

Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules

Episode #177: The Unshakeable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves

[Recorded at a live event.]

Cheri:

Hey, this is Cheri Gregory ...

Amy:

... and I'm Amy Carroll ...

Cheri:

And you're listening to Grit'n'Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules. The podcast that equips you to love who you're NOT, love who you ARE, and live your one life WELL.

Amy:

Today we're talking to Michele Cushatt, author of *Relentless: the Unshakable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*. Michele, we're so excited to be in person with you!

Michele:

In person. I know! I was going to say I can reach out and touch both of you and that makes me so happy.

Cheri:

I love it. So Michelle, I'm going to start with a question about why you wrote this book, and I just want to share a little tiny story to kick us off. A number of years ago, there was a woman in our church who had cancer and various people were visiting her. They came back to the women's group, and they said she has the greatest faith in Jesus because she never once questioned why this happened to her. And at that moment, my heart's sank. Can you speak to us about this book with the background of that question?

Michele:

Yeah. Oh goodness. I'm sitting there thinking it wouldn't that be nice to be that woman who never ever has a question ever, ever.

Cheri:

I have no idea what...

Michele:

I have no idea what it would be like.

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Well, what's so interesting is we equate a strong faith with an absence of any questions or doubt. And through my story, through my history, I've come to discover that sometimes the deepest faith is the one that has wrestled with the most questions. I have, over the period of the last 20 years, I haven't just experienced one hard circumstance I have experienced a series of consecutive, significant losses. It's been blow after blow after blow after blow. Everything from being married to a pastor in ministry, to finding myself overnight, a single mom of a one and a half year old, having to change my career, change my life, change my future.

Then entering a second marriage with step kids and a blended family. ('cause that would be easy ...) Dealing with all of that. Then having cancer three times. Cancer of the tongue three times. Even with thousands of people around the world praying for my healing. It's still coming back again and again. And in the middle of that, taking in three kids who had a history of severe abuse and neglect, children that should have never been exposed to what they were exposed to, and yet, for whatever reason, God allowed it to happen. So there I was, you know, 40 some years old with this series of consecutive losses going, Hey, I've been a good girl my whole life. I've loved Jesus forever. I've prayed. I remember praying for my husband and family someday when I was in third and fourth and fifth grade. So what happened? Where did I go wrong? Is God mad at me?

Amy:

We reforming perfectionists, we have a problem with that 'cause we're formula kind of girls.

Michele:

Yeah. We want to math to add up.

Amy:

If I do this for God, then surely he'll do that. So what do we do when the prayers aren't answered? When the pain continues?

Michele:

That is really the question, right? We equate the presence of pain with the absence of God.

Cheri:

Could you say that again for our listeners and for Amy who really needs to hear?

Michele:

Yeah, Amy really needs to hear, Cheri, Amy!

Amy:

Maybe Cheri, too.

Michele:

We equate the presence of pain with the absence of God. We assume that if we are feeling pain or discomfort or suffering of some kind that that means God has either left us or He wasn't real in the first place, or maybe, this is the worst case for me. I thought He was mad at me. That I had so disappointed Him that He had pulled away from me. However, what if pain isn't the enemy that we think it is? I know, right? That's the hard thing. What if pain isn't the worst thing that could happen to us?

Amy:

So tell us, fill in the blank. What is pain?

Michele:

Well, we think that what is at stake in our life is our health, our children, our comfort, our hopes, our dreams.

We really feel like what is at stake is whatever it is that's causing us pain. That those are the highest stakes in our lives. However, according - if we really believe what we say we believe, if we really believe that eternity's coming, the worst thing at stake for us, what is really at stake has nothing to do with this life at all. It's everything to do with our faith.

There's a moment in the Bible where Jesus is talking to Peter, and it's before the crucifixion. It's before Jesus' death. It's before all of that. Right after the last supper, and he looks at Peter, and it's such an interesting moment, right? Because Peter has no idea what's coming down the pipe. Okay? He has no idea of the crisis that's just around the corner. And Jesus looks at Peter and says, "Peter, Peter, Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat."

In other words, he's like, "Peter, a whole lot of crap is about to hit the fan." Although Jesus, I'm sure, wouldn't say crap. Can we say that on Grit and Grace?

Cheri:

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We just did.

Michele:

Okay. So, Jesus is basically saying the crap is about to hit the fan, Peter. And he says, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you.

Now, I stop right there 'cause I'm like, what is Jesus praying for Peter? He knows the crisis is about to happen. So it's a big deal to me. What is Jesus going to pray? He sees us. God in the flesh. What is he going to pray for Peter? This is what he says, but I have prayed for you that your faith would not fail. At the moment before Peter's greatest crisis of his entire life he didn't pray for Peter's health. He didn't pray for Peter's career. He didn't pray for a check to come in the mail so he could pay his mortgage payment. He didn't pray for Peter's wife or children or relatives or anything else. The one thing Jesus chose to pray for in that moment, he didn't even pray for Peter's pain to go away, he said, "I've prayed for you that your faith would not fail." And then the second part of it is, and that, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

In other words, I've prayed for your faith, and I've prayed for you to stay in relationship and community, to use whatever you will experience for the benefit of those around you. So, what if the pain isn't the worst thing that could happen?

And so, when I started, when God started to reframe that in my mind – now, I don't like pain. I'm not a fan. However, all of a sudden God said, pain is not your biggest problem.

Pain is not the worst thing in your life. What was the bigger cancer for me was fearing that God had left, and so God take me on a journey from Genesis to Revelation to find evidence of his presence.

Amy:

Well, what happens when we feel like we're a faith failure? What happens when we feel like, wow, my faith, I think, is failing?

Michele:

Well, that's an interesting question, too. I think sometimes we think our faith is failing, because we have assumed it a strong faith means that there's no questions. We have assumed that doubt and questions and faith are mutually exclusive. But here's the interesting thing. Frederick Buechner said these words, and I love it. "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith." It keeps it moving, right?

Amy:

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Wow!

Michele:

Think of it this way. If you went for a hike today, in the mountains of Colorado. Let's say you went into the middle of the woods and all of a sudden you realize you were lost. What would you do in the place of lostness? Well, you would start using your resources. You would start looking for a map. You would pull up GPS on your phone. You would call for help. You'd look at the sun in the sky. You would do everything you could to get out of that place of lostness.

Doubt, then, and questions that is actually productive. It helps you find your way home. The only time that doubt is dangerous to your faith is when you decide to set up camp and make your home there in the place of lostness.

Who goes to the woods and gets lost and decides to just say, "Well, I'm lost, I guess I'll just live here for the rest of my life?" None of us do. Doubt is evidence. Questions and doubt is evidence that you are a living, breathing, thinking human. God is beyond our ability to figure out.

We think that we want answers, but what we really do want is a God that's bigger than our ability to unravel him. We need a God who's bigger than ourselves. That means there will always be questions. And having questions is not an evidence of a lack of faith. It means you're a living, thinking human being who was trying to comprehend an incomprehensible God.

But if you allow yourself to use your resources, to use your tools, your GPS, the word of God, the relationships, people who have been there before and know their way out. Then doubt can actually become the best thing that's ever happened to your faith, because it causes you to use muscles that you haven't used and to really wrestle with why you believe what you believe.

And what ends up happening. This is what I found, God was not afraid of my doubt. He knows who he is. He just wanted me to enter into those questions with them and then he would teach me something about himself that I'd never learned before.

Cheri:

So this episode is going to be airing right before Thanksgiving, which I know is a significant time for you. And for people who are dealing with difficulties who are dealing with pain, the holidays can be extra hard. Can you, can you speak to our listeners who are maybe dreading the holidays because of some painful situation, and they're

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surrounded by people who are celebrating and joyous and that's just not where they're at.

Michele:

Well, so much of the holidays, you know, those special days. They're loaded days, because especially in American culture, we've put so much pressure into that, on relationships, on the ideal. I mean the movies on TV, the commercials, everything create an ideal that no real life can attain to; it will never measure up. And so, for me, Thanksgiving used to be my, it's always been my favorite holiday for my whole entire life.

However, three or four Thanksgivings in a row, I ended up having cancer or some kind of trauma that happened during Thanksgiving. So it's now become a very loaded season for me. Not to mention the fact that I've had two thirds of my tongue removed. So Thanksgiving and Christmas it's centered around food and flavors, which I don't get to enjoy very much. So, while everybody is talking about how the Christmas cookies are so good, I got nothing, right?

So it's loaded. What I'm having to learn is what I need. I don't need more answers or more programs. What I need most of all is presence, and it's the one thing God gave me, unconditionally. He said, never will I leave you or forsake you. He said, "I am with you always to the very end of the age." John 14:18

He said, "I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you." And so, part of me staying grounded through these seasons that are so loaded and so charged with loss and reminders of loss is reminding that the one thing that I will never lose is God and His love itself. And staying so grounded and present in that that no matter what happens around me, I've got my own little, like my own little oasis of God's presence with me everywhere I go.

Amy:

Would you give us a closing word of encouragement for our listeners, Michele?

Michele:

The biggest word of encouragement I have is that right now, for those of you who are listening, there is something that you're experiencing that is making you feel alone.

Pain creates a sense of otherness. It makes me feel separate from the lives and the excitement of those around you. And so you end up feeling more isolated. You could be

in a room of people, but the presence of your pain makes you feel more alone than you've ever been.

And the first thing I want to tell you is I'm with you. I get it. But my presence isn't even enough for that. So this is what I want to tell you. God's presence is where the pain is. God is the kind of God that doesn't pull away from things that are messy or uncomfortable or confusing. He's not turned off by your anger or your disappointment or even your questions that God is a God that actually pushes into the places of pain.

Whether you can feel him or not, whether you can reach for him or not. He is with you. He actually comes and finds you where you are.

You don't have to find him and trust the fact that he's with you. Trust the fact that his love will never end. And you will find a peace that will carry you through one day at a time.

Cheri:

Okay. We need your help to record the traditional ending to Grit and Grace.

For today. Grow your grit, embrace God's grace. And when you run across a bad rule, you know what to do. Go right on ahead and...

All:

BREAK IT!

Outtakes`

Cheri:

We're waiting. We're waiting. If we were at my house, I'd be checking to see where the cats are 'cause any of you who listen to grit and grace know that's [mewing] Dusty in the background. And she always shows up at the worst possible time.

Hey, this is Cheri Gregory, and you're listening to Grit 'n'... oh, sorry. That will be edited out. Hey...

Amy:

Well, we performing. Reper... Here's where editing comes in handy.