



Season 2 | Episode 41

## God's Grace in Chronic Illness

### Mireille Blanchard

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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 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. You can also find all of the helpful resources that we've talked about at [joniandfriends.org/podcast](http://joniandfriends.org/podcast).

Crystal Keating:

Mireille, you're a happily married woman with a wonderful job as a special education teacher. And you have a vibrant relationship with the Lord, Jesus. But you weren't even sure if you would live to see another day. Take us back to that challenging and dire season that rerouted the course of your life.

Mireille Blanchard:

I had two different instances, one was five years ago, and one was 10. So, about 10 years ago, I was diagnosed with a blood-clotting disease called Factor V Leiden, and how I found out about it is I was taking a medication for acne that actually in turn gave me blood clots. And I didn't know I had this blood disease until I started taking that medicine.

Mireille Blanchard:

I thought I had a really bad cold. I was laying in my bed, and my mom came to check on me, I was 18 at the time. My lips were completely blue, and I wasn't breathing very well, so they rushed me to the ER. It was pretty grim. They couldn't find anything at first because it's not common that an 18-year-old gets blood clots, especially when I had just run eight miles a few days before. So, I didn't have any of the early signs.

Mireille Blanchard:

There was a lot of talk of me, potentially not making it through the night and how they would handle that. They had both my parents there, which was great. I just didn't have my brothers. So, I remember praying like, "God, if this is the end, I really want to see my brothers. Please, just give you that one thing." And as I was praying that, the Lord really spoke to me and said, "This isn't the end. I have more for you." And it was very clear.



Mireille Blanchard:

And I was like, "All right, let's go." Then we found out, about 4:30 AM that all my scans had come back, and my lungs just kind of lit up like the Star Wars intro with all the blood clots in there. I had 36 plus. Yeah, that led me to be in the hospital for a week as we were trying to treat them, it was an experimental treatment and aggressive. And the team that I was working with, at one of the major hospitals, had never worked with someone who had 36 plus blood clots in their lungs. They stopped counting after 36.

Crystal Keating:

And what size were the blood clots?

Mireille Blanchard:

They were either super minuscule, maybe like a freckle, or the size of a really large marble. So, they were kind of all over the place and had caused quite a bit of damage in my lungs.

Crystal Keating:

It sounds like you had trouble breathing.

Mireille Blanchard:

Yes. So, much trouble breathing. Oh, my goodness. I was on oxygen for a while and really just had to see if I could make it through the week and stabilize my conditions. If regular people have blood that's like juice, mine is like cottage cheese. It's really thick. And so, they had to make sure that I had enough blood thinners to really even it out, then also send the medicine to those clots to destroy them.

Mireille Blanchard:

So, after that week I was stable enough to go home, but we still didn't know if I would live through the treatment. And we didn't know if the treatment would actually dissolve the clots, there's no guarantees, or if the clots will break off and move to my heart or my brain. Praise God, they did not. But it was a really rough eight months that I went through treatment.

Mireille Blanchard:

And yeah, it was wild. The treatment was very aggressive. It made my hair fall out. I spent a lot of days throwing up, like hours on end. Something you have to maintain is your vitamin K levels so that you don't interact with the medicine. So, that was really complicated. And I mean, you get so fatigued. I couldn't even walk up the stairs or to the bathroom. Sometimes my parents would help toilet me, which is, when you're 18, kind of the last thing you want to happen.



Mireille Blanchard:

But if anyone's listening and is on Coumadin, they can relate. But you lose your tastes and actually your sense of smell, which is very scary in the time of COVID-19, if you lose that. And I remember not being able to taste anything, and there's kind of no guarantee that it'll come back. Thank God it came back, because I love food. That was maybe God's little gift to me, to give me my taste back.

Mireille Blanchard:

And then, also it bleached my skin, and my skin has actually never gone back to its original pigmentation, which was really interesting. The medicine was super extreme and had some weird side effects. It's really easy to have internal bleeding. So, if you bump into anything, or I had to give myself shots twice a day in the stomach and they would automatically hematoma, they would have big, deep bruises, and you couldn't hit yourself in the same spot with the medicine. So, it was always like so hard to find a spot.

Mireille Blanchard:

It was a crazy time. I remember getting the news that this would be a lifelong thing, and it was probably the most grief I've ever experienced. Everyone in my household was just crying. No one could console themselves. We just thought it was end because my medicine plateaued a couple of times and stopped working. And there were two or three times where doctors were like, "We really have nothing else to do for you. So, you should be ready for your life to end." How do you tell your parents that? Your church community, and how do you wrap your mind around that you only have so many weeks to live multiple times? It was really hard and really, as an 18-year-old.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. How do you process that as a young teenager? It sounds like you had turned to the Lord, and you were walking with him. What kind of spiritual questions were you asking? I mean, were you wrestling with God at that point? That has to be so much to bear, not just for you, but for your family.

Mireille Blanchard:

I really was. I felt very near to the Lord, really this insane intimacy that I think was just a gift in suffering that he gives you, I'm so thankful for. But there were times where I just really was taken hour by hour. There's really hard things, like I had a small support group of girlfriends who had chronic illnesses or disabilities. And out of that group, I'm the only one living today.



Mireille Blanchard:

It's just very sobering to watch all of our journeys, and then to also have been told multiple stages, even in my marriage, that I had a very short life expectancy. It was pretty crushing. I've always felt the Lord so intimate and near the whole time, and I'm so thankful for that. There were times where I couldn't read scripture because I was just so exhausted. So, I've really found a worship to be super life-giving because I can just let it wash over me and absorb that truth and hear scripture in a different way.

Mireille Blanchard:

But there was a lot I was wrestling with the Lord, and there was just so much that I was questioning. And to look back on everything that the Lord's answered is really powerful, but I think a lot of it was just grief and despair and accepting a new normal. I was 18, I thought of myself as invincible. And there were some medical trauma and stuff that goes along with that, so having to unpack that over the last 10 years has been quite a journey, but I'm very thankful that I know Jesus.

Mireille Blanchard:

I would not be the person I am today without knowing the Lord. And I'm so thankful that I have this blood-clotting disease, as crazy as that sounds, because it really does cause you to live in the tension of making life intentional and putting the Lord in the gray area. My life is a total gray area now. I just have come to accept that even in that tension, that's where the beauty and the intimacy of the Lord is.

Crystal Keating:

That's good. Mireille, you were talking about what life was like 10 years ago. Can you take us through maybe what the last five years have been for you?

Mireille Blanchard:

Totally. I was reading in my journal, and I wrote this little letter to the Lord. And I just declared that he's the healer over my life and asked him to justify his presence in me and to heal me. And after I wrote that, that was right after the second time my medical team called me and said, "Your medicine's not working, you're the highest dose. There's nothing we can do."

Mireille Blanchard:

This is the second time I was just like, "Oh, okay. I have so many weeks to live. I need a processes it and see what I need to do with this." And I wrote that little thing in my journal. And then the scan three weeks later, literally nothing was in my lungs. It was so crazy. Everyone was praying-

Crystal Keating:

No clots?



Mireille Blanchard:

No clots. It went from having so many clots that have not budged, to then having none. I went through three different scans because they didn't believe it. They were like, "Oh, we must've messed up the lungs." Like, "Oh, like this is somebody else's picture." Like, "No way." This is only the Lord. So, only the Lord could have done that. Only the Lord could have cleaned up my lungs that way.

Mireille Blanchard:

I mean, I have no scarring, which is insane. The blood clot that was about to enter my heart did not move. Getting that news was incredible. I was actually very stubborn, and I decided to still continue to go to art school while I was having this whole blood clot episode, which I think also was like art therapy, in a way God used to really save my life emotionally and physically and to give me a community. But I remember learning that. I remember just having so much joy. I literally ran to every dorm of every person I knew, I told them.

Mireille Blanchard:

Totally one of those biblical moments when you just hear people, their whole life has turned around. God allowed the blind person to see, and he goes and tells everyone. I really experienced that sense of jubilee. It was a really powerful moment. I was like, "Wow, God really is in control." I always think I'm in control of my life, but like really this is so supernatural. I could never do anything like this.

Mireille Blanchard:

So, that was really beautiful. The recovery still continued, it took me a while to be able to have the strength to walk, even around the block. But God was so sovereign and still is. And then, after that episode, my husband and I got married, and about two years into our marriage, I had to go through checkups, and I was still in remission and making sure I good. And one of a hematologists, the blood doctor told me, "Your vitals, everything. It just doesn't look very good. And you're probably going to have to be on this blood thinner your whole life."

Mireille Blanchard:

She basically told me I had like two years to live, potentially, if I were to get a clot again. And then she said, "Also, your longest life expectancy is maybe 30 years old." And I'm 29 years old now. So, when I first heard that she thought I only had two years to live, or that that was my projected timeline based on everything we were seeing and just where my health was at, I came home, and my husband and I were absolutely devastated. What do you say? There's really no words. We're newly married and this bombshell got dropped on us. I mean, it was just like instant grief.

Crystal Keating:

And did he know about your health condition before you married him?



Mireille Blanchard:

He did. Yes. So, we were in college together. We met in art school. He was actually one of my best friends before we ended up dating. So, he was my best friend during the whole blood clot treatment and was kind of in my community there who heard all the times where I'd said, "I only have so many weeks to live." So, he was with me really through everything but maybe the first two months.

Crystal Keating:

How did you guys process this news that you may only have a few more years to live?

Mireille Blanchard:

We just cried a lot, and we ended up trying to get second opinions and seeing other doctors and kind of maneuvering through the healthcare system and put it before the Lord. We shared in our community group, and they prayed over us and some close friends. And I think it was literally just having the community of Christ around us, having our families around us. I just didn't want to let that stop me.

Mireille Blanchard:

I think I had lived in the day-to-day for so long, and still do, but I just was like, "Okay, if this is the timeline that the Lord's going to give us, then let's do something meaningful with our marriage." Not that we weren't before, but you know, let's really hone in on where does God want us to pour into, in these next couple of year?

Mireille Blanchard:

What does that look like for our marriage, for our community, or the mission fields that God has given us? Let's make this super meaningful and not waste this time. And so, we also had counseling, which was amazing. And we had really close friends who were really mentoring us through a lot of this. And so, that was a true blessing as well.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. There is a sense where if you know that eternity could be the next day or the next year or two years from now, you really start assessing life differently. Values really are magnified. What is God calling us to do? And I wonder what all lives would look like if that was our attitude, that we might be seeing Christ soon.

Crystal Keating:

How does that change how we spend money, how we spend time, how we treat our neighbors? Well, I'm curious to know, it sounds like you and your husband have been sort of living in the balance for a couple of years. What's marriage look like, even in the last few years?



Mireille Blanchard:

Passed the two-year mark. So, yeah. We, by the grace of God, don't have to worry about that. My next big mark would be making it past 30, and I'm out of remission right now. So, that's really good.

Crystal Keating:

Thank God.

Mireille Blanchard:

I know. So, that's awesome. And you know what marriage looks like right now is super beautiful. My husband, Ben, has always just been an incredible person. I mean, he's very humble, just everything that I need and very wise, just like a steady rock. And I'm just so thankful for that.

Mireille Blanchard:

As turbulent as my health has been, Ben has always been that light at the end of the tunnel, or in the tunnel as I'm walking through that darkness and just re-centering, "Okay, here's the Lord. Here's what this looks like. Here's who you are in the Lord, and we're going to do this together." I mean, he sacrifices all the time, and I honestly didn't realize how much I needed a caretaker. I really do. There's just a lot of the day-to-day that is very hard with a chronic illness.

Mireille Blanchard:

I don't believe that I could do it single, as strong and as independent as I want to be. It is a lot. And so, looking into the day-to-day of our marriage, we really work as a team, and I'm so thankful that the Lord really has given him to me. He's a gift.

Crystal Keating:

If you've been listening to the podcast at all, I love love stories so much. And I love hearing about good marriages because really God's intention for marriage is so much greater than the best love stories you see in the movies or the books. So, I want to talk a little bit about something. You mentioned the trauma of going through medical treatment.

Crystal Keating:

I don't know if you caught our podcast episode with Kimberley West. She also lives with chronic illness and has survived 20 surgeries, multiple doctor's visits, and she remarked about her struggle with severe anxiety, often triggered by little things like smelling an alcohol swab. And so, I'm wondering, have you ever faced any unwanted emotional repercussions after being in and out of the hospital so many times, and after seeing so many doctors? I mean, you've been doing this for 10 years.



Mireille Blanchard:

Yes. I heard Kimberly's story. She is such a warrior. I was really moved and encouraged by her and just her resilience. That was incredible. And yes, I totally have had some medical trauma. So, I have a lot of chronic pain every day, and it's pretty intense and severe and sometimes pretty debilitating. And after you have blood clots in your lungs, you get these things called phantom pain.

Mireille Blanchard:

And so, it's as your lung tissue is healing, you have this pain that kind of feels like it does when you had blood clots. If you have a chronic illness or a disability, you have to advocate so much for yourself. And a lot of the time, no one tells you how to do that. So, it's a lot of you doing your own research. You trusting someone with these intimate details of your life that you're trying to process.

Mireille Blanchard:

And a lot of times, unfortunately in my experience, you get pushed through the system, and it's very frustrating. So, even now, when I have a really good doctor, I still get nervous. I still have this debilitating anxiety going in that I'm going to forget a detail or something's going to be overlooked. I also was a service coordinator at a local hospital. And part of my job, I helped train students with disabilities to work in the hospital, which was amazing and beautiful.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, that's awesome.

Mireille Blanchard:

I remember I was sitting by the bus stop where the students were dropped off, and they had like the MRI, CT scan truck out in the parking lot of the hospital. They turn on all the machines, and it was so wild because I've been through so many scans over the years and been so terrified in those machines. I heard those, on my first couple of weeks of the job, and I'm like, why am I walking in so tense?

Mireille Blanchard:

My heart is racing. My fists are clenched, which is like not my posture at all. And it was definitely a physical, psychological change. And I finally pinpointed it to that noise. So, I actually had to meet the kids in a different spot. I'm not going to give my students the best of me if I'm hearing this noise all the time, and I'm coming in to the hospital, really tense.

Mireille Blanchard:

I think, actually working in the hospital was very familiar and kind of desensitized me a lot to being so fearful of going back in there. I've done therapy. So, EMDR, I think is what it's called. I've done that because some of that was so traumatic that I do forget portions of being sick. I read *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk.





Crystal Keating:

Yes. A very good book.

Mireille Blanchard:

Yes, amazing. And I literally was weeping reading that thing, this is my experience, and the physical sensations, anxiety. And so, having some of those tools in that book, I was able to see a therapist that met my needs, and we were able to do that therapy. I felt like freedom in my body, for the first time in a very long time.

Crystal Keating:

For our listeners, EMDR is eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. Which is a really fancy way of saying you do these stimulating exercises and you're recalling distressing images, and it helps to pinpoint where in the body you're experiencing, and it allows you to get past that. What was it like for you going through EMDR?

Mireille Blanchard:

At first, reading the book really helped me understand, you explained it perfectly, kind of what it is, and if it was something that fit me. And I built up a trust with my therapist. So, I felt comfortable going to them and going there. I would say I did five sessions back-to-back and I felt so much healing that I have not been able to get out and talk therapy.

Mireille Blanchard:

I can now recall those memories, and it doesn't have a physical effect on me anymore. Or I'm just able to remember them in general, which has really nice to kind of piece my life back together because there are big holes. Just being able now to know how to advocate for myself, and have a trusted team, and then also handle the sensations in my body. I'm able to handle those things better and disassociate that time 10 years ago, to me getting my blood drawn today.

Mireille Blanchard:

Whereas before, there was really in my mind and my body, it was very hard for me to separate the two. It was always a spiral. So, I think a lot of people don't talk about it, and having chronic pain every day, it wears on your mind, it wears on your body. And even just to have a functional conversation with someone can be extremely taxing, and that's not how we want it to come across. We want to engage, and we want to be present.

Mireille Blanchard:

But it is very difficult when your body is a full-time job, and your mind is a full-time job. And sometimes you feel like both of those are deteriorating at the same time. You're like, "What is happening?"



Crystal Keating:

Yeah. You almost feel trapped in your own body and sort of a prisoner to the responses your body is having. Especially as a Christian, when you know, "Oh, I want to serve, I want to love, I want to keep going." To touch on EMDR, I think it's important also for listeners to know that it really is a stimulation where it bypasses an area of the brain that's become stuck due to trauma. And it sort of prevents one side of the brain from talking to the other side.

Crystal Keating:

So, you have physical reactions to sounds and smells and sights that you're like, "Why is this happening to me?" So, I'm so glad to know you found freedom in that, and you're figuring out a way to care better for yourself and advocate for yourself. You talk about being a teacher to students in the hospital, but you've also been a teacher to students with disabilities.

Crystal Keating:

I'm wondering how you've managed some of the stress in your life, or your medical condition, with your students, especially through COVID-19. I mean, you had to do virtual learning. I think you're working with children who have mild to moderate disabilities. Is that right?

Mireille Blanchard:

Yes. Yes. So, I am. I'm a high school Special Education teacher, mild to moderate. It's literally the best job ever. If you know a Special Ed teacher, give them a hug. It's a very hard job, but it's the best job. It's so hard to sum up, but working with students who have different learning needs is so incredible to see life the way that they do. It's so refreshing and it's so beautiful.

Mireille Blanchard:

It's just been the greatest joy of my life to be able to do this. I would say that being a teacher can be all consuming and never stops. It's been really important in my journey to put boundaries down around my time, and just paying attention to what my body and my mind are actually able to handle and trusting God. A lot of it is a big mental health piece, too. And so, just trusting God that he knows my students and knows what they need the most, and just asking for that wisdom, and advocating for them and their families.

Crystal Keating:

How did they do virtually? I mean, what was it like teaching through the screen?

Mireille Blanchard:

It's so hard. It's so hard. And my kids, they worked so hard to be there. One of the main factors of my classroom, the main pillar, is just building a community first. I want that community piece, so students can be vulnerable and share their ideas, and build off one another and really work like a team.



Mireille Blanchard:

That's so hard to do, digitally. And so, I just prayed like, "Lord, please just give me ideas. Have all of our hearts be ready for this. This is so tough." As a person with a chronic illness, I'm thankful that I can teach virtually because I can't be in person. Just focusing a lot on their needs and being able to pivot and being flexible. And the good thing is, I learned a lot of different techniques digitally that I think really benefited my students, that I will continue to use years to come, even physically in the classroom.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I know community is a really important part of your life and your husband's life. So, I'm wondering what advice you have for communities who want to be helpful, but maybe don't understand chronic illness as well as they would like to. What would you tell them? What would you want them to know? What should they say? What should they not say?

Mireille Blanchard:

Yeah, that is a great question. I've thought a lot about that. I actually wrote something in my journal. Hopefully, if it's okay to read, I journal a lot.

Crystal Keating:

Go for it.

Mireille Blanchard:

But it was kind of about having a chronic illness or disability, and being a woman in a church community, people that are on the margins or stand on the margins, and how beautiful it is to lean into that. And so, I wrote, I've spoken to many women in the disability community about this, and something that has come up a lot, and that I can identify greatly, is that it's important to honor all people in the church. And so, as a woman with a disability, it can be hard for me to feel recognized and cared for in church spaces.

Mireille Blanchard:

I can't have a baby or cannot start a family like others. I can't always serve regularly due to severe pain or fatigue, and it's difficult to open up about certain traumatic experiences and feel pressured to share when the trauma is lived through often daily. It can be incredibly isolated to not feel seen, known, or celebrated.

Mireille Blanchard:

Sometimes in certain church spaces, but truly not all, it seems like these things are the criteria to be celebrated as a successful woman. I think it's really important to reach out to people with disabilities, to care for them, host them, hear their stories, and lean into their needs. I don't say this to be critical, but instead bring awareness that people on the margins need support, and sometimes creative support.



Mireille Blanchard:

People with disabilities carries such innovation, intelligence, beauty, encouragement, wisdom, and depth to offer unlike anything else. And I believe that the body of Christ is better by letting people with disabilities have a seat at the table and the church and in societal places. Those with disabilities deserve to be wildly loved and honored just as Christ honors us.

Crystal Keating:

Such a place of grace, too. And that is God's heart.

Mireille Blanchard:

Thank you.

Crystal Keating:

I love that. Well, as we close our time together, Mireille, how can we be praying for you and for others who are facing unexpected diagnosis and life-changing illness?

Mireille Blanchard:

I think it's really important just to do life amongst other people who don't look like you, and don't have the same walks of life that you do, and to lean in. And as a person with a chronic illness, I don't always know the best answer or know the best thing I need at the moment, but just sitting and doing life with me, or sitting and listening, or just sitting and just being with me is so powerful.

Mireille Blanchard:

I think even in prayer, those things are really powerful. Checking in, just making an effort really makes all the difference. I think by being with others, we're able to respond to their needs and just praying that the Holy Spirit works within us to serve other people.

Crystal Keating:

God is the God who sees us and that we need to be seen by others and known, and loved, and cared for, and encouraged in all the ways that God created the body to be. So, Mireille, thanks so much for your honesty, for sharing your story with us. May God continue to give you and your husband many years together as you serve one another and serve the body, and your students too. Thanks for your time today.

Mireille Blanchard:

Thank you so much.

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.

Crystal Keating:

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