

Season 2 | Episode 42

Finding Freedom Through Forgiveness

Vaneetha Risner

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Crystal Keating:

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Crystal Keating:

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Crystal Keating:

Vaneetha, it's wonderful to have you back on the podcast today, welcome.

Vaneetha Risner:

Thank you. It is great to be here at, Crystal. I'm really excited about our conversation.

Crystal Keating:

Oh my goodness, I am too, because you and I spoke a little over a year ago. It feels like forever ago, because life has changed so much since then. So, before we begin this conversation really focusing on the grace God gave you to truly forgive those whose harmful choices radically altered the course of your life, I'd just love to hear about you. What's this interesting season been like for you and your family?

Vaneetha Risner:

Well, Crystal, it's been interesting in that with my disability, I'm in the house more. My husband works from home, and so do I and so our day-to-day life looks somewhat similar. But yet life is so different in that we really miss our friends, and my parents are in their 80s. I don't get to see them much. It's felt lonelier. Even though I didn't leave the house that much, people would come over more. And so, there is this sense of, yeah, just feeling like I miss community a lot.



Vaneetha Risner:

We all have this just kind of sadness of what isn't happening in our lives, but yet people have been through such difficult things that I feel like what I am dealing with is pretty low level compared to that. I just have had friends who've lost loved ones and lost jobs and just a lot of hardship.

Vaneetha Risner:

I have a really good friend with ALS, and we are all really concerned about her, but can't be with her. And that honestly has been one of the hardest things for me, just being worried about inadvertently having COVID and giving it to her and yet wanting to be near her. And I think that is a lot of ... My grieving is wanting to be with people, but knowing we just can't be.

Crystal Keating:

Oh my goodness. I think that has been the sentiment of so many people we've talked to over the last several months, is that sense of isolation, but not being able to reach out and touch someone, to hug our loved ones, especially those who have really life-changing disabilities.

Crystal Keating:

I'm so glad that you and your husband have been able to continue your rhythms and working from home. But I know how much it is to feel disconnected, even from your own parents. How are you staying in touch with them?

Vaneetha Risner:

I talk to my mom every single day. We talk on the phone in the morning and that's been great. We've done a few Zoom calls with them. My parents live actually in the same town I do. So, they have come, and we have sat outside distanced, which has been fine and fun, but you can't really eat together. It's a little bit different than doing that.

Crystal Keating:

That gives us hope for what we can anticipate when we're able to be all together again. It will be that much sweeter to have that kind of fellowship.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I want to begin talking about how you've made sense of the ongoing hardships you've faced. Last time we focused on the book you wrote, *The Scars That Have Shaped Me*, and really we focused on your childhood diagnosis of polio, the devastation of losing your son, Paul, even facing the breakdown of your marriage. And you recently wrote a new book, *Walking Through Fire: A Memoir of Loss and Redemption*, and I'm wondering how you chose this title?



Vaneetha Risner:

I actually love the title of this book because there's so many layers of meaning for it for me. I would say my go-to passage in suffering, like if somebody is struggling, I will text them Isaiah 43, the end of one and two, which says, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned and the flames shall not consume you."

Vaneetha Risner:

And that's my go-to text verse because I can't promise anybody everything's going to be fine or hang on, it's going to be better tomorrow. I don't know. But I do know that God will be with you and that he will walk through everything with you, that he calls you by name, and so I've always loved that passage. And so that's one reason that I chose that name. But also, fire is associated with the presence of God in the Bible. When you think about Moses and the burning bush, he steps aside to notice it and the angel of the Lord, God is in that bush and he's on holy ground.

Vaneetha Risner:

So, when we see fire, a lot of times it is the presence of God. And you see the Israelites go with the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, and that was the presence of God. There's an image throughout the Bible of fire purifying us and the Refiner's fire. And then I love Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel, where they are thrown into the fire and there's a fourth person among them. And I love what they say before they're thrown in, "Even if you throw us in, our God can save us, but if not, we'll still not worship your idol." And so, I just that picture of that no matter what, God can save us, God is with us in the fire.

Crystal Keating:

That's beautiful. To me, it also assumes that we will walk through fire, that there will be dramatic hardships that we face, but God promises to be with us. And I love that portion of the scripture in Isaiah 43, that, "You are mine." It's like, "You're with me, I'm with you. You're my bride. You're my family." That relational aspect of going through trials.

Crystal Keating:

Well and I want to focus our conversation on forgiveness. As followers of Christ, we recognize that forgiveness of sin is really one of the foundational realities of our spiritual lives and I would say one of the keys to our relationship with God. But it's more than confessing our sins to God and receiving forgiveness from him. We're also called to forgive others as we've been forgiven in Christ Jesus.



Crystal Keating:

So, here's the definition of forgiveness. I kind of put it together from things I've read and some scripture, but I would say it's a conscious deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person who has harmed you. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting, nor does it mean condoning or excusing offenses. Forgiveness is a gift from God in conquering sin and its destructive fruits. And I would say in the Bible, it actually moves beyond revoking a desire for vengeance, because we leave that to God, and it's replaced with an attitude of Goodwill for another person rather than evil, which is talked about in Romans 12, 17 through 21.

Crystal Keating:

And I don't know about you, Vaneetha, but when I think of this, I think without God's spirit living in us, this kind of forgiveness is impossible. And forgiving others can be, I would probably say a huge issue related to disability. Maybe forgiving people who begrudgingly help or don't help the way we want them to, for those who have been bullied or discriminated against, people who may be responsible for health issues.

Crystal Keating:

What circumstances led you to wrestle with God over forgiving those who caused such suffering and pain in your life?

Vaneetha Risner:

Yeah. Thanks for that. I love your definition, Crystal. That is such a great definition because it really encompasses everything that we really need to understand about forgiveness. And I would say through my life, I have learned a lot as I've gone along. I was bullied a lot as a child. I really held that against people and just, and I held it against God, actually. I just felt like I was mad at everybody, and when I came to Christ, I felt like God was calling me just to let go of those things and not hold onto them anymore. And so that was sort of what I saw about forgiveness.

Vaneetha Risner:

But then early on in my marriage, my husband had an affair and that crushed me, and I thought and told myself, even after we had really we're working on our marriage, I'm never going to forgive this. And I remember saying that to this counselor who basically said, "You've got to forgive this." And it didn't even have to do with his repentance. He basically said, "You've got to forgive because God calls you to forgive it. It doesn't really have to do with him."



Vaneetha Risner:

And that was this mind-blowing thing, even though I was a believer and I had heard that principle, it didn't seem like it could apply to something that huge, and yet he really encouraged me to look at the Bible and so I did. I intentionally just started looking through the Bible and realizing God is really calling me to forgive, and then felt pretty inadequate, like I can't do this. And this counselor said, "We just need to be willing and God does the rest." And so, one of the things I did with that is I started keeping a list of all the things that I would have to forgive in forgiving him, and I kept that list for at least a month and wrote everything I could think of down. And then when I felt like I had written it down and could just hand that to God, I just asked God to help me forgive, and it changed my life.

Vaneetha Risner:

I had no idea what that would do. I felt like I was just doing it out of obedience to God, and yet it really drew me closer to God. I felt like I had had this block in my mind that I didn't even know because I kept rehearsing, whenever I could, all the ways he'd wronged me, and I would replay it over and over. And when I forgave, I really asked God to take that away, and that changed everything with God. And I thought I was just doing it sort of out of obedience to God, which is why I did it, but what God gave me in return was unbelievable. And I didn't know how much I would need to understand that principle of forgiveness.

Vaneetha Risner:

My son, who was seven weeks old, he died because a doctor took him off his medicine and dealing with that and realizing this was human error. This doctor made a mistake and realizing I can hold on to this and be angry about it for the rest of my life, or I can say, "Okay, God, this is not a part from you. You are in everything." And I love the way Joni says, "God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves." And just realizing God permitted this. I need to forgive this man and doing that really freed me from being angry and I started to see that when we hold on to things, it really imprisons us.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. The offenses that you've had to forgive, Vaneetha, to me are so heavy. I'm wondering how did you come to the place of actually feeling, not just that release, but actually like, "Okay, I actually want Goodwill." I think in your book, you even talked about how did you move toward forgiving your husband after his affair? I know you that you wrote down all the things that you would have to forgive, but what actually brought you to the place of that freedom?



Vaneetha Risner:

It was totally God, Crystal. I think I wrote all those things. This counselor said, "Just say I forgive them as an act of my will and I release all this bitterness." And I thought, that sounds really easy. But then I just said, "God, I know I can't do this. I cannot forgive without you. So help me do it." And God did it. It wasn't this painful, horrible thing that I thought it would be. Whereas, I felt like the first step of forgiveness felt like death. You're taking something from me that is mine. And I feel like often when God calls me to forgive, my first reaction is no, I want to hold on to this. There's sort of this pleasure in feeling wronged. And yet just even saying, "God, I can't do this. Please help me." God just comes in and does it, and so each time I thought God said, "Yeah, I'm going to do this."

Vaneetha Risner:

And my husband left for someone else, this is after we'd been married for like 18 years, and that was huge struggle for me in terms of forgiving him, as well as the person that he left me for. And I just kept replaying all of that in my head and I felt like God called me to forgive her and to write her a letter and I didn't want to do it at all. I just basically said, "God, just ask somebody else." I'm not up for this assignment. And I felt like, God just kept coming back to me with, "I'm asking you to do this, but all you need to do is say yes to me and I will do it." And he did it. He really did it.

Crystal Keating:

That is so encouraging to know that a willing spirit is what God desires and that supernatural grace he gives us to do what he's calling us to do. But you first had to say, "I can't do this in my own strength, but Lord I'm willing."

Vaneetha Risner:

Yeah. That's really what it's taken for me, and it's just being willing to name it. Even after my son's death, I remember just being angry with people who said really thoughtless things. And I remember holding onto them and until God was like, "They were trying to help. Clearly they said things that were hurtful." But until you are willing to say, "Yeah, I need to just give this to God." I would hold onto those things.

Vaneetha Risner:

I remember at my son's funeral, somebody quoted Romans 8:28, which I love that verse. "All things work together for good, for those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose." But at somebody's funeral, that feels so harsh. And they said, "One day you'll be thankful". And certainly, that's true, but it felt so cruel to me. And I think even with lots of other things with disability, we need to, and I've needed to forgive people who say really thoughtless things. But the first step is acknowledging I am replaying this. I am holding a grudge against this person, God help me to let it go because if I don't even acknowledge it, but I just kind of put it in the back of my mind, that's when it just poisons me, and I don't even realize it.



Crystal Keating:

Well, and that's a good practice, to write things down as well so you can be specific. I think the word for confession is actually, it's to say the same thing as God would about what that person has done or what we're doing to that person, even in our own minds, and I think that's a really practical and good step.

Crystal Keating:

And I want to talk about the flip side of forgiveness, and I would say that's shame. So, shame seems to be a common experience for those who have been a victim of abuse, betrayal, and bullying, and even the shame individuals feel going through a painful divorce.

Crystal Keating:

Vaneetha, how did you move past any shame you may have experienced?

Vaneetha Risner:

I think it was really seeing myself as God sees me and really asking God to rewrite that. Because I feel like throughout my life, when I've been wronged or bullied or betrayed, my first reaction is it's my fault. I've done something wrong and that's why this has happened. As I've looked into it, that is really the common response for people who've dealt with abuse. And yet it really was realizing my identity is in Christ and just sort of putting that with God, like, "It is not my fault. God is going to use this in my life, but I don't need to let people be unkind to me or bully me or stay in that relationship."

Vaneetha Risner:

You really turn inward, and I think that's a lot of what made me a pleaser. I can be very hard on myself and feel like everything is my fault and I want to make other people happy. And really in the process of writing the book, Crystal, I saw that even more clearly, which sounds crazy. I should know my own life, but sometimes we have to look back on our lives and notice all these threads. And as I was writing the book, I was like, "Oh my word, okay. I shouldn't have felt bad about that. That was not me, but I know I internalized that." And so, I think it's a really helpful thing for everybody, not necessarily to write a book, but to write about past experiences and see it through a different lens.

Crystal Keating:

That's even another great practical way to help us to help God work through those deep and hidden parts of our hearts that we don't even realize, and they bring us to a place of freedom. And so that brings me to my next question, which is about your times with God and seeking God. I would imagine that through the seasons of your life, your times with the Lord have looked really different, especially with the ebbs and flows of a progressive disability and you as a mother, raising young children and fighting for a good marriage. How would you describe what a daily time with God has looked like?



Vaneetha Risner:

Well, it has changed so much, Crystal. I would say I was fighting for time with God when I had young kids. You don't have a lot of sleep, and so that was a hard season for me. God offered a lot of grace. I find that it was really through times of suffering in my life that I drew the closest to God.

Vaneetha Risner:

Honestly, the hardest time for me was after my ex-husband left and I was parenting two adolescent daughters, and all of a sudden I had no one to even advise me. I didn't know what to do, and so I became very serious about spending time with God in the morning and so my quiet time just radically changed.

Vaneetha Risner:

I started reading through the Bible. I had done that before, but I got a Bible reading plan. I started reading every day, journaling. I would write, I love doing this and I still do it, but I would look at the scripture and just ask God to talk to me and I would basically say, "God, you need to open my eyes." Psalm 119:18 says, "Open my eyes that I would see wonderful things in your law."

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, I love that.

Vaneetha Risner:

And I would just pray that and I would say, "God, talk to me today." And he did, I would say every day, which sounds crazy in some ways because-

Crystal Keating:

It sounds wonderful.

Vaneetha Risner:

But it was amazing, Crystal. That was the highlight of my life in those years, is I'd say, "Talk to me, God." And in one of the places I was reading, because I often do reading and in four different places, there would be something that God would say directly to me and I would write it in red pen in my journal, like, "This is God's word to me." I would just copy the scripture out and then I'd write in black pen what that meant for me, and the word became alive to me in a way that it hadn't.



Vaneetha Risner:

I was homeschooling my kids. I would get up super early just to do that because that was the only part of my day that I had to myself that seemed sane, and God just showed up and just felt God just sit with me in the morning as I cried, I wanted wisdom. And there were supernatural answers to questions, things that I was grappling with. It would just be right there in scripture, and it was amazing how when God opens your eyes to what he has written and he speaks to you through it, there's nothing like that in the whole world. And so that time that was on multiple levels the hardest time of my life was probably the best time of my life because I met God in a way that I didn't know was possible on a daily basis.

Vaneetha Risner:

God was there and it changed my life to the point that I still get up early and I still do that and God still does that. So, it doesn't need to be this time of dire suffering, which it started with, but it needs to be expectation. Do we expect God to really be there and to speak to us?

Crystal Keating:

Right. And I think that, how many sermons have we heard, read your Bible more, and there's certainly a place for that. But I think the distinguishing part is your prayer. "Lord, I want to hear from you. Speak to me, help me to understand. I want to see you more and more." And God responds to that. I am so encouraged by that.

Crystal Keating:

Well, sadly after facing devastating trials, I don't know if you feel this way, but I think some Christians feel obligated to pull themselves up in their own strength and sort of be okay, kind of put on that face. Like, "I'm a Christian. I'm supposed to rejoice always." That can be very isolating, and it keeps us distant from God and distant from others. So, I'm wondering how you came to a place of transparency with God after grief had really caused such emptiness, numbness and distance from the Lord?

Vaneetha Risner:

Yeah. It's funny, Crystal, because I would say that that was really a process for me. I think for a lot of my life, my early life, I really didn't understand lament or transparency with God at all. I thought Christians needed to be happy all the time and it seemed like people put that out there, like, "I'm blessed." Not that saying that as a bad thing at all, but I felt like to say that things hurt or that you had questions seemed horrible. And then I remember after our son died, my husband and I got up and we spoke at Paul's funeral and praised God, and that was genuine.

Vaneetha Risner:

But then a week later, I felt so sad and so lonely and so distant from God, and I didn't know what to do with that. I didn't know who to tell or how to process that. So, I pulled away from God, pretty far away. And then finally though, I felt so empty. I was in my car and I just said, "God, please help me." And God really met me in that.



Vaneetha Risner:

But even after that, it wasn't that I felt happy all the time. I just felt like God was with me, and that became this new relationship with God where I could tell him how I felt and I could be honest with him. And that this language of lament, which is throughout the Bible, you look at Job and Jeremiah and then the Psalms are full of lament where people are willing to say, "This is hard, but God is good."

Vaneetha Risner:

And you say those things in the same breath with lament, because if you didn't think God was good or you didn't think God was listening or you didn't think that could be trusted, you wouldn't say those things. You wouldn't bother. But because you know that God cares, God's listening and God invites this conversation, you trust him enough to say that, and I find doing that has drawn me closer to God. And to me it reminds me of like a human relationship. Like with my husband, Joel, if I am upset with him and decide not to talk to him, we drift apart.

Vaneetha Risner:

We are at opposite sides of the house or the bed and we don't talk. But when we're willing to engage in both of us say, "This is hard," then we get closer, and I think that's the way it is with the Lord. When we're willing to engage and say, "God, this is hard." Then he can meet us there. Whereas, I think a lot of believers, and I did the same thing, I feel like if I'm upset with God or I feel that I need to not say anything, and that's the last thing God calls us to do. He calls us to engage because lament isn't complaining about God to everybody else, lament is really just talking to God.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I love what you wrote, "Lament became the language of my love for God. I no longer avoided God because of my pain, but offered my pain to him." And I think that probably a lot of listeners can relate to that and find freedom. I also love what you wrote. "I talked to God throughout the day with no barriers. I spoke about everything that was hard. Everything that felt crushing, everything I hated. I repeated the words of sorrow that I read in scripture until they became my vocabulary." And it's another aspect of freedom. We talk about finding freedom in forgiveness, but also the freedom in lament. I just really appreciate that.

Vaneetha Risner:

And I feel like just for people now in isolation, it's lonely for everybody. There's nobody I know that is thriving and happy and seeing everybody that they love. And I feel like lament is so important nowadays just to go to God with this loneliness rather than pretending like it's all fine because God knows what's in our hearts and what's hard.

Crystal Keating:

That is so true, and he loves us so much, and I appreciate you saying that. It builds that trust and it builds that faith.



Crystal Keating:

Well, Vaneetha, it's always good to talk to you. So, as we close our time together, I just want to hear your last thoughts on your memoir, *Walking Through Fire*. What are some of the ways that God has really shaped and taught you as you've written this memoir?

Vaneetha Risner:

As I look back over my life, I realize that what God gives us in suffering is more than he takes away. God gives us himself. He gives us this incredible relationship and fellowship with him that far outweighs anything that he takes away, and that has been this amazing takeaway as I look back over my life, how faithful God is in suffering.

Crystal Keating:

I love that and I love what you wrote. "We can live bitter or we can love beloved. We can trust our changing feelings alone, or we can trust in the unchanging love of God alone."

Crystal Keating:

Vaneetha, it's so wonderful and so encouraging to my heart to have you on the podcast again. Thanks again for your time.

Vaneetha Risner:

Thank you, Crystal.

Crystal Keating:

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Crystal Keating:

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Crystal Keating:

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