



This Undone Life Together Podcast
Season 2 – Relentless

A God Who Is With You in Your Doubt
September 8, 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 here is twofold. First, to help you feel less alone. I know sometimes life is hard and you feel quite alone in it. I want to make sure you know that's not true. Secondly, to help you find solid evidence of God's presence in your story, because whether you can see him or feel him or not, he is with you.

Today, we're talking about chapter 8, "A Prison: A God Who Is With You in Your Doubt." This chapter is all about John the Baptist and dealing with the very real presence of doubt in our faith journey. Before I dive in to the heavy meat of the topic, I have a little piece of trivia for you.

First of all, I love math. People either love mathematics or hate it. I love it! Math to me is like doing a puzzle, and I can sit and do puzzles for hours. When my kids have math homework, I actually get really excited about it. I love math. Math problems are fun for me. For whatever reason, it's kind of like fitting pieces together and helping something make sense. I love it when I finally come up with the solution.

Algebra is my favorite form of math, because in most cases you come up with a nice, clean, easy solution. You have some kind of problem that looks messy at the beginning. Then, you work it all out so you have a nice black-and-white answer. I think that's why I love math. It's crazy, but I really do dig it. It's super fun.

The problem, however, is I expect life to be the same. Life and faith I expect to kind of be easy to unravel, but life feels a little bit more like trying to unravel my headphones. I never come closer to losing my faith than when I need to unravel my headphones in order to listen to my iPod or my music. I really do think I might die if I have to unravel my headphones.

I would much rather (Are you ready for a real confession?) go out and buy a new pair of headphones than to actually spend time unraveling them. They drive me crazy! Honestly, that's what faith feels like sometimes. It gets so confusing. There are times when I can't make sense of it, and it feels frustrating, not like a good math problem, but like the headphones that have been wadded up in my purse that I cannot unravel for my life. That frustrates me.

It's complicated by the fact that I then have a measure of guilt, shame, and that sense of personal recrimination that I have even dared to doubt or wrestle or question, because I was raised believing that you aren't allowed to do that. If you have a strong faith and if you are a person of deep faith, you never have questions. You just believe without the questions.

However, over the last couple of years of wrestling through my own faith journey, I have actually come to see doubt as a gift. We'll get to that in a moment. There is a book on my shelf in my office by Eric Metaxas. Eric Metaxas is the one who wrote the book, *Amazing Grace*, a biography of William Wilberforce, as well as the biography about Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

He also wrote a book called *Miracles*. I bought it not long after cancer because, quite frankly, I wanted my own miracle, and I wanted to read about other miracles. I thought if I surrounded myself with happy miracle stories it might help mine come true as well. To be honest, as I

started writing *Relentless*, that's what I was hoping for. I wanted to put together a book that was full of these sensational examples of God's presence showing up in hard places. I wanted those God stories.

You know what I'm talking about. The God stories that nobody can explain how or why it happened, but something semi-miraculous happened where it was so clear that God intervened and did something big. I wanted fireworks. Let's just be clear. I wanted it to be kind of like Eric's book, *Miracles*, that was just full of these tangible evidences of God's intervention.

Behind that was a hope that it would build up my faith. If I could collect all of these stories of big, firework kind of miracles of God doing extraordinary things, then I could believe and not doubt. Then, I could have the kind of faith that was super strong. Basically, I challenged God to a dual, and you know how those kinds of things work out. They don't work out so well. God wins.

What happened was the math didn't work. Very simply, my trying to get God to prove his existence (that math formula) didn't work out so well, and I experienced what we all have come to see, this random giving and receiving of miracles. There are people who get some pretty incredible miracles.

They get a diagnosis. Then, they go to the doctor, and on the scan nothing is there, or they were told they would never be able to have children, and all of a sudden, one day they're pregnant with twins. We could go on and on. There are all kinds of people who get these very miraculous answers to their prayers, but there are just as many people who don't.

How do we explain this giving and receiving of miracles which brings us right to John the Baptist? I have spent a lot of time over the last few years thinking about John the Baptist. He did not have a happy ending to his story. John was chosen before his birth to be the forerunner to the Messiah.

When his mom, Elizabeth, was pregnant with him, she and her husband, Zechariah, were told this child was special. He was set apart. He was going to be the voice that announced the Messiah was coming (a pretty significant role and not a bad way to start a life, being told you're special).

All six of my kids are convinced that they are better than all of the others, but most babies aren't born having that kind of mission before they even see the first light of day. That was John. He did everything right, really. From a formulaic standpoint, he did what God wanted him to do. He lived a set-apart life. He was faithful. He was honorable. He was humble. He was hard-working.

Yet, when we get to the end of this story, he's arrested by a not very nice King Herod and killed (beheaded). In fact, it was such a shameful way to die that he was beheaded and his head was put on a silver platter and taken to the king's wife. It makes no sense. Why would this child who was chosen before birth to have a very important role in the coming of the Messiah have such an ignoble demise? It's not fair, quite honestly. I look at this story and go, "Hold on! Not fair!" It doesn't make sense.

We see a moment, and I write about this in *Relentless*, of when John is in prison. I believe based on my study of that Scripture that he's trying to put the pieces together. He's trying to get the algebra to work. "Did I make a mistake? Did I get something wrong here? Are you really the Messiah or did I miss it? Why is this happening?" He's basically trying to figure out all of the pieces of the formula, and it's not working out in black-and-white clarity. There is a lot of gray. He didn't get his miracle.

Then, I think of the disciples. The disciples walked with Jesus for three years. They saw him feed thousands and thousands of people with five loaves of bread and two fish. They saw him heal countless people of illness and diseases and sickness and physical disabilities. The lame

were made to walk. The blind were made to see. They saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead after he had been in the tomb for four days (a long time). The disciples had seen all of these miracles. They had seen these tangible evidences of God's presence in the life of Jesus.

Yet, when Jesus was arrested and crucified, every one of those disciples fled. They ran. The Bible says in the New Testament in the Gospels that every one of them split. He was abandoned. Jesus was left alone. You sit there and see that John didn't get his miracle and he died, and the disciples saw all of these miracles, and even in the presence of those miracles, when Jesus was crucified they still ran. That's doubt. They doubted the legitimacy of Jesus' identity in the moment of suffering, and they took off and ran.

They weren't sure what they believed anymore, which is proof to me that miracles don't always make faith. Getting a miracle does not necessarily translate to a deeper faith. In fact, in many cases it's the lack of a miracle that forces a person to wrestle with what they really believe.

We think we want miracles. We think we want proof of God's presence. Yet, it is so very clear by the disciples and even my own life that getting a miracle or getting an answer to a prayer does not definitively establish my faith beyond the risk of questions and doubts. It's an ongoing journey.

How do we deal with that? Doubt is a normal part of the faith journey, I believe. If we are humans and if we are using the thing in our head called our *brain*, we will think and process and have questions and have things we're not sure about. That is not a problem. What do we do with doubt?

1. *Acknowledge it.* Normalize it. It is part of an active, stretching, and growing faith. Doubt is a normal part of an active, stretching, and growing faith. It is part of the faith journey. There was

a quote...let me see if I can find it really quickly...in this chapter on doubt that I really appreciated.

By the way, the quote at the very beginning of the chapter by John Flavel... "It is my ignorance of God's design that makes me quarrel with him." I love that! I love, love, love that! I can sort of paraphrase that. Basically, doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. It's the ants in the pants. It keeps it moving. It keeps it growing. It keeps it stretching.

If we carry around shame over our doubt, all it's going to do is stifle our growth. What we need to do is say, "I'm a thinking human being. God gave me a brain. I'm having some doubts and questions and things I can't resolve." Acknowledge it. Normalize it. See it as a means to a deeper faith and not an obstacle to faith.

2. *Keep asking questions.* Don't get complacent. To not ask questions is to not think. Dr. Timothy Keller has been big about encouraging this part of my faith. I don't know him personally, but I listen to his sermons and his podcasts and read his books. He has really helped me to understand that to not ask questions is to not think.

God made me as someone with the ability to think. It sets us apart from all other creatures on earth (our ability to think and reason and process). Keep asking questions. Keep asking questions. Keep pursuing that. Keep thinking. God can use that, too, to lead you to a deeper faith.

3. *Keep moving.* In other words, don't get comfortable in doubt. There is a little bit of a trend I see online where it's cool to doubt. It has become almost faddish and almost like a cool club of people for whom doubting and questioning is a means of connection with other doubting, questioning people.

There is nothing wrong with all of us circling up and asking our questions, but it should be productive. The end result should not be sitting in our doubt but pursuing answers and closeness with God himself. Doubt itself needs to keep moving. It should always be productive. It should be leading us to ask more questions and to dig deeper in, to research, to study, to pray, to look, and to seek out other wise counselors who advise us and teach us and help us to grow. We must keep following the trail of breadcrumbs.

There is nothing noble about staying lost in the forest. There is nothing noble about a person who just says, "I don't know how to get out of this forest, so I'm just going to sit here and be comfortable in my lostness." There is nothing glorious about that. There is nothing noble about that. Instead, allow your doubt to be productive. Keep moving. Keep searching.

Finally, and this is the hardest, at some point, you're going to have to accept and I'm going to have accept that not all of our questions are going to be answered. There are going to be questions we have that will not be answered and clarified and made black and white on this side of eternity. It won't happen.

We want God to be bigger than we can wrap our minds around. We want God to be far beyond what we can unravel and make sense of. If we could solve the equation of God, he would be far too small. We want there to be mystery. That means ultimately we are going to arrive at a place where not all of the mystery is gone, where not all of our questions are answered, and where not all of our confusion is gone, so we will have to make a choice, and this is that final step.

4. *Choose trust.* I want you to normalize doubt and acknowledge it. I want you to keep asking questions and keep thinking. I want you to keep moving. Allow doubt to be productive. Keep moving forward, but ultimately, what we do with doubt is we choose to trust. We either are going to choose to trust our own ability to wrap our heads around everything and our own

ability to do the math problem, or we're going to choose to trust a God who is so big we will never unravel him.

You're going to place your trust in one place or the other, either in your own capacity or God's magnificence. It's one or the other. It's either your capacity to understand or God's mystery. You will have to choose where you trust. To wrap up, I want to read from page 131 in *Relentless*. This is all about trust.

"Perhaps our greatest prison isn't the pain we suffer in our incarcerations but our lagging ability to trust while sitting in them. The way we cling to our control rather than surrender to the not-knowing, not-understanding, not-resolving. We are—I am—so very desperate for explanations, reasons, something or someone to tell us how we ended up where we are. We think the answers will bring light to our darkness, set us free of our prisons.

Perhaps they might, temporarily. But sooner or later, we will once again land in a circumstance outside the reach of our lamps. Then all the reasons that felt bright enough in the first crisis won't light up the second. What we need is not more proof of Him but more trust in Him.

'Where there is true faith, yet there may be a mixture of unbelief,' a seventeenth-century Welsh minister, Matthew Henry, said. 'The Old-Testament prophets were sent mostly to kings and princes, but Christ preached to the congregations of the poor.' This is good news for the likes of you and me. We, the shabby, worn-down company of the poor. Those of us who believe and yet doubt. Those whose stomachs growl for a feast of faith and yet can scrounge up only a couple of pennies of trust.

Perhaps it's time to revisit the miracles and evidences we've already seen. He has doggedly pursued us in spite of our every attempt to push Him out. His presence is big enough to enter into the dark places, confusing places, ugly and beyond-understanding places and, by the sheer magnitude of His mystery, shine a light far too bright to be eclipsed by our doubt.

If I dare trust Him even here, doubt turns out to be a gift. A strange, hard gift, to be sure. But the means of a deeper faith. And if faith grows in a darkness with every sinister attempt to ruin it, then perhaps that is the real miracle after all."

My friends, there is no reason why I should still believe. Yet, I do. That means I finally got my miracle. For reasons I can't understand in ways that I can't comprehend, God has preserved my faith. God has reestablished my faith. God has built the strength in me where I day after day can choose to trust. If he can do that for me, he can do that for you. Doubt is not the enemy of your faith. It's the means to deepening it, so take it to him.

This is what I want you to do this week. I want you to identify your eighth Altar Stone. Rather than shaming yourself for your questions and your doubts, I want you to look for God's presence in them. I want you to look for God pushing into your questions with evidence of himself.

Jesus said, "Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you." That's Hebrews 13:5 and Deuteronomy 31:6. He also said in Matthew 28:18-20, "I will be with you always even to the end of the age." Can you trust that he's with you even if you don't feel him? Can you trust that his presence is reaching for you even when you can't reach for him? Believe it! Believe it! Let your doubt lead you on that trail of breadcrumbs to Jesus himself.

My friends, thank you so much for joining me today. It is so much sweeter and more bearable when we don't have to do this journey alone. Even better, we have a God who has promised

that he will be with us always and his love will never fail. "I will not leave you as orphans," Jesus promised. "I will come to you," and I choose to 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.