

Grit 'n' Grace — THE PODCAST Episode #271
“A Faith that Does Not Fail (Part 1)”
with Michele Cushatt

Cheri Gregory

Hey friend, it's Cheri Gregory.

And you're listening to Grit 'n' Grace — THE PODCAST that equips you to lose who you're NOT, love who you ARE, and live your ONE Life Well.

Can I just say that after more than 2 **years** of hiatus, it is SO good to be baaaack!

Last week's episode was a “Catch-Up Convo” between Amy and me. We recorded at the end of July 2023 ... and then LIFE. GOT. HARD. So those files sat on my hard drive for 14 **months** ... along with the files for the next few episodes.

And I'll confess — part of me has been so embarrassed at my inability to “pull myself together and just get these episodes *out*” that I actually considered deleting the files altogether.

But I just couldn't.

And as you're about to hear, our interview with Michele Cushatt was a POWERFUL interview. **So** powerful that I'm splitting it into Part 1 and Part 2 to give us ALL time to digest all the truth bombs she dropped!

SO, in this interview, which was recorded near the end of July 2023, we're discussing Michele's book *A Faith that Will Not Fail: 10 Practices to Build Up Your Faith When Your World Is Falling Apart*.

An experienced communicator, Michele Cushatt speaks internationally to a wide variety of audiences and has published three previous books, including *Undone* and *I Am*. A three-time head and neck cancer survivor and parent of “children from hard places,” Michele is a (reluctant) expert of trauma, pain, and the deep human need for authentic connection and enduring faith. She and her husband, Troy, share a blended family of six children, including biological children, stepchildren, and foster-adopt children. They live on eight acres outside of Denver, Colorado. For more information, visit www.MicheleCushatt.com.

That's “Michele” with only 1 “L” and Cushatt with 2 “T”s!

Amy Carroll

Michelle, welcome back to Grit'n'Grace. Good golly, I think about you – you were one of our first guests!

Michele Cushatt

I was one of the first? I don't think I knew that!

Amy Carroll

Yeah, was she second, Cheri?

Cheri Gregory

Yeah!

Michele Cushatt

Oh my goodness! Yay! How long ago was that?

Cheri Gregory

Either six or seven or eight years – I cannot do the math right now.

Michele Cushatt

So basically, I was in my 40s back then. So that was a long time ago.

Cheri Gregory

Multiple lifetimes ago.

Michele Cushatt

Yes. I'm so glad to be back with both of you. You guys know that I just adore you. So anytime I have time to chat with you two, I'm a hundred percent in.

Amy Carroll

Well, we feel the same. And one of the reasons that we love you so much is that you tackle the hard things, and you say the things that need to be said. So tell us how this book came about, *A Faith That Will Not Fail*. It is such an amazing book, Michele. I want to sit with it again. I've already determined I need to go through it again, slower. How did it come to be?

Michele Cushatt

Yeah, that's a great question. I never set out to be somebody who writes about faith and suffering. But, you know, we tend to write about what we experience, right? What we wrestle with. And that has been my story for 30 years now. It's just walking through season after season after season of difficult circumstances, just consecutive losses and trying to wrestle with the reality of faith in the middle of the reality of real life. And so all of my books talk about this subject.

My last book, *Relentless: The Unshakable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves* was more narrative nonfiction, that was a little bit more memoir-like.

And so this book was about, okay, so how do we take these kinds of theoretical concepts and actually make them *tangible* and *accessible*?

How can I deliver lifelines to the person that's in the trenches that doesn't even have the energy to pick up their Bible and do a three hour study, but they want something to hang onto? How can I make my journey and what I've learned as accessible and digestible as possible?

And that was really the heart behind the book is — how can we take these kinds of big complex topics, and for the person who really is at the end of their rope, give them something that they can hang onto.

Amy Carroll

Mission accomplished! Because, let me tell you that I just loaned my book to a friend (I will be getting that book back!) I loaned a book to a friend who runs a nonprofit for women coming out of crisis. And she said, "I cannot find a book for them." And I was like "I have one." And so I was so excited to share your book with her.

Michele Cushatt

I've heard radio programs that are now keeping this book on stock, when they have listeners call in, this is what they send ... counseling centers, things like that.

I just know that when I was at a place where I was truly suffering and really questioning, not only God's reality, but His love and affection for me.

Like really wondering if God was just mad at me, and that's why I was suffering so much. I was in the fetal position, barely surviving. And so to ask me to go to a Bible study or ask me to do an exegesis of the book of Ezekiel was not going to happen, right? I just needed what is something solid I can stand on?

And I open the book with a story about a house my husband and I bought in the middle of the pandemic, and it was a fixer upper. (Don't ask me what we were thinking, it was insane to try to remodel a house while we're going through a worldwide crisis!) But we did. That's what we did. We found a house that was really broken down, had been vacant for a year. And we gutted and rebuilt the whole thing.

But as we were in the process of purchasing it, my husband did the home inspection. And when he got done with the home inspection – he's a home inspector – he said, "Yes, it looks like it's a mess. **But the foundation is good.** And if you get the foundation right, you can fix everything else."

And that was kind of the metaphor of what if that is true about our faith? What if, you know, when Jesus is in the boat in the storm with the disciples, and the storm is raging and they wake them up and they say, "Jesus, don't you care if we drown?" Which

sounds like you and me, right? “Don't you care?” That He looks at them and He stills the storm. He calms the waves and He says “Where Is your faith?”

And basically what He's saying is “I don't want you to look at the wallpaper and the windows and the paint color, I want you to look at the foundation. And if your foundation is good, if your faith is in the right place, everything else can be fixed.”

Cheri Gregory

So, I'm just paging through the book right now. And I love how accessible it looks, you know, just looking at it, you've got these 10 spiritual disciplines or practices, you call them practices, and then it's broken down to day 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 – like just looking at the table of contents, I'm like, I could do this, I could read this bite-sized little chunk. And so I love your approach here.

But as I went through those spiritual practices, they don't look typical. They don't look like the usual list of spiritual **disciplines**. So how did you or why did you choose these particular 10 practices? Where do they come from?

Michele Cushatt

Great question. So I had two criteria for these 10 practices. One, it had to have some kind of theological basis. I'm conservative, theologically, like I believe in the Bible, and that God's word is the word of God that is inspired, I believe that there's truth. And that, you know, it gives us a lot for guiding how we walk out this life we've given. So I'm very conservative that way. And so I wanted to make sure that anything that I would teach as a Bible teacher had a theological basis.

But the second criteria was equally as important. And this was it had to be something that actually works for me. I've been in the trenches for a very, very long time. I know what it's like to feel like you're drowning, and you can't make it another day. And if the practices didn't serve as a lifeline to me, they didn't get included.

So everything in this book are things that I did, that helped me.

And one additional — I think *important* — note is we talk about spiritual disciplines, we talk about spiritual practices, I even was hesitant to call them “practices”. Because I'm a doer, like, give me a one-two-three step plan to fix myself and I am on it, right? If you give me, if Jesus would give me a checkbox list, I would just do everything I could to check the boxes and say “Look, what a good Christian I am. Look at this good work I've done. Yay!” Pat myself on the back, I should feel better now.

That's not what this is about. So even though we're talking about practices here, these are formative, I would say even *experiences*. In fact, I don't see I think of it as homework. It's not so much doing more work ourselves, but **actually resting in the work that's already been done for us**. That's what I mean by practices.

So you know, when we talk about the practice of relinquishment that's in there — that's telling ourselves at some level, that when Jesus on the Cross said "It is finished!" the heavy lifting was done.

In other words, the burden is no longer on me to rescue myself. Jesus said, "It is finished!" It is complete. It is done. All the heavy lifting is done, that means I can rest. And part of that practice of relinquishment is resting in the fact that Jesus is the one who is the author and finisher of my faith. **I can rest in Him.**

Amy Carroll

So beautiful.

Well, one of the things you said Michele that stood out to me is you talk about you're conservative because you believe that the Bible holds truth, and our friends here at Grit 'n' Grace, we feel the same way.

And so I want to challenge you a little bit, and just ask you — because the Bible consistently says things like "Rejoice always" and "Give thanks in all circumstances." We could give you the Bible verses for those references, but I'm sure you know where they are.

Michele Cushatt

Yes I do!

Amy Carroll

"Don't be anxious about anything," "Consider all joy."

So how do you how do you reconcile all of this suffering that we're talking about? And how do you reconcile it with one of your practices, which is the practice of lament? (Man, that one hit me in a hard but good way.)

Michele Cushatt

Yeah, I opened the book with the practice of lament, which I did intentionally, and it's interesting — I've shared this on a couple other interviews — but I my editor, I went back and forth on this because it seemed a very an auspicious way to start a book. Why would you start a book with lament? It's kind of a downer, right? And yet, the reality was — and this is what I knew — for someone who's suffering, if you don't give them space to acknowledge their grief, they can never go beyond that.

Pain acts as a blinder.

It acts as a it makes us blind and mute and deaf to anything else. And **until we can tell the truth about our pain, we can't embrace the truth about our rescue.**

I'll just let that sit there for a minute. And as Christians, we've done a terrible job of allowing people — especially in modern culture — allowing people to give voice to their

grief. We want people to be well-behaved. And so we tell them to kind of tamp it down, tone it down, don't be too out of control, don't have too many big feelings. We can't have big feelings here; we need to be happy all the time.

So let's go back to those things. "Rejoice in all circumstances" or "be joyful in all circumstances" ... whatever translation. It's so important that we notice the 'in.' We sometimes tell ourselves that says rejoice 'for' all circumstances or be joyful 'for.' That's masochism. God isn't asking us to be super happy about suffering. In fact, the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation shows God weeping for, being moved by, being heartbroken by the suffering of his people. He's not up there throwing a party when he sees people suffering.

Go to Exodus 2 and 3, and when the Israelites are enslaved by Egypt for 400 years, and God said He, the Bible says in Exodus, "He heard their cries, and was deeply moved by their suffering." This is not a God who rejoices 'for' all circumstances. He rejoices 'in,' and you and I can rejoice 'in,' because we know that this story hasn't ended yet. That there is a reconciliation or rescue, a deliverance that is coming. That's what we rejoice in.

I describe it this way – and this ties in lament with this whole idea of rejoicing in the Lord no matter what happens – what we have to do, **lament forces us to acknowledge the reality of our current situation.** Lament is telling the truth about our pain. It's giving vocal demonstrative expression to our grief.

And Cheri, Amy, you guys know, there are circumstances that are worth mourning over. Right? There are situations that are worth being angry about and grieving for. I mean, this life is hard. I mean, you guys know, I've gone through unexpected divorce; single motherhood; I've gone through being so broke I was eating pasta every day for years with my son when I was single mom; I've had cancer three times; I've lost a parent; I've gone through church conflicts and splits and relationship breakdown ... we can go on and on and on and on.

That is the worthy of tears. It just is okay. So that's lament. But if we only have lament, we only look at our current reality, that is a recipe for despair.

And so what you and I need to do is hold current reality in one hand, and future promise in the other.

And future promise is "Never will I leave you or forsake you." Future promise is Jesus saying, I believe John 14, "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come for you." Future promise is Revelation saying that He will wipe every tear from our eyes and there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, for God has come. That He himself will be the light in eternity. That we won't need a sun or a moon because He Himself, His presence will be with his people and His light will be our light.

When we hold current reality and future promise in both of our two hands, that's how we are able to rejoice 'in' all circumstances.

Amy Carroll

Man, I needed that right this moment, Michele. I feel lifted as you gave us those two ways to hold reality and hope. Beautiful.

Cheri Gregory

Yeah, I was just gonna say I'm going to pause so we can, as Amy says, we can rub it in because this is so, so needed.

And it leads beautifully into the next question I want to ask, which is – I think we've had conversations before, and I know our listeners have experienced this, and that is that sometimes either our society at large or our church communities can lean so much towards the "rejoicing" that it becomes toxic positivity.

So how do we come along someone whose faith is failing and offer help rather than harm? And not come in and just try to cheer them up and get them back to being who we used to be comfortable with them being?

Michele Cushatt

Okay, you make a really important point. Back to who we used to be comfortable with them being. When when someone is suffering, and we feel an urge to make them feel better, it's really not about them, we're making it about ourself. And I want you to sit with that and process that for a minute. Because at some level, we think we're trying to help them. But what we're really trying to do is minimize our discomfort.

Other people's pain makes us uncomfortable. It causes us pain at some level, right? We don't like to see a person suffer. And there's nothing wrong with us wanting to ease another person suffering. Yeah, if somebody's starving, we want to give them bread. If somebody is wounded, we want to give them medical care. So there's nothing wrong with wanting that. But more often than not, when we come to somebody with a trite quip, or cliché — saying, "Well, God never gives you more than you can handle! You just need to rejoice in the Lord!" — we aren't really connecting with their suffering. We're actually trying to ease our own. And that's important.

So that's the first thing, is to recognize, and at least take a moment to take stock of "Am I doing this thing because I'm uncomfortable, or am I doing this because I really want to deliver comfort?"

Two, always start with empathy. Always start with empathy. Empathy is entering into another person's pain. Jesus did this beautifully. Like he was always entering into places of pain. He was entering in with the lepers, He was entering in with a blind person, He was entering in with the bleeding woman. He was always wanting to go places where people were hurting. That's why the religious leaders didn't like him very

much — because He, you know, He hung out with the messy people, the broken people, the sinners, the miscreants, the rebels, all of that, right?

So start with empathy. And empathy, all you do is you enter in and you say very simply, “I am so sorry for your suffering. I'm so sorry for your suffering.” The three of us talked before we started recording. And I didn't know we were going to have this question. But, you know, and I said, “Tell me how you're doing. What's going on? Let me know what's going on in your life.” And the whole purpose behind that is I want to – this can't be just transactional, I want to do life with you. And so I want to enter in. What's the hardest thing in your life right now? I want to enter in and be here. I can't fix it. I can't do anything. But I can sit there with you. And say, “I'm so sorry for your suffering. That's awful. I'm sorry.”

So we acknowledge and at least take stock of our own heart. Second step, we start with empathy.

And three, I say, ask generous questions, or compassionate questions, things like, you know, “What do you need most right now? Do you need a place to vent and just get it off your chest? Or do you want to do something that distracts you from what's going on? Like, we could watch a funny movie? Or we could, you know, break plates on the wall if that would make you feel better? What would be helpful?” And both answers are okay; any answers are okay.

Generous questions are just covered in grace and saying, “You know what, I'm meeting you where you are. I'm not expecting you to meet me where I am. What do you need most right now? It matters to me. And if you don't know, we'll just try until we figure it out. But I'm not leaving you. I'm here as long as it takes.”

Asking questions like, “How does that feel for you?” You know, when they're going through ... I sent somebody a message last night, we were texting back and forth about a hard thing. And I she was sharing something and I wrote back and I said, “How does that feel for you right now? How does that land? What does that make you feel like?”

Because we can't just talk about the intellectual and the practical. We got to get to the heart and the soul. “How does that feel for you?”

And allowing them to speak without censure, right? And that would be step four. So really listen. Our job isn't to sit there and judge how they feel, or judge the speed of their healing, or to criticize whether or not they've read the Bible enough hours today, and I'm all for reading the Bible, okay? But our job is to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn, to do everything that we can do be a conduit of God's unfailing Romans 8 love that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Amy Carroll
So good!

Cheri Gregory

I just – I'm going to start a list, and I'm putting breaking plates at the top of the list!

Like, first of all, I want to go someplace – like one of those Renaissance Faires – and break plates with both of you, that'd be so much fun.

For recovering perfectionists who probably cringe when we chip a dish when we put it into the dishwasher fast, that would just be so freeing.

I love the idea of having alternatives and options already in your own mind to offer somebody rather than expecting them to know what they need when their prefrontal cortex is probably hijacked by whatever it is that they're going through.

Cheri Gregory:

We hope you've enjoyed Episode #271 of Grit 'n' Grace — THE PODCAST!

Check out the webpage for this week's episode at Grit N Grace The Podcast DOT Com Backslash episode 271

There you'll find links to Michele's book — *A Faith that Will Not Fail: 10 Practices to Build Up Your Faith When Your World Is Falling Apart* — and her website, which is full of fabulous resources.

And be sure to tune in next week for Part 2 of our interview with Michele Cushatt!

For today, grow your grit ...

... embrace God's grace ...

... as you **hold your current reality in one hand** and His **future promise in the other**.