

Season 4 | Episode 1

Let's Talk About Suffering: What Does it Mean to "Suffer Strong"?

Katherine Wolf

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship... and sharing practical ways that you can include people with disability in your church and community. You can find all of the resources that we mention at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

After giving birth to her first son in 2008, Katherine Wolf miraculously survived a massive brainstem stroke, leaving her body disabled and her life turned upside down. Since that day, she and her husband, Jay, have used their second chance lives to champion the truth that suffering and joy can coexist in your good/hard story.

And it's my pleasure to have Katherine on our podcast today as we talk about the strength and inner healing, she's found by leaning heavily on the Lord and other Christians through life's many unexpected hardships. Welcome to the podcast, dear Katherine.

Katherine Wolf:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm so glad to be here.

Crystal Keating:

Well, we're glad to have you. I so wish we were in person. We had you virtually for a conference many months ago, and you were such a blessing. We are so excited to kick off this podcast season with you, one of our dear friends. You're a dear friend of Joni's and we all love you.

Katherine Wolf:

I love you guys. I love you and your incredible hearts.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, oh, thank you. Thank you. Well, your story is pretty well known throughout the disability community, but for those who have not yet met you and your husband, Jay, would you mind sharing a bit about yourself and how your life was radically changed 14 years ago?



Katherine Wolf:

Exactly. It was just a completely normal day. I was totally healthy, had just had a baby six months before and out of absolutely nowhere I had a massive brainstem stroke and very nearly died, and subsequently began a journey of a new life. I became severely disabled, which largely I remain today.

And I pretty much went from zero health challenges whatsoever to now being in a wheelchair and using the opposite hand, because one arm and hand don't work. And having a paralyzed face on one side and no longer driving a car because of my terrible vision and being deaf in one ear and having many, many health challenges because of a brainstem stroke that should have by all accounts killed me. What had happened was an AVM had ruptured, which is an arterial venous malformation. That is a collection of blood vessels that forms, actually a birth defect that just forms in your mother's womb incorrectly, and then in some cases can rupture. It's kind of like a severe brain aneurysm.

Crystal Keating:

And you never knew that that was with you for many, many years. Did anything trigger it?

Katherine Wolf:

You know, it's questionable. Perhaps childbirth, 'cause I'd had a baby six months before, but it's unknown to this day. And actually, because I've had several other neurological issues since then, the doctors are telling us that I have an undiagnosable because they don't know of any other cases of this but have some sort of very rare connective tissue disorder that is causing brain malfunction. So it's very complex. And yet the thread of the hope of Jesus seems to make that complexity so much less scary. And I definitely am not living in fear.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, amen. That's what we need to hear because here you are, you're a new mama and you are in the hospital, your life has completely changed. And actually, Katherine, you went into a coma for over a month. One of the things I wanted to ask you about was the presence of your church. I know they were a powerful support for you and Jay, and you often talk about them. So I'd love to hear more about their involvement behind the scenes.

Katherine Wolf:

Yeah, it's wild. I, of course, have no memories, but I've heard many, many stories of that time. Actually, they dedicated a little corner of the hospital lobby and put up posters that said Katherine's Corner. And for that first two and a half months actually, at least one person was there at all times.

So my sweet church community and dear friends would rotate on a schedule so that someone was in prayer in the ICU in Katherine's Corner 24/7. Even at 3:00 AM, someone would be sitting down there praying so that every time Jay left the ICU, someone would be down there.

Crystal Keating:

And you had no idea that the body of Christ was right there with you interceding on your behalf, asking God to spare your life. You know, I was really struck when you explained in your book,



Hope Heals, and I've heard you talk about it, how your surgeon made some very difficult decisions while operating that took away many of your abilities, but actually proved to save your life... this is all going on and you have no idea.

Katherine Wolf:

Right, yeah. It took me many years post-stroke to recognize that I am so disabled today not because I survived the stroke, but in fact because the surgeon made decisions, made sacrifices in order for me to live. So the scars on my body, including my paralyzed face are actually the decisions that the wise and careful surgeon made to sustain life and to keep me here. Our scars are the proof that we lived and I'm alive, and yes, everything has not been untouched, unhurt. There are deep, deep scarrings for life probably. I don't put God in a box, but you know, I, I may not be miraculously healed this side of heaven. And yet, you know, it's so interesting and I know you and so many in the disability world join me in exploring what does healing actually mean? And what is the difference between curing and healing and is there healing in deeper places than our bodies to be had? And I believe, yes. I believe the Lord has really healed me, even though my body is very broken still.

Crystal Keating:

Let's talk more about that, the difference between curing and healing. How would you describe those two very different, but similar words?

Katherine Wolf:

You know, it's so fascinating. As I've kind of done a deep dive into what this true healing looks like, and I believe it can be very different for everybody, but the healing that we all need this side of heaven is healing of our soul, is the healing of our broken heart.

And that's very different than curing what's wrong with your body. You know, the physical is just a baseline. We need much deeper quote, unquote, healing of the souls of what we understand that keeps us on earth, that allows us to live our next five minutes in a body that maybe doesn't work.

And in a life that doesn't necessarily feel like it works or that you fit. Time and time again, in the disability community, I've seen plenty of not physically healed people, plenty of people who did not get cured, did not get their physical healing. However, whose souls are healed, who are able to live in a body that they did not ever expect living in. In a life and story that they never expected living. But the hope of a healing that is so deep that it can sustain a life that feels very hard is all of our great hope because in every story, whether a broken body or a broken marriage or a broken financial situation or whatever it is, we all have deep wounds.

We all have pain and struggle of all kinds and much deeper than any physical situation we find ourselves in is a healing of the inner, a healing of the internal spiritual world. The healing of our hearts.



Crystal Keating:

And Christ came... Well, you know why Katherine, because it touches your heart deeply. 'Cause you know that God is doing that great work. And it's a hard work. It's a painful work to really see ourselves and to see how kind and merciful God has been and how he's rescuing us from our greatest problem, which is sin, transforming us. It's like, why does the Psalmist say may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight? To have a mind and a heart that's free to love and free to give. That's true life.

Katherine Wolf:

Yeah, you are absolutely right there. Yes.

Crystal Keating:

So your tears are welcomed and I know felt by many. And so, let's talk about that broken piece. You've talked about how your heart was broken after your stroke. What did you mean by that and how was your deep grief received by those around you? I'm curious about that 'suffer strong in community' piece. How were you relating to one another, to yourself with a broken heart?

Katherine Wolf:

Yeah. You know, so much of my healing has been in community. And I think that's actually always how healing happens. We can't heal alone. God made us to need each other, and we desperately need deep community to heal.

Now, I have seen this in many, many forms, actually. I of course have an amazing husband, which some do have some don't. And it's hard to imagine life without this advocate, but I've seen many, many people who don't have this spouse advocate who have an even deeper advocate alone going for them. And it's amazing. So I don't pretend that he's the reason that I have this life or outlook. He's a blessing though. But I will say my church community really rallied and when we moved from Los Angeles where we now live in Atlanta, the Atlanta community has really rallied and taken care of me. Even most recently, I severely fell and tore my MCL, ACL, and meniscus, and we had sweet friends take our kids to school, bring us meals, do everything we could possibly need to help us heal. And when community is activated and felt and you feel taken care of, you can heal most freely. I mean, I think there's a connection to being able to get well, because you have people holding up your shoulders and helping you do your life when things have fallen apart. So the community piece has been huge.

Also, what community so beautifully does is tell you what you know to be true when you can't think that in the moment. You know, community speaks it to you. Community is the one doing several things. What I've seen in our camp community that is so beautiful is this incredible solidarity, this feeling of I'm not alone in this even if it's a totally different disability that someone else is dealing with, they have their disability too. When honestly, everywhere I speak, everywhere I share, whether a disabled community or a not disabled on the outside community, I see a very shared sense of struggle in life to live and flourish. And we need each other to feel solidarity there, that we've all got stuff and we need each other to begin to heal from our stuff.

Crystal Keating:

That is so true.



And I love that picture of when we can't identify the real truth ourself, we need other people to speak it to us. I kind of think about the mirror. We look in the mirror and we hear certain things about ourselves. We see certain things about ourselves. But then when we step in front of the mirror that is the body of Christ, people who are spirit-filled. When you step in front of Jesus, he says different things about us. You are beloved. You have purpose. I have a plan for you. There is hope. There's a life to come and that is truly healing. I love that.

Katherine Wolf:

Oh, absolutely. The notion that God's writing a story in all of our lives, and this story is not one chapter. This story has many chapters and seasons, and God's got the big picture in mind, not just this momentary pain, I feel has been revolutionary for me. That it's not always going to feel like it does.

And it hasn't, you know, I'm 14 years into this life and it's still been really hard. There's been major challenges left and right. I've had 13 surgeries since the stroke. I've had countless falls. I've had just a lot of all different kinds of pain and suffering, and that doesn't even touch the emotional toll.

I mean, there's been some deep stuff. But the reality that God's story is something I'm a part of and he takes such care in our stories. And he actually made me to do hard things in the good story he's writing, that has been revelatory to me and encouraged me so much.

Crystal Keating:

He made you to do hard things in the good story. I love that.

Katherine, what did you need to hear during the first few years of recovery after your stroke and what did you not need to hear?

Katherine Wolf:

That is a great question. You know, people say the worst things, don't they? It's well-meaning, but they just say the worst things. And I think even the notion of very well-meaning, sweet Christian people saying that, you know, all things work for good for those who love him. Even though that is the truth, a hundred percent, I like to say less words are the best words. That we don't need to put a lot of words around pain in acute seasons of suffering, that there will be a time to share lots of sentiments. But early on especially, really the presence and the ministry of tears is all that's needed.

We need to just grieve with each other and then pick ourselves up, and then we can hear some truth and encouragement in Jesus. I'll tell you, actually, one of the things that most encouraged me (and keep in mind we're talking over years and very large networks). My husband's dad is a beloved pastor in Alabama, in Montgomery, and my family, we have a whole lot of people tracking with us through the years. And I'm sharing online. I mean, we're talking a lot of letters, a lot of emails, a lot of words of encouragement, and many were not okay. You know, all around, just not encouraging, not thoughtful, not the right thing. Do you want to know what somebody said that is one of the most healing things I have ever heard?



It was simply I cannot believe you are going through this. I am so sorry that you are dealing with this. This is shocking. And I'm like, thank you. That is exactly how I feel. This is horrific and shocking. And no one is saying that. They all wanted to encourage me and for someone to cry and say, this is horrible, and say, I can't believe this. I cannot believe you're living through this, and a friend said that. Not even a very close friend, but several years after the stroke. And I cannot tell you what that unlocked in me. Like, thank you. Yes, this is horrible and shocking.

I appreciate that so much more than, you know, oh, well, God sure has a path different than we thought or something that is so well-meaning, but basically like you're never going to get your old life back. It's just not the right thought yet. There is such a tender beautiful way to unpack that down the road that God is doing something new here and it's beautiful and you get to be a part of blazing the trail through the darkness. And the Lord is using this and he's inside of you empowering you to take your next step.

I mean, there's ways to deeply encourage people in the truth of Jesus, but I don't think exploding sentiments and cliches off the bat may be the answer.

Crystal Keating:

No, no. And I love what you said. It's someone to mirror your bewilderment. To say, I see you and we can't make sense of it either. And we're going...

Katherine Wolf:

Oh, that is a beautiful thought. Yes. Let's mirror each other's bewilderment by what's happened in our broken lives.

Crystal Keating:

Well, Katherine, you have the privilege and platform to minister to so many who have faced significant loss in their lives. What kind of encouragement do you find yourself providing over and over? You're really someone who understands. What's that time like when you can really minister to their hearts?

Katherine Wolf:

You know, you're right. I do spend a large amount of time these days, and it is my great privilege, and it is the holy burden to deeply encourage people in many very hard situations. You know, somebody will call somebody who will reach out to somebody and say, can Katherine get on the phone with my nephew's sister's cousin who is having a leg amputated tomorrow. And we live in Wisconsin, but we heard of her. And I'll say yes, I would love that. And I'll make a cold call to a stranger in Wisconsin that's having her leg amputated.

And I will tell her this, I will say, "I wish I could look you in the eye and tell you that suffering is not the end of your story. Suffering is the new beginning. For some reason you do not understand and will not for a long time. This is it. This is your path. And it will send chills up their spine to hear it from my mouth to hear me say there is life on the other side of whatever you're going through, and God is with you every step of the way. And you're going to make it. And actually, what you get to do with your life now is be a survival guide. You get to now blaze a



trail that someone else will walk through and you lit the way and you showed them how to do it. How to walk with Jesus through terrible pain and suffering.”

Crystal Keating:

And someone like you, who has lived with God through what you've been through, you're able to say that to them and they can find hope. Well, Katherine, you were talking about the path of life. And you said that the detours, like a difficult diagnosis, loss of ability, tragedy, divorce, and fertility. These may actually be the path of life, that these hardships, when life is not going as we had hoped or planned are actually part of God's good plan for our lives.

So how do you work that out in your mind? Are there scriptures that give you great comfort when there are just multiple layers of challenges on top of managing life after a stroke?

Katherine Wolf:

Absolutely. One of the most encouraging thoughts that I tell myself and share with other people is the truth of Isaiah 45:3. That he gives hidden treasure in darkness, riches stored in secret places so that we may know him, the God of Israel, the God who summons us by name. And I absolutely love, love, love the thought of if you're going into darkness, know that God has unique treasure for you there and you get to grab on to it.

You get to love and hug that puppy and cherish it for the rest of your life and let it inform how you live.

Crystal Keating:

That's a good word, Katherine. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Oh, God bless you. Thank you.

Katherine Wolf:

Thank you for listening today! Katherine Wolf will be returning next week to talk more about redefining suffering and flourishing within your limitations. If you've been inspired, would you leave a 5-star review? And don't forget to subscribe! You can also visit joniandfriends.org/podcast to send me a message. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for joining me for the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.