



Season 3 | Episode 21

## Coping With Chronic Migraines

Heather Hart

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week, we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts or find us at [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast). Over the past three and a half years, Heather Hart has only enjoyed one day without a migraine. Her prayer has been that God would use the pain for his glory, but that doesn't make it easy. Being in pain all the time is hard and really, being in pain anytime is hard, whether you have a headache, backache, arthritis. When we feel miserable, we can let that awful feeling consume us, but as Heather will share, God doesn't give us more than we can handle with him in our hearts. Heather is here today to tell us a little bit of her own story and how the Lord has met her through chronic pain. Welcome to the podcast, Heather.

Heather Hart:

Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Crystal Keating:

So, I thought we'd start this conversation by going back to the day your life dramatically changed. As you entered into this long season of chronic migraines, Heather, looking back, did anything trigger your pain? And at the time, how did you and your family make sense of what was happening?

Heather Hart:

At the very beginning, I really had no idea what was happening. There was really no way to know that that one day was going to change everything. In June of 2017, my family and I went on a camping trip with our youth group, where we were sleeping outside, hiking in the mountains, and just praising God. It was an amazing trip. Shortly before we left for that trip, I had met with my doctor because I had started to put on a little bit of weight and he assured me it was totally normal for women to gain some weight after their 30th birthday. I still wasn't thrilled about that. I'm mean, I don't know a lot of women that would be.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah.



Heather Hart:

So even though my family was super active. We go hiking every weekend. My husband and I went for walks every morning before he left for work.

The morning my migraine started, I was on my bedroom floor planking. And I'm not normally an exercise person, but I was trying to lose that little bit of weight. And so, as I'm laying there on the floor on my arms, my head started to hurt and I'm like, "Well, that's weird." And I ignored it for a few seconds. And I'm like, "Nope, I just can't do this." It was getting worse and worse. And so, I finally laid down to take a nap, and three days later, my head still hurt because that was on a Friday, so I had to wait until Monday to go see my doctor. And he was like, "Oh, well, it's a migraine. Here's the migraine medicine. Go home and go to bed." And so, I did. And the next week I was in his office because it still hadn't gone away.

I'm like, "How can my head hurt this bad for so long? Something is wrong." And so, he admitted me to hospital for observation, and we live in a super small town. So, while we have an amazing hospital, there aren't any specialists or anything here. So, after those 24 hours, they had to transfer me to a larger hospital with a neurologist on staff who could look at what was going on. And that whole kind of season was a blur, that whole few weeks there. But my head hurt so bad I just didn't process a whole lot. I didn't open my eyes a whole lot. I was just in pain. My migraine still hurt, or my head still hurt, but I was no longer running a fever and I didn't even know I was running a fever. Nobody told me that, or maybe they did, and I don't remember.

Crystal Keating:

So, were you in bed the whole time, like in a hospital bed and were they doing testing?

Heather Hart:

Yes. Yeah, they did lots of tests. I had MRIs and CT scans and EKGs. And they did a spinal tap to check my spinal pressure.

Crystal Keating:

Wow.

Heather Hart:

And that's when they found out that I had meningitis.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, my goodness.

Heather Hart:

But nobody told me that or if they did, I don't remember. So, I didn't find out I had meningitis for several months and I was at one of my doctor's appointments, like, "Oh yeah, you're recovering from meningitis." And I'm like, "I am?"

Crystal Keating:

Well, so tell us a little bit about meningitis so that we understand maybe the correlation of what happened.



Heather Hart:

Meningitis is a bacteria that gets into your spinal cord. It can actually be life-threatening. It was a very serious illness. And it changed the pressure in my spinal column, which is what was making my head hurt. But like I said, the meningitis went away, and my migraine didn't. So, he actually told me there wasn't a whole lot the health community knew about head injuries and migraines, but he would just keep trying to help me as best as he could.

Crystal Keating:

Right. So now you're back home. You don't have meningitis anymore, but you're living with constant pain.

Heather Hart:

Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

How are you processing this with your family?

Heather Hart:

One day at a time. That's really the only thing I can see to do is just keep putting one foot in the other and do as much as I can. And that's it. That's all I can do.

Crystal Keating:

Right. We've heard from so many people who write into Joni and Friends who talk about no matter what your pain is, it's so distracting.

Heather Hart:

Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

Toothache, a headache, something as terrible as kidney stones, it is so hard to focus. And so, when I think about our relationship with Christ and how we often enter into that time of worship, through reading and praying and thinking; anything that requires brain power is so difficult when we're in pain. Right? And so, I could see how that would impact our faith.

Heather Hart:

Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

Faith can suffer because reading our Bibles and sitting down to pray can feel hopeless when it consumes our thoughts. So Heather, for you, as you're back home, how did your pain impact your faith?



Heather Hart:

Well, I had to acknowledge that I wasn't the same person that I was before. It wasn't going to work to go sit out on my picnic table every morning and read my Bible because I couldn't focus on the words. I couldn't always sit up. So, I started listening to an audio Bible and that has helped me so much. I don't always process the words, but I know it's still there. And so that's been a huge game changer to me. But I also remember when I was in the hospital, I had Christian music playing in the background quietly in my room, just because I needed that connection to Jesus. I was in so much pain. I needed to know that he was there with me. And I had several nurses actually tell me that my room was their favorite room to come into because the atmosphere was different. It was welcoming. And so even though I was in no condition to witness to these nurses, God was still there, and he was doing it for himself.

Crystal Keating:

Probably the peace that they experienced when they entered your room. And there is a calmness in the midst of a Christian's life, especially when worship music is playing, that sets our minds heavenward and on the Lord.

Heather Hart:

Right.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So, I'm interested to also know how it was for you as a wife and a mother. I know as a Christian woman, you take those relationships very seriously. I was reading that you started reminding yourself of your calling and how that helped you get focused through pain. It sounds like you really wrestled through your role as a wife and a mother and the many responsibilities you wanted to fulfill. And it sounds like you began to feel less than because the pain often made it difficult to do what you wanted to do for your family. And I bet many people in pain can really relate to this struggle. So, I'd love if you could share what it was like for you, especially in your first year of pain.

Heather Hart:

Definitely. I remember this one morning I was laying in bed and my head hurts so bad. I was like, "You know what? I'm just done. How can I get out of all of these things that God has called me to do?" And it was those few words that really just caught me in my tracks. If God has called me to do these things, who am I to throw in the towel? And even though my head hurts so bad, I remembered 1 Thessalonians 5:24. It's one of the Bible verses that I've memorized. And it says, "He who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

Crystal Keating:

Oh, that's so good.



Heather Hart:

It's been a great reminder for me through this whole thing is that it's not up to me, that if I can't get to it, it's okay. But if God's called me to do it, then he's the one that's going to make it happen. That's always been helpful to me, but I've also had to deal with the fact that as the time has gone on, he has started taking some things away so I could concentrate on my health. And so that was always really hard, was to lose something, like not being able to go to my kids' sporting events. As a mom, that has been super hard for me, but God reminds me that there's no condemnation for us to belong to him and that my family's not mad at me. It really hurts your heart when your daughter writes a paper at school and says, "I wish my mom would smile more." Because you're just in so much pain, you can't smile. And so, all the little things like that are just crushing as a mother.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Heather Hart:

So, God's really grown our entire family through this.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. I'm sure they long to see you free from that pain. They long to see you with the joy that they know you want to have. And yet even in that time of pain, you are able to really point them to the Lord. I just remember what Joni has said when she gets up in the morning and she is in so much pain, she always prays, "Lord. I don't have a smile, but let me borrow yours," or "I don't have the joy. I can't do this, but I know you can because I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Heather Hart:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And I hear that as your prayer as well. Well, Heather, the pain you feel must impact your day-to-day interactions with not only your family, but your friends. And I have to mention that I was really drawn to one of the dedications of your book. You wrote this to your prayer partner. I love that you have a prayer partner. We all need people who are willing to link arms with us to pray consistently for something. But you wrote, "Thank you for always being there for me, for caring about more than my migraines, and for reminding me that life isn't all about me." And I think if we're in any type of pain or any kind of emotional anguish, it's easy to focus on ourselves. So how has your family and church community come alongside you in helpful ways through this, even to pull you outside of the pain that you're experiencing?



Heather Hart:

Well, my church family has been absolutely amazing. They pick up my kids from school. They bring us food. And I have never been on the receiving end of so many prayers. It's blown me away. The women's ministry leader at our church has become my best friend. She takes me to virtually all of my doctor's appointments because I can no longer drive myself, because when your head hurts, you don't process things and driving a car isn't what you should be doing. But she's encouraged me beyond that to attend more functions when I would rather be at home in bed because my head hurts. She knows that I need the fellowship, so she'll draw me out. When she takes me to the doctor's appointment, we don't just go to the doctor and come home. She's like, "Oh, let's go out to eat."

And I'm like, "My head hurts, but okay." I needed that. She knows there's more to life than pain. She helps me through that. But also, my prayer partner that you mentioned, she actually contacted me so that I could pray with her about something. And that was huge at that time in my journey, because I really was just like, "I hurt. I need prayer. I need, I need, I need..." And she's like, "Would you pray with me about this?" And I'm like, "Oh, you know what? I will." And it was just kind of like a life-altering shift because even when she asked me if I need prayer, she's not asking, "How's your head today?" She's asking, "How's your family doing? How's your husband doing at work? What about your son that's graduating, how are things going with him?" She helps remind me that yes, I'm in pain. And I didn't forget any of the other things, but it's nice to know that somebody else hasn't either.

Crystal Keating:

That's so important. I think that's God's grace in our lives I think when we have someone who's willing to gently nudge us towards the things that we really need. We need fellowship.

Heather Hart:

Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

We need connections. We need to continue to care deeply about our friends and our family. And so, for her to also feel like, "Oh, I'm comfortable enough that I know that she can pray for me. Even in the midst of her pain, I need that." And this is going to be a mutual relationship, not just one where she's helping you. And I love that. That's really key to remember. And I think that draws us out of that tendency to sink into despair and depression because pain can be so isolating. And so, when we are able to, and not even able, but when we choose to focus on someone else, God-ward, that really changes our perspective.

Heather Hart:

Even talking it out, I want to add. If she does ask me about my pain or if she asks how I'm doing and I say, "My head hurts really bad," we'll be able to talk those things out and she leads me back to Christ every time, that God is still good. And sometimes it's those conversations that are just such a blessing in my day.



Crystal Keating:

I think there is a sense where when we have someone safe that we can really process what we're going through and we feel received, accepted, understood, even if that other person hasn't experienced the kind of pain we have, there's something really cleansing about that and helps us move to the next step in the day.

Heather Hart:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And it helps us. At least for me, helps me to clear my mind of what's going on so I can kind of remove the fog of seeing God and renewing my faith. So that is so important. Well, Heather, as we close our time together, what are some of the ways you've experienced God's particular care through pain? And I mean clear, tangible ways that you know without a doubt, God was ministering to you, working in and through you through mind-bending migraines.

Heather Hart:

Well, I think I can tell that he has grown my faith so much through this, but I've also had other people come to me and say, they don't know how I do it and I'm able to respond that I'm not, that it's not that I'm some Christian superhero, but more that God is good and all we can do is lean into him. It's one of those things that I always thought that I knew. But before I went into this season of migraines, it was more of a head knowledge and not a heart knowledge. And now it is just so much. I know I can't get through each day without Jesus. If I can't do anything else because my head hurts too bad, it doesn't hurt so bad that I can't cling to him.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. And that is such a comforting thought to think, "Lord, I can't do it, but you can." And even to be able to share with others, "You know what? The Lord is faithful. He's always there. His promises are true. And that is where I'm going to find my hope." Heather, thanks for joining us on the podcast today. Thanks for sharing openly about your own story and may the Lord strengthen and comfort you today.

Heather Hart:

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired, please send me a message or leave a five-star review on your favorite app. That's a great way to help other people find encouragement from these conversations. And to get our next episode automatically, subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

Episode link: <https://www.joniandfriends.org/coping-with-chronic-migraines>

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