

Season 3 | Episode 34

## Even If... I Will Still Rejoice in My Suffering

Renee Dollenmayer

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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).

Today on the podcast, I'm joined again by my friend, Renee Dollenmayer, a young college student living with chronic pain, spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, and who, in the face of COVID restrictions, started an online outreach to other women who live with physical and spiritual challenges. Welcome back to the podcast, Renee.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Thank you, Crystal. It's so good to be back.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I'm so glad you're back because we had such a great conversation in our last episode, and we just were on the precipice of going very deep into some really key parts of life and key parts of the struggles that we have as we're looking to Christ for hope. Whether we have a disability or not, I think we're always searching for that identity. Who am I? Who am I in Christ and how do I fit into the body of Christ? And in our last conversation, we got to hear a little bit of your story and learn about living life with a disability while being a university student and an intern, and at the same time feeling called to the ministry. For those who may have missed that conversation, Renee, can you briefly share again about yourself?

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes, of course. I was born premature. I'm a triplet and that's how I developed my disability of spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, which just means my muscles are really tight and it affects my arms and legs. I always knew the Lord and desired to know him more, but I had a lot of questions growing up about who God is and how he was working in the midst of my disability. And through that, I eventually learned the good news and the life of Jesus and how he suffered too and went through major adversity and that made me feel truly welcomed and loved in the body of Christ. And so, through that, I've just discovered my heart to encourage others through their hardship, through their mental health, through their disability.

Crystal Keating:

Well, you have been put on an exciting journey even through your hardships, Renee. And I just loved hearing you talk about how God brought you through Young Life in high school, and then



as your sorority, chaplain in college and despite that fear and trepidation of sharing the gospel, it hasn't stopped you. If anything, it's impassioned your heart to press through. And you have such a heart for other women specifically. And I know that you started an online ministry to women around the globe through COVID. How did this all come about?

Renee Dollenmayer:

It's truly the Lord's miracle. At the beginning stages of COVID when lockdown started, I just sensed not only loneliness in myself, but loneliness in our world and especially those affected by disability. And so, if you want to know the truth, I was just sitting on my toilet one day and I was like, well, I'm going to make a group chat of a couple girls I know who love Jesus too, who are also affected by disability and see if they want to do a Bible study. But it's not going to be any longer than six weeks, just something to bring a little hope, but then after that, it'll be over.

Little did I know the Lord's plans through that and so, it's grown exponentially. We have over 50-ish women from all over the world, Canada, Mexico, all over the US. We do it all over Zoom and people say, "Oh my gosh, Renee, look what you're doing." And I'm like, "No, look what the Lord is doing through this coronavirus. It's not me. It's our Lord and Savior." And I know that COVID has brought people deep hurt and struggles, but it's also brought so much beauty into the world for sure.

Crystal Keating:

What's the focus of your study? How did you find people? How did people hear about it? We're way past six weeks, is this a weekly Bible study?

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes. We meet weekly for Bible study, but we also just live life together. We'll do worship nights together. We'll watch movies together over Zoom. It kind of grew just based off of social media, honestly, the power of social media these days, I started posting that like, "Hey, I have this Bible study." And then I got leaders on board, and they started posting. It's kind of the ripple effect of just disciples making disciples.

And so, starting out with that small number of people and then just watching it grow. And so, it's basically our ministry runs through Instagram, which is so funny to think about. I actually got to meet some of my greatest friends in person, the girls that are involved in the ministry this past summer and it was the most joyous thing I have ever experienced. I thought, oh, we're close friends, but we've never met each other in person. And then when we met, it was just like heaven on earth. It was so joyful.

Crystal Keating:

Sweet. And the name of your ministry is Even If, right?

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

How did you choose that name?



Renee Dollenmayer:

That's a great question. We went through the book of Habakkuk or Habakkuk. We had been searching for a name for a really long time and we just were going back and forth of what name and what mission we stood for, and it was honestly something we wrestled with for a while. One of the girls reached out to me and she's like, "Renee, this name is right in front of us. We're just not being faithful," like just called me out. And she was like, "What about Even If?" And then from there, it clicked.

Crystal Keating:

Because at the end of Habakkuk, I mean, after he's gone through so many difficult seasons and it's a brilliant book of lament, what does he say? Even if the fig tree doesn't give fruit and even if all of these things happen, I will still call upon the Lord. I will still trust him. I will still abide in his love. That's a paraphrase, but it's that whole thing of like the world can be crumbling around us, but I will call upon the Lord and he is faithful.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes. What we say a lot as a ministry is even if our physical body is failing us every day, we will rejoice because we know our hope is in our Lord, Jesus Christ. And so, not looking on the hope of this world, but looking on the hope we have to come in heaven; we will all be given new bodies. And so, we can rejoice in our suffering because we know who our God is and our verse that we always cling to and go back to is Romans 8:28, which "God works all things together for the good of those who love him." It doesn't mean that all things in our life are good and glamorous, but it means God is using our suffering to work through us and grow us deeper to the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, he's using it for his good. And we also touch on that nothing we ever go through in our life is wasted, no pain, no hurt, no sorrow. He is working it all for the good.

Crystal Keating:

Especially at a time when we're so still isolated and especially out here in California, things just aren't what they used to be. Our schedules are different. We're doing relationships different, church different, work different, to have something that is constant and sure. It's just kind of calling us back to Lord... We need you. You're our rock. And Renee, I really appreciated your vulnerability even in our last conversation, because you shared that your own struggles with a disability that includes pain and requiring a power wheelchair, and just your search for identity have caused you to seek additional spiritual support in your life, which I think is such a good thing. Would you be willing to share a little bit about how Christian counseling helped you pull through a dark time in your life?

Renee Dollenmayer:

I've talked about counseling all day if I'm being honest. I think there is such a stigma and a shame around being a Christian and seeing a therapist. People will say, "Well, you have God, so it'll be all good," or, "Why are you feeling that way, because you have hope in Jesus?" But the reality is we live in a broken world with broken people. We are suffering, we are hurting. And so, it was about almost two years ago at this point, which is crazy. I was just really struggling with depression. I had just been recovering from a deep surgery and was really struggling figuring out my place, and figuring out what the Lord was doing in my life. I was hurting and I was searching



for answers. I was going to the world for my answers. And so, one of my campus pastors here on Wright State's campus reached out to me and she said, "Hey, Renee, I know this Christian counseling company and we would love to bless you and pay for your first session." And so, I was like-

Crystal Keating:

I love that.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes, it was such a gift.

Crystal Keating:

When we're in that dark place, my prayer's like, "Lord rescue me." You almost need somebody to come in and say, "We're going to take you from that pit and give you that first step."

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes. My pastor helped me take the first step when I couldn't do it on my own. And again, that's the whole concept of community. And so, I was like, "Okay, I'll go." It's like, "Thank you so much." Ever since I started it, I have just continued to grow in it and continue to seek the guidance and discipleship that Christian counseling has brought me. It has helped pull me through some dark times in my life for sure.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And one of the things that you shared that was so powerful for you is even having someone that you can talk to, to help you discern the truth from the lies that we believe, that I think bring us down into depression, right?

Renee Dollenmayer:

Yes, for sure. Our minds, when we start believing these lies about ourselves, it is really hard to take them captive when we have to do it on our own. But when you have someone ministering to you and saying, "Renee, that is not the truth, let's look at this scripture together and look at the truth, what God says." I've been learning over the years how to take my thoughts captive and turn them into biblical truth, which is then returned... helped me live in the freedom that God has given me.

Crystal Keating:

God gave the body many different people with many different gifts and it actually honors the Lord when we reach out to call upon someone else who has that gift of discernment and encouragement and exhortation, because it's really a fallacy to think that, "Hey, we're all going to be okay. We're lone wolves. We can do this on our own." No, God has intended us to work together. And the blessing that you get in turn is going to bless your 50 women as you learn, and as you mature, and as you see the Lord faithful, you're able to encourage them without feeling so depleted. And the enemy would just love to keep us in the dark and down in the pit, but that is not the Lord's plans for us. Well, I know that you've had the opportunity to speak at churches to



help communicate God's heart for people with disability. What have those experiences been like for you?

Renee Dollenmayer:

So powerful and so beautiful. I've gotten to speak about what does God have to say about disability and let's look at that scripture and something that has really helped me grow and that is actually during my [internship](#). I got to take a course and I'm actually still in the course. It's called [Beyond Suffering](#). And I got to just be poured into of truly what is disability ministry? What does God say about disability? And so now, getting to take that and speak to churches, it's been a really rewarding experience to see, okay, what was the church like when I walked into that building and what is the church like at the end of the weekend when I leave, because I think a lot of the world is just in the dark about disability.

They don't want to talk about it because they're afraid they're going to offend someone. They're afraid it's going to become uncomfortable, but if we don't have disabled people preaching about Jesus and the hope that Jesus provides, how do we expect disabled people to come to Christ? And that is something that has just been an encouragement over me, because if I would have had a mentor when I was younger who was disabled and also loved Jesus, that would have been such an encouragement to my heart as I was going through that. And so, it's an encouragement that I get to do that now.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and it's very powerful because you're there as a person living with physical challenges. And so, you have this platform where you can show how the love of Christ and discipleship in your own life has radically changed you. What a great opportunity that you've been given. Have you seen any barriers in churches that keep people with disabilities from feeling welcome or getting involved?

Renee Dollenmayer:

As someone who's disabled myself, I've found myself sometimes visiting churches or going to churches just as a guest, but the first thing someone does when they come up to me is asking to pray for my physical healing. And that right there does not make someone who has a disability feel welcomed in the body of Christ. Someone is constantly just being seen as, "Okay, we need to fix them, or they need healing," instead of them asking, "How's your soul? How's your heart?"

Healing is so much more than physical. It's emotional, it's spiritual, it's mental. Physical is just an aspect of it. I know for a fact that if it's God's will, he can heal anybody, but if it's not, then he's going to use disabled people to spread his word and his goodness.

Crystal Keating:

Right, because no matter our circumstances, what does he always say? That his power is magnified in whatever weakness that we face. Our God is so different. It's like, who has he chosen through the history of time, right? It's not the mighty, it's not the strong, it's not the noble. It's those that maybe the world wouldn't look upon favorably, but that's how God works always. I'm so thankful for that. It's like word, I am no one and nothing, but you saved me and you're working in my life.



Renee Dollenmayer:

And even if we look at the Luke 14 Mandate: go out to the poor, the disabled and show them the love of Christ. I mean, what a testament that is to God's love, his faithfulness, and who he is seeking after. We aren't called to just go out to the people who seem to have it all together or are the "perfect Christians." We are called to seek the lost, to seek the disabled, to show them the hope that they have in Jesus Christ.

Crystal Keating:

It just reminds me of Jesus saying, "I came as a good physician for the sick."

Renee Dollenmayer:

Amen.

Crystal Keating:

Not the well. And so, it's like, yes, we have to acknowledge (all of us) that sin has made us truly sick and that we need that healing from God, that forgiveness, that renewal, that identity in him. Well, Renee, I just love our conversations and as we close our time together, what encouragement do you have for others who may want to get involved in a ministry and serve, but feel limited by their own disability or a lack of confidence and support?

Renee Dollenmayer:

Well, that is a big question. Might honestly say, the first place to start, pray, ask the Lord to open your heart. Seek him and he will come along with you. Like I said earlier, I didn't feel equipped. I didn't feel valued enough to start a ministry, but the Lord said, "Renee, say yes to me because I am your father." And so, being faithful to your calling... If you feel called to ministry, say yes to him. It doesn't mean it's going to be easy or make all the sense in the world sometimes, but we are called to remain faithful to our Lord Jesus.

Crystal Keating:

I mean, I love that attitude. I know that you follow him on and you said, if we know the good news in the Bible, we can lead people to Christ even if we don't feel as equipped as other people. And Renee, you are a great example of that.

Thank you so much for coming back on the podcast and sharing so openly about your life, the impact that Christian counseling and discipleship has had on your own life, and how God is using you in the lives of those in the church and in the lives of your girls, on your Even If Zoom Bible Study. It's awesome. Bless you, Renee.

Renee Dollenmayer:

Blessings to you. Thank you so much, Crystal.

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.

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