



This Undone Life Together Podcast
Season 2 – Relentless

A God Who Is With You in Your Hunger
October 6, 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 *Relentless: The Unshakeable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*. My goal here is twofold: first, to help you feel less alone and, secondly...this is even more important...to help you find solid evidence of God's presence in the middle of your story.

From the first episode till now, I have been trying to walk you along with some of the thoughts behind the different chapters but also helping you find your 12 Altar Stones. I want at the end of the last page for you to have your own altar of 12 stones that testify to God's presence with you no matter what comes. The reason for that is because you and I both know this is not the last of the difficult things we will deal with.

Until we get to the last day of our lives, there will be more unexpected circumstances and challenging things we will have to face, and my hope is that we shore up enough factual evidence of God's presence so no matter what happens and no matter what comes and no matter how hard it may be down the road we will know for certain God's love is unfailing and his presence is relentless. Relentless. It has been such a huge part of my journey, and this is what I want for you.

Today, we are talking about chapter 10, "A Meal: A God Who Is With You in Your Hunger." I have a question for you as we begin. First of all, have you ever known what it feels like to be truly hungry? I mean, truly hungry. I know there are times... My kids actually tell me on a regular basis that they're "starving." Of course, they are not starving, but they are convinced they are.

Have you ever known what it feels like to be truly hungry and utterly unable to fill yourself? You're so hungry, but you have no ability to find food and to eat the food, so you're starving. Until I went through the last several years, my only example of being truly hungry and knowing what that feels like was before I would go have blood drawn at the doctor.

If you're doing a glucose test or something like that, they say, "You need to fast before your blood test. You can't have anything for breakfast. Only water." I'd have to go like four whole hours without eating, and I usually thought I was going to die. Please tell me I'm not the only one!

On those days, I would dread it, and I would try to time my doctor's appointment to get my lab work done at the earliest possible time in the morning so I could go home and eat. Obviously, going without food for a few hours was not going to kill me, but in my head I was hungry and wasn't allowed to satisfy that hunger, which is a terrible feeling. Let's just be really quite honest.

I'll never forget the day my smallest three children joined our family. It was July of 2011. The day before, we had gotten a phone call from a relative telling us about a mom who had three children (twin 4-year-olds and a 5-year-old) who needed a place to live. She was no longer able to care for them (the biological mother), so we were asked to take them in.

The next day, we borrowed some car seats, and we packed them in the car and drove to another state and picked up these three kiddos. When we brought them home, I remember making for them a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese, because...hello...what would be a better meal for a pre-schooler than Kraft macaroni and cheese and watermelon slices?

In my mind, it was certain to make me a hero. Serve up macaroni and cheese and watermelon. These were tiny little 4- and 5-year-olds. They were pretty small even for their age, so I thought, "Surely, one box of Kraft macaroni and cheese and watermelon would be enough." Within seconds of serving it up... I'm not kidding. Within seconds of serving it up, I equally divided one box between all three of them. Every last noodle was gone. There was nothing left. There was not a single piece of macaroni and cheese left.

The other thing I noticed is that they swallowed it whole. They shoveled the macaroni and cheese into their mouths like it would run off their plate if they didn't eat it fast. There's really only one way to describe how they ate their food on that day and the hundreds and hundreds of days that followed. Desperation.

They ate with a desperation I had never seen in children before, and I had raised three boys, so I'm fairly accustomed to hungry teenage boys. I'm fairly accustomed to children shoveling food in their mouths, but my boys never ate with that kind of desperation. They may have been hungry, but there wasn't this frightened, scared, desperate look on their face as they ate their food.

What's interesting is I remember as a little girl my dad eating the same way. I hadn't connected the dots. I hadn't understood why, but I remember how my dad would eat with that same kind of desperation even as an adult. He was definitely a smidgen of a control freak when it came to my brother and I finishing everything on our plates, and we never could get our plates as clean as his.

Let me tell you. When my dad would eat his dinner, there was not a drop of anything left. He ate all of it, every time, and the entire plate was clean, every time. I thought that was normal. That's what I grew up seeing. I thought that was normal. I didn't realize there are people who don't wipe their plates clean of all evidence of food. I didn't understand that until I became an adult by eating with other adults who sometimes left a couple of pieces of food on their plates.

When I took in these three young children and watched how they ate, it reminded me of how my dad ate as well. There was that desperation there. Quite honestly, I didn't understand it. I didn't really understand why my kids even a year or two after they had been with us still ate with that desperation. With my dad, I didn't understand. He was a grown adult. He had plenty of food for his entire adult life. Why was he still eating with that kind of desperation?

I didn't understand any of this until my third round of cancer when I experienced true hunger. To give you an idea, and I don't think I go into very much detail about this in the book, but from my cancer surgery (the big one that took out two-thirds of my tongue), I remember my last meal the night before that surgery, because I wanted to have one of my favorite meals. I talk about it in the book. You can read in the book what I ended up eating.

I knew with taking out two-thirds of my tongue I would lose most of my taste, and I wanted to taste my favorite meal again. That day, of course, I got up early in the morning and was not allowed to have food or water, which is understandable, but that was only the beginning of my hunger.

After they took out my tongue, they made a graft from tissue from my left arm and blood vessels from my left arm and tissue from my neck and blood vessels from my neck and used all of that to create some sort of semblance of a tongue. Then, they had to put a Doppler ultrasound in my tongue that stayed there for two days to make sure there was blood flow. They basically wanted to create live tissue and not just a dead scarred graft but live tissue that would function.

It's complicated. For you medical people, you think it's pretty cool, but the rest of you are probably grossed out right now. The long story short is I couldn't have anything by mouth (nothing in my mouth) for two weeks. We're not talking four hours. This isn't a normal pre-blood draw fast. For two weeks, I couldn't have so much as an ice chip. I'm not kidding.

I will never forget. I was in the ICU for a couple of days after that surgery. I can't remember. I think it was the second day. My husband came in with my kids. My mom had been staying with me in the hospital. My husband came in with a drink carrier with Starbucks lattes in it. I'm lying there, and at that point, I hadn't even had a sip of water in over 24 hours, I also realized I had lost most of my taste, and I'm missing a tongue. It was a lot.

I watched my husband carry in one of my favorite drinks and hand it to my mom, knowing I couldn't have one myself. Let me tell you. Oh, man! He didn't mean anything by it, but I have never felt my hunger as much as I felt my hunger in that moment, my desire for something I could not fill and my longing for something I could not have. It was so incredibly painful, and that was just the beginning.

For 14 days, I went without any water or ice or food. I had a feeding tube in my stomach, so all fluid had to go directly into my stomach, but I couldn't have anything in my mouth or throat. That's not very comfortable, by the way. For 14 days... When I finally went for my follow-up and they gave me the approval to have clear liquids only, I went home, and all I wanted was a glass of water. I was so happy to have a glass of water.

I had no idea how much we take for granted. Obviously, just some of the basic parts of our sustenance. That was a horrific season. After that two weeks, I started chemotherapy and radiation, and then my throat and everything burned enough that I couldn't swallow anyway, so the rest of my nourishment for months went directly into a tube in my stomach.

Those first two weeks were only the very beginning of what I would need to deal with, and I can honestly say now that, yes, I have experienced true hunger that I have not been able to fill. I have a whole new awareness now. I've done a lot of work with Compassion International, and when I talk to the alumni in the program (these men and women who were once children in abject poverty) and they talk about not having food or water and what that felt like for year upon year upon year, I have a tiny glimpse of what that must have been like for them and how traumatic it is when we have a physical hunger that we cannot fill.

It is a horrific suffering that most of us in Western civilization have no idea what that feels like. We have no idea what it feels like to be truly hungry. Because of those six months of me having a feeding tube and not being able to eat, I have a tiny glimpse now of what real hunger is.

The irony, however, is that our physical hunger is only the barest representation of our soul hunger. You and I carry around a soul hunger. Ever since the garden of Eden, we have carried around a soul hunger that is starving for and is desperate for intimacy. We are desperate to be connected and filled with a love that comes from relationship.

We see evidence of this everywhere. The epidemic of addictions we have... The amount and different types of addictions we have are really quite profound. We have so many different kinds of addictions. Really, this epidemic of addiction is nothing more than a desperate need to fill a hunger we haven't been able to fill anywhere else, so we use these addictions to try to soothe the soul hunger we feel.

Of course, these addictions (these things we try to fill our hunger with) never work. They may satisfy for a moment and take the pain away for a moment, but they never cure our hunger. In chapter 10, I talk about a pretty famous experiment with Dr. Harlow and his monkeys. You can find the videos of this online. It's a little traumatic to watch what they did to these

monkeys. I think it was back in the 60s. I can't remember, but a long time ago. They are black and white videos.

In Harlow's experiment with the monkeys, he had different groups of baby monkeys. Some of them were fed their milk. They were fed a bottle via a cold wire apparatus. There was this wire apparatus that would hold the bottle, and the monkey could go and drink the milk and get its hunger filled.

Then, they had another group of monkeys that got their nourishment with a soft terrycloth apparatus. It was still a wire apparatus, but it had this terrycloth around it. What would happen is the monkeys, when they were hungry, may go to the wire apparatus to get their food, but the monkeys spent the vast majority of their time with the terrycloth "mother" or the terrycloth apparatus.

In other words, these monkeys were together, but they had these two options. Those who only had the cold wire apparatus didn't function as well, because they needed more than just having their bellies full. Those monkeys were not nearly as well adjusted and nearly as happy, you could say, as the monkeys who had the terrycloth apparatus, because curing our physical hunger is never enough.

We need more than just food in our bellies. We need relationship. We need warmth. We need safety. We need connection. I sit there and think, "How brilliant of God to create us with the need to get our stomachs full but also using meals as a means of connection!" So much of our culture, especially in the United States, is centered around restaurants and food and meals, probably too much so.

At the same time, the reason for that is because of the connection that takes place at a shared meal at a restaurant table or at the kitchen table in your home. A shared meal is significant. It's significant not simply because it feeds our physical hunger but because it offers us... Well,

there are three different significances. Let's say it that way. There are three different means of significance of a shared meal.

1. *When we sit down for a meal with another person, it reminds us of our shared humanity.* Just like the monkeys in the cage, all of them needed food. All of them needed nourishment in order to survive. They needed to have the bottle of milk in order to be healthy and whole and to live. They knew it. There was some instinctual need to fill their bellies.

They felt their physical hunger, but it also reminds us of our shared humanity and our need for relationship. Without food, every one of us will die. Without each other, every one of us will emotionally shrivel. We need relationship. We're not nearly as independent as we think. A shared meal reminds us of our shared humanity.

To sit together at a table is to acknowledge that all of us need the same thing. Ultimately, we all have the same destination. This shared awareness of our mortality makes way for humility. It's to acknowledge that we are not invincible and we actually do need something in order to survive.

2. *It requires us to set aside our different agendas and come together under one purpose.* A meal requires us to set aside all of the different agendas of the day and come together for one shared purpose. A shared meal is a unifying experience. It requires us to put aside all of the other things we think are important to do the one thing that is important in this moment, and that is to satisfy our hunger.

3. *A shared meal provides us an opportunity for reciprocity.* When we come together around a table with our family, with our friends, or with our co-workers, wherever it is, we must take turns eating and conversing. We go back and forth. It's like a tennis match or like the many instruments of a symphony.

I talked about that in this chapter, where everybody takes a different turn at playing solo. There are multiple different instruments. Each person takes a lead at a different point and time, but it requires us to practice reciprocity, the going back and forth around a shared purpose.

Now, I want you to translate all of this to the Last Supper, because the Last Supper was significant in multiple ways and far deeper ways than I could even go into in *Relentless* or can in this podcast. The Last Supper, like any shared meal, had similar significance. The first is that the Last Supper reminded all of the disciples and Jesus himself, because he was in the flesh and was human, of our shared humanity.

They all came together at that moment. They shared a meal. God didn't do that accidentally. It had significance. It was reminding all of us of our mortality. It was a shared humility, and Jesus was prepping for his own death. At this Last Supper, he was prepping for that, but there was a communal reminder that all of us are destined for death at some point in time. The food might be staving off death for a while, but eventually death is going to catch up with us. We are not as independent as we think.

The Last Supper also reminded the disciples and all of us that we all think we have different agendas, but we came together for one purpose. That Last Supper was a Passover meal. That Last Supper was reminding us of the fact that, again, we have this single purpose. We are destined for death. We have this shared humanity, but God, out of love and grace, chose to pass over judgment on us and, instead, preserve our lives and give us a promise of new life in relationship with him. Yeah, it's a singular purpose. It brings us together.

The third significance is this opportunity for reciprocity where we give and take back and forth, but the beauty of this shared reciprocity is that Jesus went first. He entered into the death experience first. He entered into that himself first. He did it so we could have life. He

took the cost. He paid the price so we could live forever. Man! It's a beautiful symbolic expression of really and truly the gospel and what it's all about.

Now, because of my challenges with eating, sitting at a table is kind of a loaded bag for me. It is very hard for me to eat. It's even hard for me to talk and swallow my own spit as I speak and do this podcast, but to sit at a table and navigate food and water and different textures and different sizes of food and all of that and to move it around and swallow it without choking is a little tiny miracle every single day.

Yet, I recognize even in my struggle to eat my dependence and the awareness of my mortality. There's an added humility of my place at this Table. I don't deserve to be here. I have nothing to offer. Yet, everything has been laid out for me. Jesus has set this Table for me. He has set this Table for me, and all I have to do is pull up my chair and sit with him at it. That's the beauty of the Last Supper and the beauty of the cross, that Jesus went first, so I can sit at his Table as broken as I am and I can finally get my soul hunger filled.

I live a little bit hungry all of the time right now because it's so hard to get food into my belly, but the truth is I've been soul hungry my whole entire life, and I'm learning there is really only one place I can go to get my hunger satisfied, and that's with Jesus himself. When we pull up a chair at his Table, whether it's me in my brokenness, or my three kids and their hunger or my father in his hunger... When we pull up a chair at Jesus' Table, the Last Supper Table, we find a place to finally be full.

What does this look like for us? How do we find the presence of God in our hunger? Our hunger indicates a need we have but a need we were created to have, so when I am hungry and when I feel my soul hunger, I'm learning to recognize it as evidence of the imprint of God in my life.

What I'm really aching for is him. I am aching for a relationship that is better than all of the other relationships I've had in life. I'm aching for a relationship that is finally going to make me feel whole. Even though I don't like the feel of my hunger, it has reminded me how I was created, and that is evidence of God there.

This is what I want you to do. I want you to pay attention to your hunger, both for food but also for relationship. I want you to notice even the difficult emotions and the painful parts of hunger (the ones that make you feel desperate). Pay attention to it. Your desperation is simply a hunger for a God who has everything you need.

What do the hard emotions and what does your hunger tell you about how you were created? What does your hunger, your desperation, or your hard emotions tell you about what you need most? I want you to look for evidence of God right there in that place of hunger. As uncomfortable as it is and as desperate as it makes you feel, look at it. Learn to look at it as God drawing you and pulling you to himself. He is using your hunger to remind you he has exactly what you need to be full.

We will never be full completely until the day we're in heaven, but for now, our hunger can indicate to us and can lead us to the one Table where we will be welcomed in all of our dysfunction and brokenness and where you and I will finally be full. Then, in one last follow-up or action step, I want you to think how you can create tables like Jesus did where others are welcome.

How can we live the kind of life where our life itself is a table with open chairs where people, as hungry as they are and as desperate as they may be, can find a safe place to meet Jesus there? What would it look like to make your life that kind of table? That's the tenth Altar Stone, friends.

Thank you so much for doing this journey with me. Life is so much sweeter and more bearable when we don't have to do it alone. Even better, we have a God who has promised to always be with us and never stop loving us. "I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you," Jesus said. Man! It's a good promise, 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.