all) or they have said they're no longer sure they believe Christianity as they once did.

I've been hearing all of these stories of different Christians who have gone through some of their own difficult experiences and they're now questioning their faith or just abandoning it altogether. Here, the whole story of this book is my journey of my faith being crushed and God's slow rebuilding of it.

This podcast is not really about if you are with these other leaders and where they are on their faith journey. I trust God is going to leave them or God is going to lead them, and I have absolute confidence in his faithfulness, but I do find the timing interesting, because I can remember the day I sat on my deck in my backyard with my husband several years ago. I still can remember where he was sitting and where I was sitting.

It was after I had come through the third round of cancer and after my treatment had ended. It was during that season that I was trying so hard to come back to life. It took a full two years, by the way, just so you know, and close to three years for me to get back to some semblance of normal physical stamina and strength after cancer and treatment.

My treatment, although relatively short-lived, was so extensive that it literally took me to the brink of death, and it took me years to come back to life. Even so and even now, I'm probably only at maybe 80 percent of what I once was, and I don't think I'll ever get beyond this 80-percent mark.

I remember that day sitting on the deck with my husband. It was taking far longer than I thought to heal and recover. Doctors had told me it would take two years to recover. I didn't

believe them. What they didn't tell me was that I would never fully recover and I would always deal with a diminished capacity.

On that day on the deck with my husband, I looked at him in the face and said very simply, "I don't know what I believe anymore. I don't know if I believe God is real." The truth of saying that out loud terrified me. It terrified me even more than the prospect of dying because, without hope of a real God who had made a way for me to be with him, dying really was the end, so this question about the meaning of life and the reality and existence of God and his character was huge.

In the middle of my pain, as I was really wrestling through the reality of what my life would look like after almost dying, this wrestling and not knowing the reality of God was absolutely terrifying. What's even more interesting is there is a very powerful correlation between our lack of understanding and belief in God's presence and affection and the corresponding depth and capacity of our own presence and affection with others.

We are only able to love and be present with people to the extent that we are able to receive and believe God's love and presence with us. My doubt about and my struggle with God's presence and affection with me started then to impact the other relationships in my life. For those of you who are there, I simply want to begin by saying that I get it. I've been there. There is no judgment here.

However, you can't stop searching. Don't get too comfortable in your doubt. It's so easy to just get comfortable in the not knowing and not chase after or search after truth. What do we do when we're in that wilderness place? This chapter talks some about wandering in the wilderness. What do we do as we wander?

It's talking about the Israelites when they were between the slavery of Egypt and the promise of the Promised Land. They were in that in-between place and they had the excitement of God

delivering them from Egypt. Then, they had an extended period where life was just hard and they weren't sure where they were going and what God was doing. While they were in the wilderness, God was still leading them, but there were lots of questions. The Bible mentions that God's presence was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night and he was with them every step of the way, even in their questions.

Through my journey over the last several years of wrestling with so many questions about who God is after so many years of feeling I've lost it is I've had to find some ropes to hang onto in the wilderness, because the untried faith I had in the first half of my life (that innocent belief in the goodness of God) had been challenged by the intensity and reality of my human suffering.

I had always believed if I worked hard enough and was good enough, like a rudder on my life, I could turn my boat in any direction I wanted. I just needed to work harder or do the right things. Then, I could manipulate the outcome, but so many experiences had taught me otherwise, so I felt very lost and very much in the wilderness. Here are five ropes I have learned to hang onto when in the wilderness. These are hard ropes. I'll start walking through them in just a minute.

They're not trite or easy-to-swallow clichés. They aren't. They just don't land nice and pretty. At the same time, they're solid. These ropes are secure. They are truth, and I would much rather have a hard-to-swallow truth than a lie that goes down nice and easy. I would rather have a truth that is difficult to accept than a lie that makes me feel good in the moment but doesn't hold up in the long term. Here are five ropes for you to hang onto when you're in the wilderness.

1. *Wildernesses are part of the human experience.* They just are. I wish that wasn't the case. I wish wilderness was temporary and relatively short-lived and we'll be in the Promised Land and the rest of life is the Promised Land. I think part of the Western civilization American mindset

is that we are owed the Promised Land right now, and if we just pay enough money or know the right people or do the right work, we're going to have our Promised Land here. That's not reality.

Walking through wildernesses is part of the human experience. It's a guarantee. If you haven't had any wildernesses yet, you're going to. If you've had more than one, welcome to life. This is normal. It's just a matter of time, and if you are out of one wilderness, you will probably enter another one before long.

If you and I live long enough, we'll experience multiple seasons of wilderness. I have walked through multiple...I wouldn't even be able to count them right now...at this point in my life. I'm only 48. I'm coming out of the most recent one. Yet, I have another one I have one foot already in, and I know for a fact it will not be the last.

The first rope to hang onto is this solid, although slightly painful, truth that wildernesses are part of the human experience. This is normal, so rather than us living in a way that says, "Once I get past this, everything is going to be fine," no. This is normal. This is part of being human.

2. *Just because you feel lost doesn't mean God is.* He has a vantage point that you and I don't have even on our best day. God sees outside the bounds of time, outside the bounds of pain and circumstance, and ultimately I have to ask myself, "Whose vision am I going to trust more? Mine or his? Whose perspective am I going to bank on and lean into more? Mine or his?"

In *Relentless* on page 71, I wrote, "We need someone who will enter into relationship with us, someone who loves us more than they fear the risk. As science journalist Donna Jackson Nakazawa reports, 'Most psychologists agree that a child has to develop a secure attachment with at least one primary caregiver in order to learn how to effectively regulate her own emotions for the rest of her life, and in order to learn how to become attached in a healthy way in adult relationships.'

With secure attachments we are protected. Without them we're vulnerable, lost in our own backyard. The secret to healing is the reciprocal presence of at least one safe, stable, significant other. Exodus 13:22 says, **'Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.'**"

Just because you and I feel lost doesn't mean God is, and the truth of his presence is that he does not pull away but he holds his position before and behind a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. He holds his position and never leaves his place, so as lost as we are and as confused and buried by our wildernesses as we are, he knows exactly where he is, and he knows exactly where we are right next to him. God's presence is where it has always been. He does not move. That means my lostness is no indicator of God's lostness. He knows exactly where he is.

3. Be cautious about accepting directions from someone who doesn't know what it feels like to be lost.

I've had to learn the hard way that to go to someone who has never experienced their own doubts and questions and lostness can be dangerous for those of us who have been in our own wildernesses.

There are people who claim to have never, ever struggled. I'm happy for them if that is true, but what I've discovered more often than not is they're projecting a perfection that is not real. I would prefer to learn from and lean into those people who have gone through their own seasons of spiritual lostness and their own seasons of being stuck in the wilderness. Those are the ones who have learned how to bank on God's unflinching presence even when they felt alone. They are the ones who learned to develop spiritual resilience in the place of suffering.

I am very cautious about accepting directions from people who don't know what it feels like to be lost. The best guides are the ones who have been there and who have found a way out. I spent a lot of time over the last few years reading the writings of other Jesus-loving men and women who have had their own struggles.

There is a book list, by the way, in the back of *Relentless*. I listed some of the most important books that have helped me navigate this spiritual, physical, and emotional wilderness in my life, and they are men and women who have experienced their own seasons of lostness and found a way out, which is why I trust their voices.

4. *Remember even the wisest human guides are still, at the end of the day, human.* This follows up the third rope perfectly. I think we can learn so much from each other, but at the end of the day, you and I both have to remember even the most well-intentioned and wisest human guides are still human.

At times, they make mistakes. I will say things wrong. I never want to mislead anybody, but I am human. The one we need to have eyes on the most is the pillar of cloud and fire, the one who is with us and knows exactly where we're going and where we came from and he knows how to get us there. He is the ultimate best guide. The fifth rope is an important one, so hang onto this. Listen to this. Write it down if you need to, but hold onto this one with both hands.

5. *Your home, your Promised Land, isn't on the other side of this wilderness; your home is God himself.* The Promised Land is not a place up ahead once you resolve the current crisis. Your Promised Land is God himself. It's his presence right here with you in the middle of the wilderness. That is your Promised Land. Rather than waiting for the sweetness up ahead and rather than pining away in this hard moment thinking that once you get around the corner everything will be fine, I want you to learn how to hang onto the rope of God's presence right here. He is your Promised Land.

Again, the first of those five ropes is that wildernesses are part of the human experience. Secondly, just because you feel lost doesn't mean God is. Thirdly, be cautious about accepting directions from someone who doesn't know what it feels like to be lost. Fourthly, remember even the wisest human guides are still, at the end of the day, human. Fifthly, your home isn't

on the other side of this wilderness; your home is God himself. He is present with you behind and before, right in the middle of your mess.

This is what I want you to do. The fourth Altar Stone is looking for God's presence in your wilderness. I'm going to finish reading a page in *Relentless*. This is picking up where I left off on page 71. "As lost as you and I feel, God's presence is where it always has been with us, behind and before. The last few years felt like a wilderness to me, and much like the Israelites, I responded to my wilderness with desperation one moment and distance the next.

Although I longed to trust God and ached for closeness with Him, suffering blinded me like a snowstorm outside my door. Trauma wounded me, altered my ability to attach, made me afraid I'd never find my way back home. Even so, God never left. Even when I doubted His reality, He stood guard, behind and before.

I saw evidence of Him in the authors and scholars who spoke to my broken heart through their words, in the well-worn pages of my Bible that shone with fresh revelation and new light, and in the steadfast friends who made space for my questions without shaming me to silence. Just as a dilapidated house sometimes requires rebuilding, my faith needed a rebuilding. I needed to learn what to let go of and what to hang onto.

The process felt a lot like lostness, but at the other side of the wandering I finally found a rope that would lead me home. There is a light that shines in the darkness which is only visible there. Barbara Brown Taylor said those words, a woman who, like me, knows a thing or two about wildernesses and wanderings. She's right, you know. There is a special kind of light that shows up only in the dark. And it looks like a pillar of fire. A God who never leaves, even when we wander."

I want you to look for him, friends. I want you to look for the light that is only visible in the dark. That is evidence of God's presence with you in the middle of the wilderness, not waiting

for you on the other side of it. At the beginning of this chapter, I shared a story about my visit to the Mother Cabrini Shrine in the foothills outside of Denver.

There is nothing magical about that place, but simply my time there made space for me to experience God's presence, so I want you this week to figure out what you can do or where you can go to make space to recognize God's presence with you right here, right now in the middle of your wilderness. He is with you behind and before, and he will not leave.

Thank you for joining me today, friends. Life is so much sweeter and much more bearable when we don't have to do it alone. Even better, we have a God who will never leave us. Jesus said, "I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to 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.