



Season 2 | Episode 34

## Does God Hear My Prayers?

Dave Deuel

---

OCTOBER 1, 2020

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 welcome and include people living with disability in your community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to [podcasts](#), so you don't miss any of our encouraging conversations. Well, I'm excited to announce the Joni and Friends Global Access Conference, an online interactive conference taking place October 14th through the 17th that will strengthen the Body of Christ, mobilize the church to action, and connect regional and global leaders in disability ministry. I can't wait to hear from incredible speakers like Joni Eareckson Tada, Nick Vujicic and Pastor Kempton Turner. Register today at [joniandfriends.org/globalaccess](http://joniandfriends.org/globalaccess) to join me.

Dave, as we begin this conversation focusing on God's attentive ear to us in the midst of suffering and unplanned life-changing situations, I'd love to start by hearing a bit of your family's story.

Dave Deuel:

Yes. Thank you, Crystal. Having grown up in a Christian home, I knew many of the Bible verses that talk about the blessing of having children. I knew this from the birth of our first child. I expected a repeat experience with our second child, but my second child nearly died at birth due to the fact that she had Down syndrome and a congenitally weakened heart. And so, as a seminary professor and pastor, I suddenly realized that I had no clear answers. I struggled. What we desired was a healthy baby. The verses about children being a blessing were not working for me. The confusion was overwhelming. Life seemed like it was over. I want to tell you, I'm not talking about suicide there, just the objective reality of looking ahead at what life might be like was very, very discouraging. The stigma of disability was not the issue for us, and I think some people think it might have been.

Crystal Keating:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).



Dave Deuel:

My wife grew up with a sister with a disability that she cared for all of her early years. I grew up in a home of a special education teacher who always spoke favorably of her love for her students, particularly those with Down syndrome. Our concern was not for the social impact on us, her parents, it was for her health. She was a newborn who was dying. Doctors told us that her heart was severely damaged and needed immediate surgery, but her immune system was too weak for surgery. We waited for a year. This seemed like an eternity. When it came time for the surgery, the heart surgeon told us that Joanna would die within four months without surgery, but that he was booked up for six months. This was one of our darkest moments. I had pleaded with God for a year to save her life, but it looked like there was no hope.

Crystal Keating:

Well, that sounds like you were calling upon the Lord. I mean here you are, you're this seminary trained Christian minister and your daughter is there on the precipice of life or death. And it sounds like even the doctor became unavailable. What were you going through spiritually at that time?

Dave Deuel:

It was a really tough time. For lack of a better way of describing it, it was just a day after day struggle to keep going knowing that her health was declining. We were watching her in a sense die. And we, as a young couple at the time, just to know how to move forward and we didn't understand the resources that were available to us.

Crystal Keating:

How did God answer some of your prayers when it seemed like he really wasn't listening or wasn't answering to what you thought he would do and on your timetable?

Dave Deuel:

It was one of those things where we prayed and we had so many people praying for us, but it still left us wondering how we move forward, and we weren't moving forward. It was basically a time of day after day, just keeping one foot in front of the other. And it was a special time for us and my wife's parents, because my mother-in-law had raised a child with a disability, with an intellectual disability much like Joanna. And so, her words, and my father-in-law's words, were extremely important.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely. And so, I can see why this particular season of life impacted the writing of *Is God Listening?*, Because as you're pouring out your hearts to him, you're feeling that perhaps you're alone. How was Joanna's life saved?



Dave Deuel:

She did get her surgery. In fact, immediately after that doctor told us that he was not able to operate for six months, a pediatric cardiologist who had seen our daughter from time to time asked me how things were going. And I said, "They're going terribly." And when we explained to him, he called immediately another pediatric cardiologist who got us in with another surgeon. And within a month's time, she got the surgery at St. Vincent's Hospital in Los Angeles and her heart was repaired. So, we went from the depths of despair and one month later, we were back on track and Joanna was doing wonderfully well. Her heart was healing, the surgery was completely successful. Praise God.

Crystal Keating:

Praise God. And on this side of the story, we know that Joanna is now in her thirties. And I really don't know much about those years in between her birth and life today. What are some of your most memorable moments these past 32 years? She's 32-years-old right now, right?

Dave Deuel:

Correct. She just turned 32 on August 3rd and we had a big birthday party for her. Well unlike Joanna's health at birth, the 32 years had been good years as all our four children, including Joanna, grew up. There were therapists and there were surgeries, but God gave us the grace we needed. In most ways, we were an average family that was highly involved in church and participated in school and community activities. Special Olympics was a very important part of our lives. One special group of people was the parent group that we and another couple started as outreach ministries of our churches. I was pastoring the young marriage group at a church in Los Angeles, and our parent group was a natural outreach. The picnics together in the park, gatherings at hospital for surgeries and countless encouraging phone conversations were just a few of the highlights of our lives.

Our children even became friends and played together. I look back on those people and experiences with great delight. It was a blessing. The degree of suffering that each of us as couples experienced in one form or another gave us a depth of relationship and a desire to help others in our situation, even though we disband after probably five years when our children were getting a little bit older. Most of the couples kept on being involved with children, especially newborns with disabilities. So, I've never gotten over that largely because I don't want to.

Crystal Keating:

No, you had a great community.

Dave Deuel:

We did. I mean it came as a complete surprise to us and God built that community right before our eyes, as new couples with newborns with developmental disabilities, primarily Down syndrome. We went after another. We got together. We had this little group that was wonderful.



Crystal Keating:

And that's something that people continue to express over and over again, is this desire to be understood, to relate, to resonate with others who have been through what they're going through as a new couple and a new family. So, what a joy for you and your wife to be able to experience that. And of course, you don't want to get over it. I mean that's something that God intended for the Body of Christ to be together to provide that fellowship. We are the physical expression of the invisible God to one another. So, what a joy? Well, I know Joanna's now in her thirties, and 32 is amazing. What's the life expectancy for people with Down syndrome?

Dave Deuel:

Yeah. Great question. Until about 30-years-ago, it was very short, between 25 and say 35, 40 years. And it was primarily due to the lack of the heart surgeries and the lack of antibiotics because infections are a large part of the early years of a person with Down syndrome. But with the surgery and with the antibiotics, people with Down syndrome are living into their sixties and seventies, not quite as long as the rest of the population, but still doubled actually from what it was. So, it's a new day and a wonderful day.

Crystal Keating:

That is wonderful. And especially being a part of a family, I think from what I understand some of those with Down syndrome were often institutionalized, which deeply impacted their health and how much relationships and friendships actually impact our physical health. So, all of that together, your daughter is in a great place. And so, as a father, I'm wondering how raising your children, specifically your daughter, Joanna, has shaped your relationship and understanding of the Lord.

Dave Deuel:

Yes, that's a huge question. One way that stands out in my mind is the impact of Joanna's faith. Down syndrome is a developmental or an intellectual disability. On the one hand, she will never understand many things about her salvation. Just explaining to her how and why Jesus is our substitute in his death on the cross is a challenge. But on the other hand, her faith is simple and pure. She doesn't struggle with all the complexities and the unanswered questions that many of us do. She has suffered no epistemological crises that you hear people talk about.

Crystal Keating:

Okay, you have to define epistemology, please.

Dave Deuel:

What is truth and why believe? She suffered none of those, she has never asked, "What is truth?" She just believes in Jesus with a simple trust that reminds me of Jesus' message about the importance of having a childlike faith. But here's one illustration. Joanna's 10th birthday. A friend bought her a bouquet of balloons and delivered them in person to our house. So, I'm standing in the door, and I answered the door and this friend hands me the balloons, and I hand them to Joanna. And we're chit chatting in polite conversation. And as our friend left, I wonder, "Where's Joanna?" I looked around the house, couldn't find her. I went out on the deck and there she was. I said, "Joanna, what are you doing? Where are the balloons?" And she looked up in the sky and pointed, and she said, "Balloon sky Jesus."



She had sent the balloons off to Jesus in heaven. And so, the simple faith and the simple understanding of us on earth and Jesus in heaven was real to her, even at a young age. At another level, her health is frail and requires continuous attention. She has needed quite a few surgeries and ongoing procedures. This intensity of medical care, instead of making us bitter about Joanna's health issues has made us thankful that we live in a country where health care is available.

Crystal Keating:

Amen.

Dave Deuel:

But it has also deepened our sensitivity to people with disabilities around the world.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Dave Deuel:

Who can get very little if any care for their health. So, in my spare time, since Joanna was born, I've advocated for people with disabilities as a citizen. Most recently, the United Nations. When COVID-19 hit, I had access to the disability data that was coming into the UN circles from all over the globe, and it was devastating. People with disabilities suffer disproportionately in pandemics and other forms of disaster. They are two to four times less likely to survive or get the disaster response care that they need. There's a saying among people with disabilities in disasters, they won't be coming for us. I'm thankful to say as a volunteer member of the American Red Cross that this is changing rapidly, but we have a long way to go.

Crystal Keating:

That is devastating news. And yet, we know that people like you and great organizations are on the front lines of continuing to advocate for people with disabilities, especially when nations are being cut off from basic necessities like food and medication. That is a powerful testimony of the Lord and his desire to spread his care and love through all the nations to every person, especially the vulnerable and weak. So much to be grateful for and yet, it makes me think of the scripture that said, "To the one who is given much, much is required," and I think that is so true for us. For whatever we have, we have responsibility to turn around and say, "God, where are you leading me? Where are you directing me? Where should my resources go especially to help the most vulnerable?" I want to go back to Joanna. I heard you on a podcast talk about Joanne's difficult season during her teenage years. I understand you and your wife started noticing a difference in her emotional stability. Can you share a little bit about that season of her life? What was happening then?



Dave Deuel:

Due to the genetic complexities of Down syndrome, particularly young women have a tendency to develop forms of mental illness in their late teens and early twenties. Specialists referred to it as a dual diagnosis. They have a disability, but also develop a secondary condition identified as a mental health issue. She wasn't able to eat or sleep and spent a lot of time screaming. It was an incredibly difficult time, and it took several years before we saw a significant positive change. But she's doing fairly well today. We find ourselves watching her very carefully though, for certain symptoms that might suggest that her condition is returning or is likely to.

Crystal Keating:

What were some of the factors that you started noticing during that season? I mean did anything happen to trigger it?

Dave Deuel:

The symptoms were really slow incoming. The onset of the mental illness was really slow, so slow that we didn't suspect anything. But we did notice that she didn't seem as happy.

Crystal Keating:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Deuel:

We noticed at times she seemed very cross, unlike a person with Down syndrome, usually jovial. There's a stereotype it's the happy person. She wasn't happy. She got angry at people, and she would have outbursts and we thought something's just not right. Maybe she doesn't feel good. And we didn't know what it was. We told Our doctor, he said, "Well let's just keep an eye on it." I think he suspected. And so, we waited for it to develop and develop it did. We thought we're going to lose her because she wasn't eating, she was losing weight rapidly. She wasn't sleeping so she was exhausted all the time. And we thought she has a slightly weakened heart and so we thought well hopefully, this won't affect her heart. But there were signs. There were clear signs. We just did not interpret them.

Crystal Keating:

Right. Yeah. Well on that note, would you say that mental illness can develop in people with disabilities generally? Or is it just reserved to women who have a diagnosis of Down syndrome? Can you talk a little bit more about that? Or how or why this might happen?

Dave Deuel:

I'll try to relay what my wife and I had been told, because we've asked a lot of questions about this. Disability will often lead to forms of mental illness, not always. And it's not even necessarily the case that people with disabilities have a propensity to a mental illness. It's the segregation and the isolation that often does this.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.



Dave Deuel:

A recent study has demonstrated quite conclusively that people with Down syndrome will develop a form of dementia at some point during their life. Dementia is often accompanied by depression and anxiety. And one large factor is just what I said, is the isolation and segregation that comes with many disabilities. When people with or without disabilities are not socially interactive, it's dangerous for us. That is why many specialists advise you to just get a person with Down syndrome especially out in public and interacting as we do with our jobs. People with disabilities will often tell you that they want a job, not charity.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Dave Deuel:

But the fact of the matter is many need a job or some regular mental stimulation in order to enjoy life and healthy relationships. And in order to prevent mental illness.

Crystal Keating:

It goes back to what did the creator make us for? He made us for relationship. He made us actually to do some kind of work. Isolation has so many ill effects on a person even to develop mental illness. I have to tell you this story. We have this woman who used to call Joni and Friends regularly, I would say every day. And she would say on our prayer line, she'd leave a message and say, "Please pray for me. I am all alone." And she said, "I am a smart woman, but I am developing a mental illness because I am isolated. Please pray for me." And I'm going to get emotional. We prayed for her regularly for the course of about a year and a half. And we just got a letter maybe two months ago saying, "I just want you to know that I have moved to a different state. I'm moved closer to my family and to my grandchild. And the mental illness has lifted. I feel like myself again." And she said, "I can't thank you enough for praying for me."

And she gave a donation, which I know she doesn't have a lot of money, but it was one of those things that you could see the cloud lift from her. So, the power of the church, the power for us to be together, we can't say it enough. So, Dave, you said some really great things in your mini book, *Is God Listening?* When people go through long seasons of suffering or unexpected hardships, it's easy to believe that God is either absent or indifferent to our pain. I know I've experienced that. You're praying and praying your thinking, "God, are you listening?" So, you wrote, "Suffering can feel like a darkness that blinds us to God's presence. In the dark, you can stand next to someone and not even know that they're there. Suffering can do that to us spiritually. Although God is always close by, we can feel alone." What have you learned about the nature of God during the dark seasons of your own life and Joanna's life?



Dave Deuel:

Well, it's important to understand that in scripture, there is a relationship between God not listening and what biblical authors refer to as his hiding. If God doesn't answer our prayers, we might assume one of several things, we'll talk about just two. First, God is present, but he is not listening. He's ignoring us for some reason. And so, we speculate what that reason might be. Maybe sin. Some people even challenge God's compassion, "He doesn't love me enough, or he doesn't love well." This is unwise. There's a second response, which is probably more typical. "God is absent. So how could he possibly listen? God has gone. He has abandoned us."

This is what Job and his comforters thought. The comforters argued that Job must've done something terribly sinful to offend or insult God. Job knew better, but he could not figure it out. Both Job and his comforters had limited God by thinking that God has to operate in certain human ways with no inconsistencies. They assumed that God could not be there right beside Job. Otherwise, he would certainly answer Job's prayer. They reasoned that if God is there, he must answer Job. And God tells him they were all wrong at the end of the book. In our suffering, it's easy to believe that God is either absent or indifferent to our pain but be assured that God has not forgotten you and yours. He promises his children that he will never leave nor forsake us.

Crystal Keating:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Deuel:

Job and his friends wanted to understand why Job was suffering. But God spoke out of the whirlwind and did something different. He offered his visible presence with the whirlwind. God had never wavered in giving Job his presence, even prior to the whirlwind. And Job, of course, when he understood responded in faith. He didn't understand his suffering and I'm not sure Job ever understood why he suffered, but he knew that he should trust God. How does our relationship with God grow? That happens as we go to him with our questions. Nothing wrong with questions. And as we listen to him in the Bible, his word to us, God is not silent.

Crystal Keating:

Mm-mm (negative).

Dave Deuel:

And as we have already seen, he speaks to sufferers through the Bible, and he speaks as someone who understands suffering from the inside. God the Father watched his own son die a cruel and humiliating death. Can you imagine what it was like for the God of the universe who created all of us? He watched humanity humiliate his own son. It's incredible. That's suffering that we can't possibly imagine. Remember, you have a God who understands suffering and draws close to you in your pain. Ask him to show himself to you through his word and he will.





Crystal Keating:

Amen. He certainly will. And like Job, we naturally question any experience that doesn't meet our expectations for how we think God should work, right? And for those who live with disability that doesn't seem to change or from the many people who experience pain that seems to worsen. How do we reconcile God's loving and protective nature with what may seem to us like a slow and painful deliverance? I mean one of God's names is that he is the God who delivers. He's our deliverer. So, what are some practical ways we can press into the Lord through our suffering?

Dave Deuel:

Yes, great question. Well first, recognize that God's perfect wisdom determines the timing of his intervention. The timing of God's rescuing us is super significant and it's usually our greatest issue. Why can't God rescue me now?

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Dave Deuel:

Why does he wait? Why the delay? So secondly, believe that God has more in mind for us and others through us than simply giving us pain-free lives. Those two ideas are very closely connected. God has reasons for his delay in rescuing us. So, third, I would suggest, and this I had to learn the hard way, ask older family members, friends, pastors, counselors, to tell you about their experience with suffering. Look for people who have suffered by faith and ask them for their insights and prayers. They are God's agents for you.

Crystal Keating:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Deuel:

They are a gift. Finally, ask God for wisdom. Why do we need wisdom for suffering? It is because suffering is difficult, and suffering is confusing.

Crystal Keating:

It is.

Dave Deuel:

But we also need wisdom because suffering can be complicated, and God tells us that he will give us that wisdom.



Crystal Keating:

He is so generous to do that. And I really appreciate you talking about as we ask for wisdom, we can also trust the wisdom of God who is determining the timing of his intervention. And I think that takes that childlike faith to say, "Lord, I don't understand, but I will trust you." So, Dave, as we close our time together, what words of perspective and encouragement can you share with those who've suffered a long time and from everything they know their circumstances will probably continue to remain until their home with Jesus? What help does God offer us in our suffering?

Dave Deuel:

One day, God himself will wipe every tear away.

Crystal Keating:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Deuel:

And that day, there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain. If God does not seem to answer our prayers, the answer is not, "No," it's, "Not yet." That is how the Psalmist in Psalm 73 came to accept God's will in his suffering. Another place to learn from God's suffering is from God's people reading the lament Psalms, the Psalms of lament. Psalms of lament are the most common Psalms. God's people, the Jews, had a type of him to help them sing through their suffering called the lament. Biblical laments show us the process of suffering. If anyone wants one place to start, it's Psalm 73. It's a catalog of difficulties and struggles and resolutions for suffering. You might also want to read Hebrews 11 and hear God's perspective on those who live by faith and died in faith. All of these passages remind us that when it seems like God is silent or hiding, he is right there with us.

But what can we do in our suffering? What does God offer us? First of all, God offers us, and most importantly, his presence. He says he will never leave you, Deuteronomy 31:6. Second, he can bestow his wisdom. In fact, when James says, "If any of you like wisdom, let him ask of God," he's talking about the wisdom for suffering. There is a specific wisdom for suffering that is available to us. Thirdly, he offers us his strength. Isaiah 40:31 says, "They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength." Fourth, God offers hope, and this is what we need most of all. We need hope to keep one foot in front of the other and keep moving because hope assures us. And not just with wishful thinking, it's not that kind of hope, but with confident expectation that God will rescue us ultimately in the end. And finally, God offers us his guiding hand. He is not only present, He actively helps us with our suffering often through other people. So, I have one final closing thought. God loves us too perfectly to rescue us too soon.

Crystal Keating:

Dave, that is just a powerful and encouraging thought. Thank you so much for your time on the podcast today. And we just pray for God's continued blessing on you and your family and Joanna, and all the work that God has for youth. Thank you so much, Dave.

Dave Deuel:

My pleasure, Crystal. Thank you for having me.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired by our conversation or have a comment about something you heard, please drop me a message at [podcast@joniandfriends.org](mailto:podcast@joniandfriends.org). I would love to hear from you. To get our next conversation automatically, please subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. And if you enjoyed today's episode, leave us a five-star review. This helps other people find our podcast so that they can be encouraged too. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

Episode link: [Does God Hear My Prayers? | Joni & Friends \(joniandfriends.org\)](https://joniandfriends.org/does-god-hear-my-prayers/)

©Joni And Friends