



This Undone Life Together Podcast
Season 2 – Relentless

A God Who Is With You When You Reach the End of Yourself
August 11, 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 here is two-fold. First of all, to help you know you're not alone, and, secondly, to make sure you have the tools you need to find evidence of God's presence in your story, because he is with you even if your story doesn't look or feel like you thought it would.

Today, we're talking about chapter 6, "A Cleft in a Rock: A God Who Is With You When You Reach the End of Yourself." Baby! This one is a hard chapter but one of my favorite chapters, because it's talking about finding God when you finally hit the end of your rope or rock bottom. Whatever you want to call it, the thing is I don't just get there once; I've been there a few times in my life. Learning to find God and being able to see glimpses of God's presence when you reach the end of yourself.

To begin, let's talk about that. Is it okay for Christians to reach the end of themselves? Is it allowed? Are we allowed to get to a point where we just feel defeated and overwhelmed and

tired and done? The truth is there are multiple examples of people in the Bible who got to the end of themselves, people who were righteous and godly and loved God with all of their hearts, and they still hit a point where they were done.

Jeremiah is one. He is the weeping prophet. Honestly, if you read the book of Jeremiah, it can be rather depressing. He goes from feeling good about God one moment to despairing of everything the next. He's a hard one. He goes up and down. He's all over the place. Then, we have Paul. Even Paul said in one of his letters that he despaired of life. He struggled so much that he hit that place where he despaired of life.

Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his arrest... His agony in the garden certainly sounds like a measure of despair. He even knows... He has experienced heaven. He is part of the Trinity. He knows God. Yet, he reached that place where knowing the agony that was coming brought him to his knees. He was sweating drops of blood from the agony of what was going to happen.

Today, however, I want to talk about Elijah, because that's who I talk about in chapter 6, "A Cleft in the Rock." Elijah definitely reached the end of himself. Before we dive into it a little bit further, I want to talk about the fact that there were these amazing, strong, godly leaders in the Bible who got to the end of their own human capacity gives me great encouragement and great hope to know when I reach the end of myself it doesn't necessarily mean something is wrong with me or my faith is weak or I'm not a good enough Christian, whatever that means.

Rather, I'm holding company with some amazing people who loved God who also knew what it felt like to have nothing left. Elijah is one of those. There are two parts I want to talk about today. The first part is what it's like to live in that tension between the reality of our humanity

and the hope of heaven. This life is a gift. We have so much to be thankful for. There is so much about this life that's good.

Just where I'm standing right now in my office recording this, I see sunlight spilling in my window, and it is making me happy. It's that late-afternoon sunlight. There's something about it that is so beautiful to me. I have my favorite chair over here. I love my office and the way I've set it up. I have books all over the place, which makes me happy.

I have a wonderful family. I have a new puppy dog that is so sweet. We have a beautiful front yard that's green with the leaves changing. I could just go on and on. There is a lot about this life that is full of beauty. At the same time, there is a lot about this life that's wrong, too, and living in the tension of this life and the one to come isn't always easy.

If you haven't experienced any pain or suffering, you probably love this life a whole lot, so the thought of dying and leaving is not a happy one. You want to hang onto this life with both hands as much as you can, but once you've gone through a certain amount of suffering, especially extended seasons of suffering, you spend a lot of time dreaming of heaven, and that's kind of where I have been the last several years.

Recently, I was texting with one of my good friends, Liz Curtis Higgs. She has just become a dear friend as we've walked through different but similar journeys together. She and I were texting back and forth about Paul's words in Philippians 1, and I want to read that to you right now.

In Philippians 1, Paul said (this may sound familiar to you because you've probably heard it before), **"I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient**

courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."

He's facing some significant challenges, and his life is on the line, so he's hopeful that he will have sufficient courage to face it whether he lives or dies. Any of you hanging in this space where you are waiting for a diagnosis or waiting for the results of a test or waiting for whatever, you know that tension of hoping and wanting to have sufficient courage and sufficient faith whether you live or die. That's where Paul is. Then, he says in verse 21,

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me."

What he's simply saying is it's hard to choose. There is a part of him that longs to depart and just be done with life, to die and meet Jesus face to face, and I can tell you I have many days and many moments when I feel the same way. I long for my body to be whole. I long to not have pain anymore. I long to be able to speak and swallow and eat without discomfort or choking and without the pain.

I long to be done with all of the complicated parts of this life (things like trauma and PTSD and responses and the wounds my children have suffered and the challenges in our extended family and all of these different things). I long to depart and be with Christ, because I know the moment I see him face to face... Oh, it is going to be so good! The joy! I long for it.

On the other hand, I love my family. I love my friends. I long to remain. I know that as long as I am here God will use my story and my circumstance for great good. Hello! I get to be a part of what he's doing! That's incredible! It will be fruitful labor for me, just like Paul said. Then, he said, "What will I choose? Either way, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

When Liz and I were texting, we both were sharing how it wasn't until we went through what we went through that we really understood these verses on a deeper level. I've read those verses in Philippians 1 countless times in my life. I grew up chewing on pages of the Bible, so I've read this before. I didn't get it until now. I understand the tension Paul is speaking of. I understand his longing for heaven and, yet, joy at still being here. It's both. It's not either/or. It's both/and.

That's one thing I wanted to just mention. This tension is expected. There should be this tension. To have days where we long for heaven, there is nothing wrong with that. To have days longing for Jesus to just come and for us to be done and everything to be made whole, there is nothing wrong with that.

It's okay to celebrate the life we have, too. Life is hard. It certainly has its rich, sweet moments, but more often than not it packs a serious punch. Right? Man! About the time I think things are getting better and everything is going to be okay something comes out of left field to surprise me and double me over. It's not easy.

What do we do in those places when we reach the end of ourselves? The last thing we need in those moments is someone to throw a few clichés or memes our direction to tell us to just toughen up and have more faith. Telling me to have more faith doesn't help when life is hard. When people tell me, "God will never give you more than you can handle," I want to scream!

There was a moment right after treatment... Treatment has a cumulative effect, so this would have been four and a half years ago. I had gone through really extensive radiation that had so burned the inside and outside of my body from my nose to my chest. I was in excruciating pain. It's hard to even describe it. I didn't even know somebody could experience that much pain and still survive.

Right toward the end of treatment I had a day that was particularly difficult. I was struggling with pain. I was dealing with some significant depression as a result of pain and loss and everything else. I posted on Facebook something to the effect of, "Today is a hard day. Please pray for me."

Now, I rarely post stuff like that online. First of all, if I have a hard day and I need prayer, I'll contact my closest friends, but that day for whatever reason, probably because so many were praying for me through my journey, I decided to go ahead and say, "Pray for me. Today is a hard day."

I would rather offer help than ask for it, but the pain was so much I needed help that day, so I posted. One woman responded back. I promise you my friends saw it and they can confirm it was something to the effect of, "Come on now, Michele. It's not that bad. You can still walk. You're not in a wheelchair. Toughen up. You'll be fine!"

Now, I'm paraphrasing. She did mention the wheelchair, and she did say, "Come on, Michele. It's not that bad." I'm trying to recreate everything she said in that text. Basically, she was like, "You have no right to be upset. You have no right to feel weak." She was that blunt. It was blunt enough that some of my friends were about ready to jump through the computer screen and have a conversation with her.

The result of her response... This is what she did. She may have thought she was trying to buoy my faith, strengthen my faith, or build up my faith. The result? This is what happened. I felt more alone, my physical pain was compounded by shame and humiliation, I felt guilty for not being strong enough, and I sure as heck wasn't going to ask for help again.

All of that happened in the span of one comment. Now, years later I'm in a different place. I don't have the same amount of pain, and I can clearly see how she was talking out of her own pain. Her response was coming from her own pain, so there is lots of grace and understanding, but at the same time, the way she responded was not helpful.

In the middle of pain in that moment when I was suffering, I did not have the strength or the perspective to be able to counteract this shame-fest she basically poured on me in that moment, and as a result, it buried me. The truth is, though, I'm picking on her, but we do this all of the time. You and I do this all of the time in different degrees and in different ways, but we still do it. This is on page 92 in *Relentless*.

"One of the most dangerous Christian practices and expectations is the compulsion to present a put-together, unflappable faith. On the whole, we haven't done a very good job of making space for a struggle that lasts longer than we think it should. We may give the struggler grace for a day, a week, a month, or a year. But sooner than later, we decide it's high time she pulled it together. This pressure—whether spoken or unspoken—only pushes the sufferer to hide and neglect the long, hard process of healing."

Oh! Isn't that the truth? I've had it done to me, but I know I've done it to others. In my attempt to try to get them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and find new strength, I load them down with shame, and it doesn't help anyone. How do we wait well with those who suffer? When people reach the end of themselves, how do we wait well with them? How do we pull

up a chair at another's suffering and mourn with them without slipping into preaching, correcting, or trying to judge or fix them?

I want us to look at God's example with Elijah. It's beautiful. Elijah was God's prophet. Righteous and holy, he loved God and served him faithfully. He did so alone quite often, and at one point in his ministry, he did a showdown between God and an evil king named Ahab and Ahab's wife, Jezebel.

Ahab and Jezebel believed in a pagan God called *Baal*, and Elijah believed in the one and only God. They had this big showdown where God showed up and showed off, and it was beautiful. It was miraculous. Elijah expected Ahab and Jezebel and everybody else would turn toward God. Instead, Jezebel told Elijah that she was going to kill him. She would make sure he was dead by this time tomorrow. Not the results he was hoping for!

As a result, Elijah took off running, and he ran a long distance of 100 miles over the course of a few days, collapsed at the bottom of a tree, laid down, and basically said, "I've had enough. I'm done. I'm finished. I don't want to do this anymore." He said, "Take my life. I'm no better than my ancestors." That's what Elijah said at that moment in his prayer. "Take my life. I'm done. I'm no better than anybody else." What matters to me is how God responds to Elijah. This is where I'm going to pick up reading on page 96.

"It matters to me how God responds to Elijah's despair. Rather than a worthless cliché, he offers Elijah comfort. **'All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.'**" A second nap!

"The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank." That's from 1 Kings 19:5-8. What does God do? He doesn't rebuke him. He doesn't quote Scripture at him. He doesn't tell him to get his act together or his butt in church. He doesn't tell him how much worse it could be, and he doesn't tell him he will never give him more than he can handle. There is no bootstrapping, guilt-tripping, manhandling, heavy-load throwing.

Instead, God touches him and feeds him, twice. Skin to skin, a tangible acknowledgement of presence and bread hot out of the oven (comfort food), maybe a casserole with extra cheese, likely a pan of double-chocolate brownies (nourishment of body and soul). Why? Because the journey is too much for you. The journey is too much for you. When Elijah reached the end of himself, God met him there. God was with him when Elijah reached the end of himself. How can we do what God did? How can we follow God's example with others who suffer?

1. *Meet them where they are.* Go to them. Don't wait for them to come to you. God met Elijah where he was...collapsed, done, and at his end. God met him there. We can do the same. We don't wait for them to come to church; we go and find them. We go and sit with them.
2. *Keep words at a minimum.* Man! God did this so well. He didn't quote Scripture. He didn't tell him he needed to memorize more or go to church more or pray more or fast more. He didn't tell him he wouldn't be in this situation if he would do other things or that he must have done something wrong so that's why he was here. Simply, an angel touched him and said, **"Get up and eat."** God kept his words to a minimum. Elijah wasn't ready for words. He needed presence.
3. *Meet physical needs.* In the absence of trying to wax spiritual about why somebody is in the situation they are, we can simply offer physical touch and physical sustenance. We can reach

out and touch somebody to let them know they're not alone. We can make them a meal. We can do something to physically strengthen them.

When I was the sickest, when I literally couldn't get up off of the couch, I had friends like Kathi Lipp and Renee Swope and Crystal Paine and my friend, Tangie, who flew on planes across the country. My friend, Tangie, actually rode a train to come and sit with me. I couldn't do a thing for them. I was way too sick to do anything for them.

They would just sit next to me on the couch while I slept. They sat with me three feet away and they didn't leave. They said very little, but there was a whole lot of physical touch and sustenance, and it's exactly what I needed. We meet them where they are, we keep our words to a minimum, we meet physical needs, and we...

4. *Acknowledge their pain.* We just acknowledge it. We see it and acknowledge it. This is in 1 Kings 19. **"The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, 'Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.'"** Not, "God will never give you more than you can handle." Nope. We say, **"...for the journey is too much for you."**

My friend, we can look at each other in places of suffering and say, "I see you. I see how hard this is for you. The journey is too much for you sometimes, and I get it. You have a right to be exhausted. You have a right to be weary. You have a right to just want to be done. I'm here. I'm here. I'm going to sit here with you. I'm not going anywhere."

What can you and I do in the sixth Altar Stone? Not only are these four strategies ways we can help somebody else in places of pain, but I also want you to sit in the reality that this is how God responds to your pain. The sixth Altar Stone is looking for God's presence when you've reached the end of yourself.

There are two major takeaways for today. First, I want you and me to learn how to love people well in places of pain. We can do better. We must do better. We *must* do better. We have people all around us who are suffering, and we aren't helping them by piling shame and guilt and expectations on top of their pain. We can just meet them in it.

We can take care of their physical needs, we can keep some of our words and comments to ourselves, and we can acknowledge how hard it must be for them. Man! Can you imagine what would happen to our churches if we learned how to do that better? That's the first takeaway for today.

The second I want you to take...I've already said it, but I'm going to say it again...is that I want you to understand this is how God responds to your pain, your suffering, your questions, and your doubt. This is his MO when it comes to his children and their pain. Whatever you have come to believe about how God feels about you in suffering, I want you to see his tenderness with Elijah. This is his heart. This is his character.

Today, as you sit and contemplate the sixth Altar Stone, I want you to look for God's presence with you at the points where you reached the end of yourself. I want you to look for his tenderness. I want you to look for ways he met you there and sat with you there. I want you to look for ways he sustained you and fed you what you needed at the right time when you could offer nothing back to him. Then, as you see that and identify it, I want you to sit with it and believe it even if you don't feel it. God is with you even when you've reached the end of yourself, especially then.

Thank you for joining me, friends. Life is so much easier to endure when we don't have to do it alone. Even better, we have a God who has promised to 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.