

Season 4 | Episode 2

How to Flourish Within Your Limitations

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.

Helping us break down the myth that joy can only be found in a pain-free life, Katherine Wolf is joining us on the podcast again, to share more of her story with us, and especially focus on how to flourish within our limitations. Welcome back to the podcast, Katherine.

Katherine Wolf:

Oh, thank you so much. I am always honored and delighted to be a part of anything Joni Eareckson Tada and her amazing team are doing.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, good. Well, I have a fun story about how I met you. It must've been eight years ago. So, I was the receptionist at our International Disability Center in Agoura Hills. And if anyone has been there, it's a very serene setting.

It's very quiet. There's a floating chapel there with a little waterfall and everyone usually speaks quietly, and sound reverberates. So, I'm there and I hear this woman with so much joy and so much passion come through the front door and I'm thinking, who is this woman?

She just has so much life coming from her heart. And that was you. And that's how I met you the first time, Katherine. I just thought this woman is special. She has energy. I'm so glad she's filling up this quiet building with so much joy. It was great to meet you then.

Katherine Wolf:

Oh, the blessing is all mine. My goodness.

I love the IDC and I have been so blessed by that incredible place and the amazing people inside of it.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. Well, for those who may have missed our previous conversation, can you briefly share how your life was changed by a debilitating stroke 14 years ago?



Katherine Wolf:

Oh, sure. Goodness. April 21st, 2008, out of absolutely nowhere, I had a massive brainstem stroke. It was caused by an AVM, which is an arterial venous malformation, which is a collection of blood vessels that formed incorrectly.

Before I was even born, I like to say that when I was fearfully and wonderfully made in my mother's womb, that little AVM birth defect formed. And then once I was born, it was in my brain all 26 years of life. But it ruptured as a newly 26-year-old and subsequently the rupture caused a massive brainstem stroke and left me severely, severely disabled as I largely remain today.

Crystal Keating:

Well and Katherine, God has, worked in and through you to be a guiding light for others who are also struggling. And I know it's been many years since your stroke and so much has happened in between, but what are some of the most important ways your church has continued to come alongside of you and your family through the joys and sorrows of living with a significant disability?

Katherine Wolf:

Oh, goodness. My church then when I was in Los Angeles and even today, now that I'm in Atlanta, provide so, so much comfort in so many realms. We've seen people, the community being the body of Christ really rally and take care of us and love on us. We've also seen the importance of Christian community from a local church body and beyond pouring truth of scripture into your heart. When you can't believe or see or speak truth to yourself, they can speak it to ya and tell you the truth of the gospel - that nothing is wasted and that nothing is out of God's control. And I, I like to say to not evoke that sentiment on someone the morning after tragedy, goodness, but in time we can be truth-tellers to each other and encourage each other deeply.

Crystal Keating:

That's so good. You know, you said one thing that really stuck out to me and that is that God often gives us more, so much more than we can handle alone so he can handle it for us. And so, we can handle it together.

Katherine Wolf:

Yes, absolutely. That's the truth. The weight of the world is too great to hold on our own, but in community together, we can bear the weight of it all.

Crystal Keating:

Let's talk about prayer. Okay. I'm the kind of person that prays and then watches intently for God to answer my prayers. I even say, "Lord open my eyes to see when you're answering these prayers so that I know it's from you."

And when he doesn't (this is probably my pride), when he doesn't answer, I find myself perplexed. So, I want to pose a question to you as you and Jay walked with Christ and are

walking with Christ. How do you work out the reality that not all prayers get answered the way we want?

Katherine Wolf:

Right. I mean, that is a classic difficult question to ever understand. But you know, I think so many times if the answer is not what we would have wanted, we have to trust that there is one who's answering the prayer that we actually really need more than we may think we need. You know, I might pray to walk again, but if that doesn't happen this side of heaven, God knows my story better than I do.

God knows everything and everything that I need to live a life in a wheelchair. And we can understand and thank God somehow for unanswered prayers, because he's keeping us from the things not for us. And I think that is a great comfort. So much of God's not answering prayers the way we would have wanted is about protection.

He is really protecting us from the things that are not for us, not to be in our story.

Crystal Keating:

Well, that is a good reminder of how wise God is and how he shepherds our life. So, thank you for that. And I want to ask you another question. You said you and Jay talk about the idea of letting go of your past, you know. Is that really healthy?

And as a, as a young counseling student in my twenties, I think I must have misunderstood Paul's word in Philippians when he said, "Forget what's behind and strain toward what is ahead." And I think I took this to mean that we were to let go of our past and just move on to really press into Christ.

And you've shared that how we remember our lives actually really matters. So, what are some practical examples of how you've reframed your own circumstances, especially as you look back on your past?

Katherine Wolf:

Oh, I love this question and could not agree more. I think what the Bible calls us to is a biblical remembrance to, yeah, let it go.

Let the past go but learn the right lessons from past. Forgive yourself. Yes. Move on. But goodness, don't go forward forgetting what God's done. We're called over and over to remember, learn the right things from where we've been and take that with us. I think the past is so useful to be inspired by. For our future, to live with such hope of God showing up. I guess my biggest example, of course, would be the tragedy quote, unquote of the stroke. So, I could see it as this horrible, terrible thing in my past, that is haunting and I'm cursed and it's like, "Woe is me." Or I live.

I should be dead. I'm alive. I'm here. It's a miracle. I look at my broken body the same way, like this is tragic. Look at my life in a wheelchair. Look at this really awful story. Or recognize, oh, my



word, I am a living miracle. The Lord has given me a second-chance life. I'm here. I'm in the room. I believe if you have a pulse, you have a purpose and I definitely have a pulse (and fast).

And the Lord is at work in my story. So, I think we can reframe everything in our lives and remember it differently, not in a fake way. No, no, no. But in the deep reality of the threads of the God story in our story.

Crystal Keating:

I think you and Jay do a tremendous job at redefining the suffering in our lives. Right? Cause life is how we respond to what happens to us. And it's how we think about it. And you don't sugar coat it either, and that's what I really appreciate about you.

Katherine Wolf:

Well, what you were saying is all my jam. I love the notion of redefining everything in this world. And honestly, then re-narrating this world.

I think as Christians, we are called to re-narrate the world to the world. And so much of that is not accepting a victim mentality in your life and waking up to: I get to tell my story and it is not a tragedy. God has shown up here. He's showing off through my life, and I get to share that with the world and not a mentality that look, this terrible thing happened to me and I'm this horrible victim of my story. No, this terrible thing happened to me and now I get to choose how to respond to that terrible thing.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And that choice is a powerful thing. And it gives agency to a person who feels probably very helpless. And God says, you are not helpless. I am with you. I will strengthen you. And there is more to your story.

So, Katherine, would you share some thoughts with those living in hard and unchanging circumstances about how you've seen your suffering produce hope in your heart?

Katherine Wolf:

I love the truth of that. I love in Romans 5, that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope. And hope will never put us to shame. I love that deep truth. And so much of my story of suffering has elements of deep horrible pain, for sure. Lots of unmet expectations, lots of unwanted everything, from unwanted surgeries to future diagnosis, to terrible falls. I mean, a lot of really, really bad stuff. But through it all, it would be almost undeniable to recognize that God is so at work, keeping the worst-case scenarios from happening to me; keeping so much away from me that could hurt me. The Lord's really protected me. And that's pretty radical to think when I've had a massive stroke and nearly died, that the Lord's really been protecting me. But it's the truth. It's totally the truth that the worst has not happened.

I'm here on earth. And I can start with a deep hope in God, right there that he's with me, kept me here. And that is the choice every person in a wheelchair, every person who is severely



disabled has, is to recognize that God has them on this earth, even in a broken body for a reason. And we may not understand or know, but there is hope. You know, the smallest sign of life is the very beginning of hope. And that hope fuels more hope and more hope and more hope. And I believe the more hope that we feel and internalize, we then give, and it feeds itself as that beautiful truth of 2 Corinthians 1. That we share hope and then we're comforted, and we comfort and it's this cycle. And I love the truth of Romans 15:13, that the God of hope fills us with hope, and we overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Crystal Keating:

Those are the words that we need to hear, and we need to be telling one another. When we forget you also said one key thing that I think is so worth restating, that what's true in the dark is also true in the light because hopelessness, I think is really where we feel, where is God? What is true? What is my life? What's happening?

Katherine Wolf:

Absolutely. Yes. That's it that when we recognize like, oh wait, the same God is on both sides; the same God is before and after. The same God, the same truths of scripture are there encouraging me in the highs and the lows of my life.

Crystal Keating:

What are some of the truths you've learned on this side of the stroke that you wished someone would have told you then?

Katherine Wolf:

You know, so, so many for sure. I think I wish someone would have told me or I would have internalized then - maybe they did say this: that life will be full of very hard things, but that you can do very hard things because Jesus is at work in you.

I definitely did not grasp that, 1. Because I don't think anyone's community, parents, et cetera, is pouring it on to their little girl or little boy: life's going to be really hard. You know, we're trying to shelter our children from really hard things and thinking those are to come. But the reality is they are, they are coming. John 16:33 is true that in this world we will have trouble.

So, I think I would tell little Katherine to expect more of God and less of this world; that we're putting all our eggs in the wrong basket, so to speak. We're saying this life should overwhelm every expectation I've ever had and maybe, maybe God can do things. I don't really know; I don't really care. Here and now is what matters. I want my life to be wonderful and turn out wonderful and perfect. Yet, the reality is it probably won't be that way.

So, expectations need to be shifted. We're desperately trying to teach our little boys that God made them to do hard things. And that's within the good story he's writing, that God is writing a beautiful story in their lives. But it means that they will be doing hard things that he made them to do in this hard story. That's really a good story. They go hand-in-hand. I'm all about the good, hard stories.



Crystal Keating:

The good hard. That is real life, that's real life. Well, you talk about the blessing of limited options in a world where it seems like everything is at our fingertips, that we can actually flourish within our limitations.

And you've said that redefining our constraints as opportunities rather than barriers, help expand our thinking in ways we never would have imagined otherwise. I just love that. So how does that truth play out in your life?

Katherine Wolf:

Oh, in a thousand little ways. You know, one of the most clear examples would obviously be my life in a wheelchair. That could be seen by many as tremendously confining, that the wheelchair is what confines me or I'm "wheelchair bound," quote unquote. And I really reject that because I'm flourishing because of the wheelchair. The wheelchair takes me out in the world. The wheelchair gets me to where I want to go.

The wheelchair enables me to do my life and show up in the rooms I want to be in. So, the wheelchair is not an agent that confines me. It frees me. And that's true in so, so many stories that what looks like a constraint can actually be an avenue to freedom, if we see it that way.

Crystal Keating:

Another redefining moment. How do we look at our constraints, not as barriers, but as opportunities for God to flourish in and through us? That's great. Katherine, as we close our time together, are there any final words you'd like to share with our listeners today? We just love you. And we're just so thankful that you've joined us on the podcast today.

Katherine Wolf:

What a blessing, what a deep blessing it is to be here. Um, I never know who might be listening, but I, I get emotional thinking that maybe there's a listener today that's in a lot of pain and feels very alone and I would speak to you. Maybe you're driving home in your car, listening at home, or with kids screaming in the next room, that God is there, right where you are, comforting you, surrounding you with a deep peace. No matter the storm, you are going to be okay. No matter what is to come in your life, that truly good things of God are already inside of you. No matter how bad things get on the outside, the goodness of God can never be taken away. As it says in Psalm 84:11, he withholds no good thing. The good things, the truly, truly good things are already there. The joy and the peace and the comfort of him, and the reality of heaven to come sustain us through all of our pain and struggles.

Crystal Keating:

Those are some very encouraging words for those who are alone. God is with you. Katherine, thanks so much for joining us on the podcast today. We so appreciate you.

Katherine Wolf:

Oh, my goodness. What a tremendous, tremendous blessing. Joni and Friends radically changed the trajectory of my life, and I will be forever grateful. So, I love you people.

Crystal Keating:
We love you, too.

Thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. 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.

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