

Grit 'n' Grace — THE PODCAST

Episode #227: Stepping into the Good Life of Faith

Cheri Gregory

Amy, when it comes down to it – developing new and better habits... it just feels like too much work.

Amy Carroll

You can say that again! So I have been trying to form the habit of intermittent fasting.

Cheri Gregory

Oh, yuck, that does not sound fun at all.

Amy Carroll

Exactly. But I know even though it's hard that if I were to actually develop this habit, the change would be worth it.

Cheri Gregory

Alright, that sounds very mature and very reasonable.

Amy Carroll

And also awful, right? And this is why the habit is not quite developed yet, shall we say.

Cheri Gregory

You're still practicing.

Amy Carroll

Practicing!

Cheri Gregory:

Alright. Well, in today's interview, Jen Pollock Michel, author of *A Habit Called Faith*, calls us into habits that will deepen our relationship with God.

Amy Carroll

Ah, well, those are habits that are worth the hard work.

Cheri Gregory

Well, this is Cheri Gregory –

Amy Carroll

And I'm Amy Carroll –

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.

Amy Carroll

Today we're talking with Jen Pollock Michel, author of *A Habit Called Faith: 40 Days in the Bible to Find and Follow Jesus*. Jen is the award winning author of *Teach Us To Want*, *Keeping Place*, and *Surprised by Paradox*. She holds a BA in French from Wheaton College, and an MA in literature from Northwestern University. An American living in Toronto, Jen is a wife and mother of five. She is the lead editor for *Imprint* magazine published by Grace Center for the Arts and host of Englewood Review of Books podcast.

Cheri Gregory

I am so intrigued by Jen's devotional *A Habit Called Faith*. I've never seen anything quite like it, to be honest. The first 20 readings are from the Old Testament, specifically Deuteronomy. And then the other 20 are from the New Testament, from my husband's favorite gospel, the book of John.

Amy Carroll

Well, I love how Jen explains in our interview why these two books are featured. So y'all listen out for that. And I'm studyin' John right now, and it's just an incredibly rich source. So as we're introducing people to Jesus, it's the perfect place to point them. And this book is a great one for folks who are looking into faith.

Cheri Gregory

Yeah. And I'm going to quote straight from her introduction, because I just love the way she says this. She says, "Wherever you find yourself across the spectrum of faith, whether you're more hostile or more indifferent, more curious or more convinced, I think the commitment to 40 days of reading the Bible might open some back door of faith without you're even struggling to open it."

Amy Carroll

Absolutely, yes. And I love that Jen is standing on the truth that God tells us that the Bible is alive and active, it's alive and active for me – I can't believe after reading it for what, 40+ years, it's new every single day. And we can trust it to be that for others too.

Cheri Gregory

Absolutely. The way Jen puts it – she says it's an ordinary habit with extraordinary results.

Amy Carroll

No doubt.

Jen, welcome to Grit'N'Grace, we are so excited to have you here for first time.

Jen

Oh, thank you so much for having me. This is gonna be great.

Amy Carroll

Absolutely. Well, we love the title of your book. And so tell us about it. What led you to write *A Habit Called Faith*?

Jen

I mean, a couple of things I think about – even when I first became a Christian, someone said to me, if you want to make your commitment to Christ stick, you need to form some good habits. I was 16. And I think about that person all the time, and think how wonderful, and how wonderfully practical that advice was. And so in some ways, you know, I have that in the back of my mind, you know, I had that in the back of my mind when I was reading this book, like, how could I create a resource for people to help create their own habit, specifically a habit of Bible reading?

But it was also – I had in mind inviting people into the experience of reading the Bible, who might actually not yet call themselves a Christian. I felt that – and I live in Toronto, I haven't lived here my entire life, I've lived here for the last 10 years. And so it's a very different kind of environment. I interact with people all the time who don't have any sort of religious commitment, or background, or really any understanding of the Bible. And I wondered, you know, if there could be a way to create a resource for them, too. To help them engage the Bible, and engage it as a story that points to Jesus and why Jesus came and what his work even means on the cross. And so I had those people in mind as well.

Amy Carroll

I'm fascinated by that.

Cheri Gregory

So *A Habit Called Faith* is divided into 40 daily readings. So why 40, and what do the readings consist of?

Jen

Yeah, 40 just because that seems to be the Biblical number, right? You know, Jesus spent 40 days being tempted in the wilderness, and we know that Israel was wandering 40 years in the wilderness and Moses was 40 days on the top of Mount Sinai receiving the 10 commandments, so forty just kind of felt like a wonderful number and wonderful also in the way that it gives us enough time to establish a habit. If you do something every day for 40 days, or something pretty consistently for 40 days, then you're on your way to having a habit established.

The readings consist of, well, 20 days of the readings are focused on the book of Deuteronomy, and 20 days are focused on the Gospel of John. I've really tried to make it as accessible as possible for people. You could read the entire chapter, there's a chapter sort of identified with each daily reading; but I've also highlighted just a selection of verses where you could do five to eight verses, and if you only – and there's also, on each day's reading, a key verse. So maybe for some people who are new to the habit of daily Bible reading, they would choose some of those shorter selections, either the key verse or the the daily selections, and then are the smaller selections of verses, and then there's just a reflection that I write. It always starts starts with a personal story. So I'm not trying to present a whole bunch of deep kind of theological information. It really is for the purpose of transformation for seeing how these trues impact our daily lives.

Amy Carroll

Well, so now I'm really curious. Oh, go ahead.

Cheri Gregory

Oh, I was just gonna say it sounds like there's different levels of accessibility depending on the stage of life. So a mom with a lot of young kids could really zero in on that one verse whereas somebody, I'm an empty nester, and I have a little more time to linger and dig deep, so I like that it sounds like it has some flexibility to it.

Jen

You know, truthfully, even in the back of the book, there's a group discussion guide. And for people who want to maybe do the readings with a group of people, you could even participate if you only did two days a week. So I sort of highlight that in the back of the book that you can still sort of understand the discussion questions if you only read those two selected days. So I really did try to have in mind the kinds of people for whom this is a totally new habit, or like you said, people who seasons of life may just not allow them to sort of sit and linger for, you know, an extended period of time.

Amy Carroll

So good. Well, and I'm curious, because of all the books in the Bible, how did you decide on Deuteronomy and John; and then of all the verses in Deuteronomy and John, how did you choose the ones that you would include?

Jen

It started, really, because I was – and this was before I even thought of it as a book project – I was working in the Gospel of John for some speaking that I was doing. And as I was studying, in particular, chapters 13 through 17 are what are called the farewell discourse, so Jesus is getting ready to say goodbye to his disciples, He's giving them a final command, you know, love one another as I have loved you, and he is praying for them. And he's just preparing, you know, he's preparing them for his departure for his death.

And really Deuteronomy is exactly that. And so commentators scholars were drawing that comparison for me, which I had never seen. And I thought, oh, that's so fascinating. Deuteronomy. Yes, Moses is saying goodbye to the Israelites, they're getting ready to inherit the promised land. He's kind of giving them his final sermons. And this is his final farewell.

And then the other thing – and then I started to get really interested in that connection, the other connections specifically in John, the farewell discourse in Deuteronomy, are these five words of faith that you can sort of see repeated. There's, see, live, love, know, and obey. And I got really intrigued by those words, I mean, specifically, because there's a really obvious one that's not included, when you think about words of faith, and believe is not on that list.

So I thought wouldn't it really be interesting to kind of examine this scripture and also really more broadly, the life of faith through these five words? So then I thought, well, maybe this is a book and this would be fun to do.

Amy Carroll

I have become obsessed with connections between the Old and New Testament. So I'm gonna have to read this to see these connections that I've never seen before either. Jen, amazing.

Cheri Gregory

We're also list girls, so – and I can remember like, five, five fingers. I feel like stenciling those words somewhere in my house, because that feels doable. And it's fascinating that believe isn't one of them.

So you say there is a persistent idea today that we've grown out of religion, like a child grows out of shoes, that's a great picture. What do you mean by this? And what's the solution?

Jen

I'm thinking specifically of those kinds of people – and honestly, these could be Christians as well, unfortunately – but I'm thinking really more about that kind of average secular person in Toronto, who really just doesn't imagine that the life of faith would mean anything to them. You know, it's sort of like, aren't we now in the age of science, you know, we've discovered quarks, we've mapped the genome. We know so much, what do we need religion for? And so a lot of people I think, who especially maybe don't come from a religious background don't have any kind of religious commitments. They just sort of imagine isn't that a little bit prehistoric, like or maybe at least medieval?

So that's what I'm sort of getting out there. I actually tell a really fascinating story in the introduction of the book, being at a dinner party with people who were not believers. And when we were talking about, you know, of course, the subject comes around, what do you do for a living? These were business acquaintances of my husband, so I didn't know them. And when I said, well, I'm a writer, I write about faith, you know, this, one woman just looks at me aghast like, and she said to me, just very explicitly, do you believe in the Bible? And so I think that kind of reaction is very typical of somebody who says, well, we've grown out of faith, right? I mean, we're sort of in a new, we're in a modern era.

What's the solution to it, I really think it's to invite people into the scriptures to see for themselves. And that's what this book really is. It's a come and see invitation. I think if I were to go back to that person at the dinner party, and to have a more extended conversation, I'd love to say to her, tell me more about what you assume you'd find if you cracked open a Bible. And then hey, take this 40 day journey with me, let's look at it together. I'd love to, you know, not – just you, you put on your own kind of scrutinizing hat, I've had the experience just the blessing, truthfully, to walk with several people who have come to faith through reading scripture for themselves. I didn't really honestly have to do anything. I just sort of accompany them on that journey. And the Holy Spirit did the rest.

Amy Carroll

Okay, so I'm listening to this. And I said last time, like, that's fascinating. And the reason it's so fascinating to me, Jen, is because I live in North Carolina. So I'm still in the Bible belt. Everybody here says they have faith. Now, it means a lot of different things. But it's still, it's just a very different culture, what you're expressing, but I love that invitation to read scripture together. So since we are coming from these two cultural places, let me ask you, what does faith look like to you?

Jen

I always want to say, you know, I really think faith is a gift, I do think it's a gift that we're given. Because you know, any of us kind of left to our own devices, I don't think we would have faith. I

think that God has to do a work in us to respond to the work that he's done through Jesus. So faith is, it's first and foremost a response to what God has already done through Jesus. God has sent Jesus to bridge the gap between us and God, we're estranged from God, apart from believing in Jesus and trusting in Jesus and responding to the work of the Cross. So this is all work that God has done. And so I think it's such a relief for some people to realize faith isn't a long list of to-dos. It's not a whole bunch of obligations. It's first and foremost, you know, it's just a response to the work of love that God has done on our behalf.

I mean, Paul says it so beautifully in Romans and I can never sort of get tired of a verse that says, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And then I want to say, you know, faith is a response to what God has done, but it is a response, you know, there is an active activity involved in faith. You know, faith isn't just this inert sort of thing. And that's again, to look back at those five words, see, live, love, know, obey. You know, I think faith is about knowing a God who has revealed Himself through Jesus, I think it's about loving this God who has loved us first, I think faith involves seeing, seeing, really truthfully, with our eyes, because we can see the work of Christ, the Israelites saw work that God had done, but also faith we know is seeing things that aren't seen, you know, trying to apprehend realities that are invisible to us physically. And then of course, obeying, you know, obeying, responding to the goodness of God by surrendering our lives to Him and trusting that his words to us are good. And then this last one, live is just so beautiful. And it's so vivid in the book of Deuteronomy, because you often you just come back to this moment where Moses is just standing, you know, you kind of imagine him with his arms outstretched to the Israelites and saying to them, you know, hear these words, obey them, trust them, and live. And so I really think that faith is the best life as we live as God intended us to live in relationship with him, you know, with growing and moral goodness and love and joy and peace and all of the fruit of the Spirit. This is really the best life. It's really a good life.

Amy Carroll

I think we're both just soaking it in.

Cheri Gregory

Absolutely, absolutely. All right. So you've painted just such an appealing picture here. And then my next question has to do with habits, and I'll just go ahead and say it: I have always prided myself in being a free spirit, and the whole idea of developing habits or disciplines sounds like it's going to ruin my groove. So why are habits necessary and how can habits increase our faith?

Jen

Well, I thank God for the free spirits of the world, because some of us are just so boring and routinized. But you know what all of us need some sort of anchor, our faith needs to be

anchored, it needs to be grounded, you know, think about this large cargo ship that was just sort of stuck in the Suez Canal, you know, if we left our lives to drifting, let's just say, and we just imagine that the wind would carry us where it will, you know, well, sometimes you just don't have when you don't have wind, in your spiritual life, you don't have motivation, you don't have a motion to carry you, you don't really even have a sense sometimes that God is real and near, let's be honest, that there are seasons of our faith lives that feel like God is very distant.

And habit is just one of those ways that you kind of, it's like the paddle, you know, that maybe can keep you going. And it's not again, it's not about your own effort and energy, wouldn't want to put your hope in your habit. But you could put your hope and believing that God could use your habit to just sort of keep you in those times of staleness of dryness. I mean, we've lived through an entire year that has been so hard. And I think for many people, we've maybe either that a lack of our habits, you know, some events, time was totally disrupted, life just was turned upside down. And we didn't know kind of which end was up and we didn't have a habit, any habits to kind of ground us, some of us, you know, maybe we could say, you know what, I had some habits, and they kept me steady throughout the year.

I also think, you know, some of us are going to have to just reclaim some habits after we get out of this, you know, that I think about the habit of meeting regularly for weekly worship, I've been online for an entire year, church hasn't been in-person for services. So that's gonna be a little bit of effort involved in sort of reclaiming that habit.

o, you know, habit can feel like a dirty word, like, oh, this is just the drudgery kind of part of it. But as with other parts of our lives, you know, habits actually lead us into the desire for the thing. That's true, too. Sometimes we wait for a desire, like, oh, well, I'll practice my spiritual habits when I feel close to God. But sometimes you practice your spiritual habits, and the closeness is as a result of those habits.

Amy Carroll

So well said.

So every time we do an interview, Jen, we ask our listeners, our friends online to submit questions to us, and they always have good ones. So we've got a couple of really good ones here. The first one is 'How do you let it go and literally have faith in God that carries you when things go so wrong at times? I know it intellectually, but when it comes down to it, I'm still trying to steer the boat.'

Jen

I don't know that we're ever going to necessarily get over that impulse. You know, in some ways, this is kind of what is really at the root of sin, you know, it's not wanting to let go of pride,

a sense of self reliance, I would say. First of all, reading scripture and really seeing how trustworthy God is, we're not going to let go and trust God unless we actually believe that He's trustworthy. And so as you read Scripture, you actually start to see look at how God met Israel in this time of difficulty or suffering, or look at how God answered the Psalmist. Look at what he did for Job. And then, you know, look at how Jesus met the disciples and look at what God did in the book of Acts. And just all of these, you know, we read Scripture, and it's like, we're building reasons for God's trustworthiness. And that shores up our faith.

I think the same is true for our own lives. Psalm 78, says to the Israelites, let's keep our story. So we can tell the story of God's faithfulness to our children and to our grandchildren, keeping your own story, remembering how God's been faithful to you, and then being with other believers. And if you don't see God's faithfulness in your life, you will see God's faithfulness in other people's lives. And that will remind you okay, that's right, God's trustworthy. Look at how God answered that person's prayer, how God provided for that person. You have to build reasons that you can sort of hold on to in those seasons of dark times. And then you got to take a leap, you really do have to kind of unpeel your fingers, you know, open your hand and let some things go. But I don't think you can do that if you don't have reasons for confidence and God's trustworthiness.

Amy Carroll

There's so much grace in that, Jen. Thank you. Because I think some of us feel guilty that we're just not there. And you're saying it's something that's built over time.

Cheri Gregory

Alright. So our second listener question. I'll read it that's exactly the way it's written. And then I'll just I'll add a twist to it. She asks 'How could two believers who want to encourage one another to go deeper in their walk with the Lord develop an accountability partnership?' And so what I'd like to broaden that to be is 'What role does accountability between believers play in our development of faith?'

Jen

This is such a great question. I have really been tempted so much of my life to be a lone ranger, you know, like, I'm going to do these things. And I'm going to do them all by myself. And and then over the pandemic, I've actually deepened a friendship with two other women that has been a lifeline. So what does accountability look like? You know, I can actually think of a group that's doing *A Habit Called Faith* right now. And I'll just share, one of the things they're doing is they're literally just checking in with each other to say that they read the reading for the day, and everybody has a little emoji. And you don't honestly even have to type a word, all you do is you put your little rooster in if you're the rooster emoji, and that means you read for the

day. And people say there's something really to that, to know that you just have to sort of report.

And tracking your progress is a really good part of building a habit actually. Research tells us that that you are more likely to stick with the habit if you keep track of your progress. And if you try to like keep a streak. So doing those kinds of things, those just silly things where you're just checking in with somebody, I think accountability relationships, they will only work as not so long as the relationship is one of trust and mutual encouragement. You know, if you're not going to be successful with somebody who really wants to just slap your hand every time you fall down. But do you have somebody who'd really be willing to pray for you and with you and share their own struggles.

So a lot of times it's just get a plan, get something that you maybe can be doing in common, because I think that enriches your accountability and your discussion that happened with me, for my friends, these two friends, we've been doing a prayer book, we all started a new prayer practice, we're actually praying four times a day. And this is a book that just has very simple prayers that you sort of return to, and we just, it's just natural now where throughout the day – oh my goodness, yesterday was this wonderful translation of Philippians 2: Jesus who emptied Himself – this particular translation said something about 'who had no mind for his own reputation,' I think is how it was said, and they use that word, reputation. And so it was like, did you guys see that? That really hit me. And so there's this natural kind of way that you are held accountable as people share what they're learning and you respond to it, you get excited about it, and then you think, you know, I missed that prayer. Today, I'm going to go back and find that.

Cheri Gregory

It sounds like a really organic rhythm develops,

Jen

I think organic is great. I mean, you know, structure is like a backbone. But then finding text is really wonderful. I think it's a wonderful way to just sort of do those kind of quick check ins and then building from that, you know, weekly face to face or whatever the rhythm works.

Amy Carroll

Well, thanks for giving us some tools that we can, you know, take this and make it a habit.

So Jen, what closing words do you have to motivate our friends who long to develop this habit called faith?

Jen

I want to say to people that you know, one of the key things about building the habit is starting small. Habit is something I really do think that builds like a mountain of faith, but it starts as small as a mustard seed. And sometimes people you know, want to jump from mustard seed to mountain in like a day. And I want to say give habits some time, set some modest goals, find some friends, as we've talked about, who might walk alongside you and don't measure how well it's going after a week or even a month, maybe take account, take inventory after a year, look forward to even five years, you know, 10 years.

It's been 30-some years, 30 years now that I've been reading scripture consistently, because that person when I was 16 told me make this a habit. And so I just want to encourage people they know people in their lives, I bet some, you know, wonderful, older, seasoned mature Christian, I bet if they asked that person, how did you grow in the Lord? They'd say, well, it's been 30, 40, 50 years, you know, and sometimes that can feel maybe frustrating because it's like cost. You have to stick with it that long, but maybe there's something really hopeful about that. You don't have to build Rome in a day. You just have to start with a small habit and kind of stick with it for a bit.

Cheri Gregory

Okay, Amy, I have a true confession to make. So I made fun of you for saying that you're doing intermittent fasting. I started it three days ago myself.

Amy Carroll

Why, skinny girl?

(Both laugh)

Cheri Gregory

Well, I've been having too much fun with carbs and yeah, I may not have gained the COVID-19 but I need – how shall I say it – I need to change my habits. And the whole intermittent fasting felt like a challenge that was worth taking up.

Amy Carroll

Absolutely, absolutely. It's actually a great way to do lots of good things for your body. So.

Cheri Gregory

Well, and in Jen's devo, *A Habit Called Faith*, she throws down a serious challenge.

Amy Carroll

She says “The most important piece of advice I have for you is this: finish.”

Cheri Gregory

Gah. That hits away too close to home for me. I am a starter. My mother was always on my case for starting things and never finishing them. But I have to admit, I agree with Jen because where she says that the best lessons from anything we do tend to come together towards the end, not at the beginning.

Amy Carroll

Oh, she's right. And there really is something super satisfying about taking control of our lives. Well, in this way, it's a good thing, but taking control of our lives by starting and finishing something in 40 days, and I thought you know, I love a check on my checklist. So it's a big check on the list. And it's a bigger change of heart.

Cheri Gregory

Ooh, well stated.

Well, friends, we sure hope that you've enjoyed listening to episode number 227 of *Grit'N'Grace: The Podcast* as much as we've enjoyed making it for you.

Amy Carroll

And we want to say a big thank you to Jen Pollock Michel, *A Habit Called Faith: 40 Days in the Bible to Find and Follow Jesus*, and her publisher Baker books, for making this episode possible. Check out our web page at gritnegracethepodcast.com/episode227. There you'll find this week's transcript, a link to order *A Habit Called Faith: 40 Days in the Bible to Find and Follow Jesus*, and a link to Jen's website which has some great resources related to her book.

Cheri Gregory

If you're not yet a member of our Facebook group, we would love to have you join us. Just go on Facebook and search for Grit N Grace: The Community, and you'll find us

Amy Carroll

Next week we'll be discussing what we learned from Jen Pollock Michel, *A Habit Called Faith: 40 Days in the Bible to Find and Follow Jesus*, and how it's impacting our lives.

Cheri Gregory

For today, grow Your grit,

Amy Carroll

embrace God's grace,

Cheri Gregory

and as God reveals the next step to live your one life,

Amy Carroll

we'll be cheering you on. So –

Both

take it!