



Season 4 | Episode 3

## When Skies Aren't Blue

Dr. Andy Laurie

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MAY 26, 2022

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.

Dr. Andy Laurie is joining us on the podcast today to share his journey as a physician and a pastor who has lived nearly two decades with an autoimmune disease. Be encouraged as he shares key steps for staying hopeful through the unexpected struggles that may come our way. Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Andy!

Dr. Andy Laurie:

Thank you. Appreciate you having me on.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, it's so good to talk to you. You know, I was really touched by your story you wrote in, *When Skies Aren't Blue: A Physicians Personal Journey*, and you were really living the dream. You were happily married to your college sweetheart. You had a thriving family with four young children, a successful medical practice, and were starting a second career as a pastor. Then the unthinkable happened when you were struck by a devastating illness. So, Dr. Andy, can you take us on that journey from symptoms to diagnosis? What happened when you started to feel sick?

Dr. Andy Laurie:

Sure, I'd be glad to do that. So, I was 38 years old when this all hit, and like you mentioned, I was living the dream. At that time, I was healthy. I was strong. I was vibrant. I was an emergency room radiologist. I covered four of the emergency rooms in town. I did that at night full-time and then in the daytime, we were starting up a brand-new church that I was pastoring and running everything there.

And in addition, four small kids, and I'm just juggling all this stuff, but seemingly endless energy and great health and able to pull the whole thing off. And then one morning, it was around Christmas time. I woke up with what I thought was the stomach flu. You know, sick to my stomach, throwing up, nausea, and all that.

And I figured, okay, it's stomach flu. Nobody likes that, but it'll probably pass by tomorrow morning. Well, tomorrow came. I was still sick and throwing up and the next day and the next



and the next. And after about a week of this, I was really in bad shape, just obviously very dehydrated. My blood pressure was dropping down.

You know, my wife had to bring me into the emergency room just to get IV fluids and all of that. The ER doctors were puzzled. They figured out, maybe it's some kind of virus that's lingering. And it continued day after day, week after week. And after about a month of it, I was critically sick. I had probably lost about thirty pounds by that point, in the hospital multiple times to get IV fluids, you know, paramedics showing up just to give me fluids to get my blood pressure up, and I had no idea what was going on. And I'm a diagnostic radiologist. I mean, that's kind of what we do. And I just no clue what was happening here. I ended up calling a friend of mine that I did my residency with. He was a gastroenterologist - explained to him what's happening. He brought me in and ran a whole bunch of tests, which is what gastroenterologists pretty much do.

And everything came back normal, and we're just greatly, greatly puzzled. What is going on here? My wife and I, you know, we were just up one night, praying, just crying, and praying, and what's happening to us? What's going on here? And in the middle of one of those prayers, it was kind of a, just so happened to think about an old professor of mine.

(I love those "just so happened" moments with God. They happen a lot.) But it just so happened, I thought about this professor of mine, when I was an intern doing my residency. This guy was just brilliant. He was double boarded in internal medicine and gastroenterology, and he was kind of the guy that when all the tough cases would come, they would send them his way and he'd figure it out. Kind of like Dr. House, but nice. Not obnoxious and rude. So, we prayed on this and said let's just call him. And so, I called him. I'm surprised he remembered me. It was almost 10 years and he remembered me, and he said, "sure, come on in."

And he spent time with us and he figured it out. He said, "Andy, I think what happened to you is you've had an autoimmune response, probably triggered by a virus and it hampered your autonomic nervous system." Now the autonomic nervous system, that's the part of our nervous system that controls things that happen autonomically or automatically like blood pressure, heart rate, digestion, breathing, things we don't think about but they're vitally important.

And he says, "Likely, this autoimmune response shut down the autonomic system that innervates your gut and your gut basically has stopped working." And he said, there's not much he can do about it. But he said, "Why don't you head off to the Mayo Clinic? It's just not that common and they may have some ideas."

And so, my wife and I while were just overwhelmed by this, incredibly grateful. We at least sorta had an answer as to what was going on. So, we went to the Mayo Clinic, and while they made it very clear there was no cure for this, which was devastating for us, they said there are things they could do to help me feel better.

And they did, they put some things in place, some medications, some therapies, and some things that at least got me to the point where I could hold stuff down again. I could kind of function a little bit, but the nausea was just still overwhelming. And so, we ended up doing, which was an



experimental procedure at that time, a surgery where they placed a pacemaker, like a heart pacemaker, but they placed it in the stomach.

Again, it was kind of experimental at that time. It didn't really help the nausea, but unfortunately, after that surgery, it triggered another problem where every time I would stand up, my heart rate would take off. I'd go into heart arrhythmias. My blood pressure would plummet, and I would pass out.

It was so bad; I couldn't even really get out of bed. And as it turned out the same autoimmune thing that attacked the gut now went after the cardiovascular system and I had what's commonly known now as POTS. They didn't understand it too much then, but POTS is postural orthostatic tachycardic syndrome.

And that's getting to have more and more understanding of what that's about now. And so basically what happened in a very short time, I went from healthy, strong, vibrant as somebody that wakes up every morning with what feels like the stomach flu. Sometimes I can't even get out of bed. Things that used to be so easy are overwhelmingly difficult. And so, in a very quick time, I went from blue skies to very dark skies and that's kind of how the whole thing played out here.

Crystal Keating:

I just cannot imagine what you may have been thinking and feeling. Were you doing any kind of work or pastoral ministry through that? I'm just picturing you in bed.

Dr. Andy Laurie:

Acutely, no, for the first two to three months, it was, am I going to live? I mean, it really, it came down to that. So, I was pretty much bedbound and just trying to survive most of the time, in and out of hospitals. But once we got to the Mayo Clinic and they started putting some things in place, it got me to that point where I at least can kind of get back on my feet again and start to approach the second phase of life, which was I now have a chronic illness that I have to deal with and cope with. So, it was several months before I was able to start functioning again in that limited capacity.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I'm sure as a strong man who's a physician and a pastor, you're not thinking about your future, imagining, oh, I may one day also be a patient.

And other doctors are going to diagnose me, and people are going to be having to minister to me. So, I'm curious during those initial stages of her illness, how did your friends and family come around you and especially your church? How did they respond to what you were experiencing?

Dr. Andy Laurie:

That's a great question. So, with the family, thankfully at least acutely in the illness, as I mentioned those first three, four months when I didn't know whether I was going to live or not, my kids were very small. And so, some of the trauma of having paramedics showing up and



taking their dad away and hooking up IV fluids, I don't think they have many memories of that, thankfully. Now they had to grow up with a dad that was chronically sick. A dad that was limited, but at least in that initial phase, they were young enough that it didn't impact them.

But with my wife, that was an interesting, kind of development. I do want to spend a little time talking about that. And you mentioned the thing as a, as a man and as a doctor. I want to talk a little bit to the guys. At least I don't know about you and your experience for mine, I'm on a number of kind of online chronic illness support groups.

And for the most part, it's women, it's just. So yeah, you probably get that. This coping with chronic illness, it's just not really a guy thing. And I think there's a lot of reasons for that, but one of them I do want to address because it really ties into as a man, how did I deal with this? And how did it affect my relationship with my wife?

And I would say early on, it was not good. When I mean early on, beyond the initial traumatic phase of - am I going to die? Is my wife going to be a widower and have to take care of these four kids on her own? Obviously, that's an entirely different overwhelming situation that hopefully, we'll, we'll, we'll be able to talk to about the power of God and the comfort of God working through these overwhelming situations.

But when it became clear that, okay, I'm not going to die from this, but I'm going to have severe limitations. It sent me into a real dark place because as a guy, in many ways, we as guys, we, we value ourselves based on what we do, what we achieve, what we accomplish. And certainly, when my wife met me, I was a medical student, achieving and accomplishing. And then I moved into my residency and with long work hours, getting called out for emergency things. And then her guy was the emergency radiologist covering these four hospitals. And then her guy was this pastor starting up a new church. It was these big-ticket items that kind of defined me as a man in a lot of ways, what I achieved and what I accomplished.

And then this illness hit, and it robbed me of my ability to be able to do any of those things. And I began to not feel very good about myself. I didn't have much respect for myself. I, although my wife did not feel this way, I just would think of how maybe my wife doesn't think much of me as a man anymore.

And I really pulled away and went into a not a good place for me emotionally. It was not a very good husband. It was a real tough time. Finally, I came to that point saying, this has got to stop. I know better than this. I'm a pastor. I have taught on this. I have taught our self-worth is not what we do and what we achieve and what we accomplish.

It's who we are in God. And I also get it, as God made man a certain way to achieve and to accomplish, I had to go through this process of redefining what a victory is. I had to get to this point where I said, okay, Andy, you can't do the things you used to do, but you cannot let the things that you can't do stop you from doing the things you can do.



And so yeah, I can't run around the sports fields and keep up with my kids anymore. I can get all the energy and strength I can to go out and watch them play soccer, or watch them play tennis, and motivate them and encourage them. And while maybe I can't cover four emergency rooms all night long anymore, I can get the strength I need to work a couple hours and do the very best I can and try to help patients and bring some income into the house. And while I can't go out and run an entire church anymore, I can get the energy I need, take a shower, and on Sunday morning, head off to church and minister to a few people.

And I had to redefine what victory was. And if you brought my wife onto the show, which she'd be horrified, cause she's so shy. So, you wouldn't want to do this, but if you brought her on and you asked her, which Andy was more manly to you, healthy Andy who achieved and accomplished and did all those big-ticket items, or sick Andy who, despite his limitations did what he could do.

I have no doubt, she would say it was sick Andy. That's heroic. And I just, I cannot stress to the guys enough out there. We need to define ourselves, yeah, first and foremost, that God made us and created us in his image and that gives us our value, but we can't be defining ourselves by the magnitude of our achievements.

We can't let the things we can't do stop us from having victory in what we can do, because if we go down that pathway, it's going to send us into that very dark place that the enemy will use, the very things that God instilled in us in a very detrimental way. So, I just want to be able to share that, that kind of early phases to help the guys out a little bit there.

Oh, and I'm so glad you did. We hear from many people with chronic illnesses or, they've encountered something where their ability to do what they used to do is completely limited. And their question is always about identity. Who am I now if I can't do what I used to do? Even that piece about, you know, when you're ministering to others, but then God brings you through your own season where you have to say, okay God, the very things that I'm encouraging other people to do, I need to embrace myself, that these things are true, that we are representative of you. And that is our true identity. And I've heard you share that a good starting point for healing, which is kind of what you've just been describing when skies go dark and you don't know who you are anymore, and you're fearful of disappointing the beloved of your life. You said it's to realize that God is very real. That just resonated with me so much. So how do you know God is very real, even objectively, not just personally?

Dr. Andy Laurie:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think for those that are suffering and suffering extensively, this concept is so important because we reached that point when life hits us and hits it hard. Whether we're talking about an ongoing, awful illness or a disability or some financial calamity or a divorce or a loss of love and whatever it is, we reached that point when we were absolutely overwhelmed. And in those moments, it's not going to be good enough to kind of hope God is real, to wish he's true, to kind of have this blind faith that I just, I feel he's there.

It's not going to be enough. We will end up becoming despondent and discouraged very quickly if we don't have objective truth. I think a little bit about the story of John the Baptist. If



remember John the Baptist, he ended up in prison and he knew his life was coming to an end. He was going to be executed for this.

And just prior to that, he ended up going through this phase of doubt, like, is Jesus really it? Is this, is he really it? And he ended up sending his followers, his disciples, up to Jesus. He, he was in prison. He couldn't go do it himself. And when his disciples showed up to Jesus to let them know what was going on and what John was feeling, Jesus' response was really telling.

He did not say, you know, go tell John how dare he question me. How dare he doubt me. He should have blind faith. I am who I say I am. Instead, he reminded his followers, go back to John, and tell him about these miracles. Tell him about these amazing things I've done. Remind them of that.

And it's interesting. The miracles he pointed out, many of those were the miracles that were prophesied in the Old Testament that the Messiah would do that, that John would be very familiar with. Jesus' point, and it's fascinating because he made us, he created us. He knows us, and he knows when we face these overwhelming traumatic situations that floor us. Our faith will falter. And what we need at that time is that objective, provable truth to come back to so that no matter what we're going through, what we're struggling with, we come back to that objective truth that we can prove God is real. Prove God is true. Prove the Bible is real. And because of that, we know God some way, one way or the other, he's going to take us through that.

And so, in the book I listed out ten. I call them prescriptions just to have a little fun with the doctor things. But first and foremost was we need that objective truth that we know God is real and true because if we don't have that, everything falls apart. We won't be able to find those, those blue skies again.

Crystal Keating:

You know, I'm just curious when you think about certain objective truths, what do you go back to? I always go back to the resurrection, but what do you go back to?

Dr. Andy Laurie:

That's a big question there. There's a lot to that. So let me kind of address something to get my background and then I think that will be really helpful to be able to answer that question. So, I'm a little bit unique in that I am both a medical doctor and a pastor. I was a medical doctor before I was a pastor. In fact, when I was in medical school, I didn't even really even believe in God. We had this Christian medical student association in medical school. And I'd just think you gotta be kidding me. These guys are supposed to be smart. They're intelligent. They're scientists. Why in the world would they possibly believe in this fairy tale? Is it some crutch that they need?

And so, I, I had no part with God at all as a medical student and even in my start of my residency. But something interesting happened. I ended up going into a real deep depression early in my medical career because I bought into the lie of Darwinian macroevolution, which says we are accidents of nature.





And all I could think about was it doesn't matter. Yeah. I'm going to be a doctor. I got this career in front of me and all I can think of is maybe I'll get thirty to forty years to practice if I'm lucky. Then I will die, and I will be gone. And I'll just be another accident that's here today and gone tomorrow and I was miserable.

And so there I was young Dr. Andy, didn't really care much about life, career. I was so depressed through this, and it was my wife who said, "Andy, I think we need to go to church." And I'm looking at her like, you gotta be kidding me. I'm a man of science. Why in the world would I do that? She says, "Andy, you're miserable. Let's just give it a shot." And so, we showed up at church. It just so happened.

Crystal Keating:  
Another one of those just so happened.

Dr. Andy Laurie:  
It just so happened at that very first day we showed up to church, the pastor, his name was David McAllister, just so happened that's the church I'm a pastor at now. I never left it. But it just so happened on that first day, pastor said, "You know, the one thing that separates Christianity from every other religion in the world is that it does not want you to believe on blind faith."

Because it self-authenticates itself. It's the only religion because it's true, it proves it to be true and there are facts to prove it to be true. So now I'm getting to your question. That floored me. I'm like what? And he said it was such confidence. I mean, it was with such confidence.

And so, I tore into this thing just like I did anything in science, just like all of my doctor training. First and foremost, I tore into evolution. How did we get here? And you know what? Deep down Crystal, I knew. Deep down, I mean, I was a radiologist. I studied the body inside and out. I knew life is incredibly complex beyond anything we can fathom. And deep down, I knew it made no sense that we got here by accident. And so, I dug into the science. I dug into the complexity of human life and cellular studies. I dug into the fact that there is machinery within the human cells, and it became so obvious to me that the human body was created; that there is a master design in a creator without a doubt that the science is crystal clear.

So, one of my proofs that God is real, and God is true is I exist. I just look at the fact that I am here, and I know how incredibly complex I am. I know there is a creator. But it didn't answer the question, who is, and what is the creator? And then I dug into the Bible and studied. One of the things you mentioned, the proof of the resurrection and everything that goes along with that fulfilled prophecy in the Old Testament about the coming Messiah.

And it is unbelievable when you look at it from a historical perspective and a statistical perspective, the Bible has to be true. And so, once all of that came into place, I knew what I needed to do. I needed Christ in my life. I got right with God, became a Christian. Suddenly my passion wasn't so much healing people physically as a doctor but trying to impact people eternally.



And so, after several years went by, that very same pastor said, what do you think about the idea of coming on staff? And so, I did and that started the whole other phase. So, it still comes back to though the fact that I now know intellectually, logically, factually, God is real, and God is true.

Strength in the power of that to overcome this awful illness has been so significant. And then that has to be the starting point for all of us. So, any of the listeners out there that are they're struggling and deep down they're wondering, is God really there? He is. It's true. It's provable and love to be able to help them through that process.

There's lots of information in my book and other places they can get that.

Crystal Keating:

That is so good. When we are feeling like there is no end in sight and no bottom to rest on, we have to have a sure anchor of foundation that we can go back to. So, your book again is, *When Skies Aren't Blue*, and you know, I love what you wrote: "Hope is so easy to grasp onto and yet so easily destroyed." So, Dr. Andy, when the ups and downs of your chronic condition shadowed God's face and darkened hope for a better tomorrow, how have you processed the roller coaster of emotions that come with gaining hope and then losing hope?

Dr. Andy Laurie:

You know, I think for those who suffer with chronic illness, chronic injury, or ongoing depression or I don't know loss of a loved one, divorce, some overwhelming thing that you're going to get what I'm about to say, but especially those in the chronic illness category, we're suffering and we're looking for answers.

And we're looking for hope when we go to the doctor and they're saying, hey, there's this new medicine out there. There's this new procedure out there. There's this new surgery. And we think it could bring you some relief and your hopes get up. I mean, you get so excited about it. I cannot tell you how many times with each new thing, my wife and I were praying, God, maybe this is it.

This is the thing. This is the one. This is what's going to finally give us our life back. And we pray and we get so excited. And ninety-nine percent of the time it doesn't work, or it makes it worse. And we're just devastated. It's crushing for us, and the crying and it was this rollercoaster. And I know people that suffer. They get it, this world, these ups, and downs. The hope gets up, and then it's crushed, and you're brought down, and it probably was two or three years into it, maybe more.

And my wife and I finally said, we've had enough of this. We can't live this way anymore. We can't get our hopes so put into something that inevitably just lets us down and it brings us back to, we only have one thing and one thing only that will never let us down. And that's God who we know is real and we know is true.





And so well, yeah, we continue to look for answers, our hope would never be put into those things again. It was always going to be put in God is going to take us through this one way or the other.

Crystal Keating:

That is right. Our hope is in Christ. He is our sure, sure foundation. Dr. Andy, what have been some of the most powerful ways God has worked through the messiness of your medical condition and how has this brought you a sense of freedom from bitterness?

Dr. Andy Laurie:

It is so easy for those that suffer chronically to slip into bitterness. I mean, it is so, so easy for that to happen. And I think one of the reasons that people who suffer with chronic illness, chronic pain, whatever it may be, and for that matter, it could be somebody that's chronically, you know, grieving the loss of a loved one or a marriage that has fallen apart.

This ongoing, unseemingly unchangeable problem could so easily lead to bitterness if, and this is so important if they have wrong expectations. And I think it is failed expectations that lead people down that pathway of bitterness. We expect somehow life to be good. We expect our relationships to be good.

We expect to be healthy. We expect to be pain-free. We expect there not to be financial calamity, whatever it is. And when inevitably those things fall apart, it leads us down this pathway of darkness into bitterness. And so, it is so crucial that we accurately see the world around us, through the eyes of God, how God is clearly portrayed to us scripturally, the nature of this world we live in.

God couldn't be any clearer that it's a broken world. It's a fallen world, right from Genesis chapter one. When Eden was lost, it became very clear. We're going to have problems. We're going to have struggles. And if we don't have those right expectations in that right balance, it's going to lead to bitterness.

And I think one of the best ways to see life is through James chapter one. And I actually, I talked a lot about this in the book because it's so important, James chapter one. I know a lot of listeners are familiar with it, but that's where it talks about, "consider it pure joy, my brethren, whenever you face trials of many kinds."

Now, when he said consider it pure joy because we have to consider it joyful, cause it's not. It's not joyful. But we can consider it because God could take us through a process to bring something powerful and positive out of something yuck.

So, we can consider it pure joy, but it says whenever. So, he didn't say if you face trials. He says, when. Again, it's very clear-cut. God says it's not if, it's when you're going to face these struggles and suffering and issues in a broken world. But he says, whenever you face trials of many kinds. It's the of many kinds I want to talk about.



If you kind of look at the entomology and where we get our English word from that, it's actually polka dots. So, God's saying here, our life is going to be polka-dotted with these struggles and problems. That's how he wants us to see life. And if you kind of picture life as a giant canvas and in the book, I actually, I had an artistic illustration of all this to illustrate it because it's such an important point, but for the listeners, picture your life as this big canvas.

And on this canvas, it's filled with these polka dots: red dots, green dots, red dots, green dots, red and green dots everywhere. And the red dots are all the bad stuff. The struggles, the pain, the suffering, the illness, the broken relationships, the financials, they're struggles. They're those red dots everywhere.

And the green dots, it's the good stuff. The blessings of the things that are positive in our life. And that's life. And we know when we think about it, we know that's true. Life is not always, everything's horrible, everything's awful, everything's bad. All there are red dots. Life is not, everything's good, everything's wonderful. There's nothing but green dots. It's both. We have the good and the bad going on at the same time. And that's how God wants us to see life so that every time a red dot shows up in our life, we're not floored by it because we're not having these false expectations that they shouldn't be there.

And instead, God wants us to put our focus somewhere. God doesn't want us to be a bunch of Christian pessimists. I don't want the listeners to be listening, boy this doctor is a real downer here. I'm not, I just want to be accurate. God doesn't want us to be Christian pessimists. I mean, God says, this is the day he has given us so let us rejoice and be glad in it. But the only way we're going to be able to rejoice and be glad in it is we have to accurately see life for what it is, and we understand, okay, we've got red dots, but I'm going to choose. And this is the Philippians four thing where God teaches us, what are we going to choose to think on? What are we going to choose to dwell on? I am going to choose to dwell on the green dots. I am going to choose to dwell on the blessings in my life. And I'm going to focus on those and be thankful for those. And I cannot begin to tell you the power that, that has. As I look at my life, I've got some awful red dots in it.

I really do. I'm sick, I'm suffering. I'm miserable at times. But you know what, I've got some incredible green dots. God has done some amazing things in my family, even through this illness. God has done some amazing things in my marriage through this illness. God has taken our church and I wish I had time to tell the story about how this illness forced our church to make some significant changes and we became one of the first live feed churches in America, and we grew out of our building and into the next one, and tons of people are getting right with God. And what a blessing there is. God has done so many really cool and special things here. But if all I do is get myopic and focus on the red dots, I would miss all those wonderful green dots and it's going to lead me down that pathway of bitterness.

And so, having accurate expectations is so important because when we do that, we then open our eyes a little wider and we see God working in our lives and it is so cool and so amazing and so powerful to transforming our skies to be blue once again.



Crystal Keating:

That is right. What a good reminder. Dr. Andy Laurie, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. I have been so deeply encouraged to keep my eyes on the Lord that he is my rock and my foundation. I'm so grateful for your story and what you've shared today.

Dr. Andy Laurie:

Crystal. Thank you so much. I love being here with you.

Crystal Keating:

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