



Season 4 | Episode # 24

## Out of Addiction to Freedom: The Road to Recovery

### Jennifer Evans

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#### Part 1

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.

As a young girl disability advocate, Jennifer Evans dreamed of traveling around the world to help people in need. And by the age of 33, she had been on missions in 45 countries on six continents. On the outside, her life seemed full of purpose, but on the inside, she was struggling.

Jennifer was a high-functioning addict, and it truly got the best of her. And yet in her darkest hour hitting rock bottom, Jennifer called out to God and she's here on the podcast to share her story of overcoming addiction. Welcome to the podcast, Jennifer. Thank you so much for being willing to share your personal story with us.

Jennifer Evans:

Crystal, I'm so glad to be here and three and a half years sober from drugs and alcohol.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. You know, would you just take us back to 2016? You really hit a wall. You were totally burnt out and you knew you had to make a change.

Jennifer Evans:

Yeah, so I was serving all around the world doing secular mission work, but I was on the road 200 days a year. My identity was in what I was doing, and I was in flight or fight mode all the time and getting lack of sleep.

And so, to be able to continue to execute at a high capacity, I was using drugs and alcohol. So, I smuggled marijuana with me to every one of those countries. Oh wow. Um, I called it my medicine and I was, you know, at that time taking pain pills and diet pills as well. And then drinking a little bit here and there too.

So, I was kind of just always changing my consciousness. I liked that it worked for me for a long time until it didn't in 2016. And I remember coming back, I had a three-week trip. I was in China and Africa, and I came home to Minneapolis where I was living in the summer. And it's the most beautiful time there.



But I remember I was just so depressed and anxious. And my life at that time, all I did was work and basically smoke weed, you know, and, and do these other things. So, I remember just going up and quitting my job 'cause I just didn't wanna feel that way anymore. And I had bad habits of making hasty decisions, you know, instead of going to the owners and telling them, maybe I had this problem and I needed help.

I didn't really think I had a problem. I actually just thought, I'm tired, I'm overworked. I just need to change. I'm done with this. So, I quit my job. And then I started to try to moderate, you know, on my own, like, okay, I just wanna smoke weed twice a week. I just wanna have two drinks at a time. I was trying to moderate myself and I could get like a month under my belt and then I would fall.

And so, during this process, I went home to visit family in Arizona. And I went out with my friends and told them I have a two-drink limit. Well, that didn't happen, and I had countless drinks and ended up like really, you know, doing cocaine and ditching my friends and I woke up in an alley. Well, I was standing, and some guy was asking me for my number and so I just praised God that nothing bad ever happened to me really.

I made it home that night and I woke up the next morning with a horrible hangover and I had promised to take my grandma to church. And I really didn't want to, but I didn't wanna let her down. She's the only Christian Evangelical in our family. And so, I remember smoking weed on the way to pick grandma up for church.

Crystal Keating:  
Wow.

Jennifer Evans:  
And we walk in the church doors, and I got handed the program for the day and it said addiction must fall.

Crystal Keating:  
Oh, my goodness.

Jennifer Evans:  
Yeah. So that just hit me. And I knew God was talking to me and I wish I could say I was immediately delivered. But that's not what happened to me. But I was working with a secular life coach, and she said, you know, have you tried asking God for help? And I'm like, no, I think I've pretty much done about everything else.

Crystal Keating:  
Wow.

Jennifer Evans:  
But that, and so she encouraged me to get on my knees and just ask God for help. Ask him to help me change my story before something bad happened.



I hadn't prayed in maybe, I don't know, five years, who knows? And so, after that, I just felt inspired to look for help. I think that was when I knew, okay, I can't do this on my own. I need help. And I went into Marijuana Anonymous, which is a real thing.

And then I ended up going to a traditional AA 12-step program. And, really, it did work for me. It delivered me from the bondage of addiction and using every day. Praise God.

Crystal Keating:  
Praise the Lord.

Jennifer Evans:  
Yeah. And about two months into that, I ended up at a women's leadership conference in Austin, Texas, and there was about 11 women and myself and you know, they were all happy and successful. And I was like, you know, what do these women have because I'm sober, but I'm depressed and anxious.

And so, I found out they were all Christian. And so, uh, you know, at this point.

Crystal Keating:  
You saw something very different in them. It wasn't just that they were clean.

Jennifer Evans:  
Yes.

Crystal Keating:  
They were like flourishing.

Jennifer Evans:  
Yes, like the joy of the Lord, which I now see. A couple of the women really just loved up on me. 'Cause I even said, oh yeah, that's great, Jesus you know, he was a good guy 2000 years ago, you know. But I had really never heard the gospel, to be honest. I went through the motions, but I didn't really know why do I need a savior? So, these women just encouraged me to open my heart to the Lord and ask him if he was real and just seek for myself.

And so, I decided to do that because at that point in my life, I couldn't imagine living really without drugs and alcohol before. That was the hardest thing for me, like, this is not gonna be fun. Life's gonna suck. It's gonna be boring. But I couldn't go back to the old lifestyle 'cause I was so unhappy and uncomfortable in the bondage of addiction, waking up and not wanting to use and then using, you know. So, I was finally off that cycle, and I knew I couldn't go back and there had to be something more.

And so, I opened my heart to the Lord. I started to seek him, and I was going to Ireland, and I saw this book in the airport called *Bible Verses for Women*. I decided I was gonna look at it. And I was getting off the plane in Dublin, and this woman said, is this your bag?



You know, she said that to her husband, and she looked at me and said, or is this this little child's bag?

Crystal Keating:  
Oh.

Jennifer Evans:  
And I was like, excuse me. I know I don't have makeup on. I kind of look a little young. And she goes, Honey, you just look like a little child.

And so that was not a compliment. I felt offended and so I get in my room, I unpack my bag, and I see the book Bible verses for women, and I open it up and it says, Jesus asks you to come to him like a little child.

Crystal Keating:  
Wow.

Jennifer Evans:  
Yeah. And the scripture Mark 10:15, "Verily I say to you unless you humble yourselves and come to me like a little child, you'll by no means enter the kingdom of God." And so, I just really felt like the Lord saw me and that was a big part of my coming out of addiction is Jesus. You know, God not only freed me from addiction, but then Jesus gave me eternal life.

Crystal Keating:  
Amen.

Jennifer Evans:  
You know, which has been the biggest blessing of my recovery.

Crystal Keating:  
Yeah, I was thinking about that this morning, just meditating on like, God, you love us so much. You've given us so much. You give us eternal life, but then you give us new life, in this life. It says that the old things have passed away, and the new things are what's taking light and that God is continuously renewing us by his spirit and we're not to be transformed by the world's philosophies, but we're to be renewed in our minds by the truth of God.

And you know, just thinking about coming as a little child, what did that mean to you? Cause that's a, that's a fundamental, entrance point into a relationship with Jesus.

Jennifer Evans:  
I think it's, you know, really realizing my need for a savior, which I had to learn what that meant 'cause I didn't understand it and what it was to be a new creation in Christ and repentance, really, you know. That's what I had to go through is that humbling myself and saying, I need you. I'm a sinner and going to the Lord. You know those women encouraged me. Bring your sins



to the Lord. Ask for his forgiveness and thank him for forgiving you because he has forgiven you. You know?

Crystal Keating:

And that's so good. I'm glad you brought up repentance. It's so key to walking in joy with the Lord. Because like you did before, you tried to modify your life. You tried to change a little bit here and there. You tried to overcome in your own strength. And repentance is when you confess your sin. You forsake it. You ask God help, and then you actually turn in the complete opposite direction. And it's not in our own strength. It's really based on God. You promised you would help. You promised you would give me life. You promised you would give me purpose, and I'm gonna walk in that with your help. It's gonna be a struggle. But by your Grace and with the help of other people, I know that I can do this.

That's awesome. Well after a major lifestyle change like choosing to break free from an ongoing pattern of addiction, I think there's a compulsion to continue seeing yourself as an addict or any other sin pattern that we all deal with. What was it like for you to become a Christian, as part of your recovery and be challenged with accepting your new identity in Christ?

Do you still struggle with feeling like an addict?

Jennifer Evans:

That's a great question. You know, I think initially for anyone struggling with addiction, what I've seen is there has to come to a place where we admit we're powerless. And so, you know, it worked for me at first to say I'm an alcoholic addict, but I went into the recovery rooms.

Once I met Jesus and really started to learn my identity in Christ, I didn't feel comfortable in my spirit saying that anymore. Because I just imagined Jesus dying on the cross, for our sins, and now he's seated at the right hand of the Father and looking down and watching me go to a meeting, claiming my identity every day is an alcoholic addict. And him going, no, I delivered you from that.

Crystal Keating:

Amen.

Jennifer Evans:

By my stripes, you are healed. At the beginning, I needed to say that because that was part of my process to even becoming a Christian.

I definitely stand up each morning and say, I am a new creation in Christ Jesus. You know, the old has gone away. Behold, all things have become new.

Crystal Keating:

That's right on. I, I was just looking on a couple of websites of Christian, recovery groups and they really stress that. I, I love what you're saying about meeting people where they're at. But in their meetings, they often introduce themselves, by first saying, I'm a believer who struggles



with dot, dot, dot. And so, our identity first is in Christ and our struggle is real. And I think what you said just about even before you came to Christ, you had to really come out of deception and denial to saying, I do have a problem. I do need help. I'm powerless against it. But God can deliver us from that. So, I just love your story. So let me ask you this. What impact has your spiritual walk with the Lord had on fighting addiction? Because we know we're free from the power of sin. We're no longer slaves of sin, but there is a walk. There is a battle there.

Jennifer Evans:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. The mental health battle is real for so many people that have battled addiction or overcome. And that's something that I have to work on daily because after overcoming drug and alcohol addiction, I would wake up with extreme anxiety and depression.

That's something I've battled on and off. And I just wanna mention that, you know, I do take an antidepressant anxiety medication now. And it's something I've been on and off four times. You know, I do claim my healing. But as we know, especially at Johnny and Friends, sometimes we don't see that healing on this side of eternity.

And so, I've really had to come to the terms with that the medication is a tool for me and I'm working out. I'm eating healthy. I'm waking up reading my Bible, reciting scripture. Those are the things that I do, the disciplines I've put in place.

So, I don't think it's like, you know, just the answer, right? You know, I did drinking and drugging for 15-plus years. And so, it probably did change my chemical balance in my brain.

Right. Um, so....

Crystal Keating:

There's truly a physiological aspect of all this.

Jennifer Evans:

There really is. And there's a big debate on, you know, if this is a disease or just a sin problem, and I hear Christians having different perspectives and I've finally been to the place where, you know, whatever it is, the Lord is our answer.

Crystal Keating:

Amen.

Jennifer Evans:

You know we are new creations in Christ, and we need the Lord. He's the only way.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And he knows when we desire him more than anything, even if those other things tempt us. Temptations are going to come. They are there. But God says that no temptation has overcome us that isn't common to man. But he will make a way through, and he will make a way



of escape. And some of these tools that God has given us on this earth like helpers, like medical professionals, and good counselors are part of God's grace in that.

Jennifer Evans:

Yeah. Yeah. And I think of our audience, you know, as maybe many Christians listening or parents of children with disabilities or caregivers that may be struggling with addiction. Like we know that's happening and, you know, God wants to help you with that. And so, I think it's the same thing as if you are struggling, knowing that other people are too and you're not alone and there are people there to help you, and it really is God helping deliver you.

But there's some great groups like Celebrate Recovery that you can look up online. And there's people out there that wanna help you and you don't have to have shame around it. You're going through a lot of stress and oftentimes we go to substances and alcohol to relieve us from stress, but really it doesn't help in the long run.

It doesn't give you that joy and that peace that you're looking for. It's really a relationship with Christ, and it takes time. It's not easy, but you can do it. If I can do it, anybody can do it.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, with God's help and God's people. I mean, it's so important that you know, in James, it says to confess your sins to one another, and you'll be healed.

I mean, there is something, we've talked about this before, about saying it out loud, being specific, and then saying, I need help. I've done this. I don't wanna do it. And I need help. So, God will meet us there. And you know, often people who experience freedom from addiction have a clearer understanding of what others may be facing as they go through the ups and downs of becoming clean. So, Jennifer, how has your journey given you a greater sensitivity for others who are struggling? I mean, I just hear it in your voice, even just what you said about identifying that, you know, there might be families out there listening.

Jennifer Evans:

Well, one thing I wanna say, I have the blessing to oversee a nonprofit called Grace Over Living. And we provide Christ-centered, recovery care and housing to people overcoming drug and alcohol addiction. And so, I am now walking alongside people and helping to develop a transformational recovery care program that really helps people.

The one thing the Lord had put on my heart and our team this week is knowing that parents of children that are struggling with addiction, just like special needs families. You know? And so, we were praying this week, how can we really help those parents?

And last night at one of our Christian recovery meetings, a man showed up that had a daughter who's 23, that is in addiction, struggling. And he heard my testimony last night and he teared up at the end and said, thank you. You've provided me hope. Oh, that there is hope for my daughter.



When you get delivered, the enemy wants to pull you back. You have to know that the enemy is gonna try to pull you back. So, you have to put on the full armor of God. And I think that's why having a sponsor or mentor to walk you through. You know, they have the 12 steps with the Bible, the scriptures that go with it, and doing your inventory and repentance and those things are really, really powerful.

There's a lot of great tools and to have those people walking alongside you and being accountable is what helped me. And I still have a mentor, a recovery mentor, to this day. And now we're not looking at things like drugs and alcohol. But maybe we're looking at things like perfectionism or, eating, right? So, we always have something to work on.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. I love that. You know, that was Jesus' design from the beginning that whole model of discipleship. I mean, we call it a lot of things, but it's really becoming a learner from a teacher who can help you walk and obey all the things that God's called us to do because that's where our joy is.

He says that his commandments are not burdensome but are meant to help us flourish and give us great joy. I love that there's people who understand those kinds of struggles, really specifically because they've probably been through it, too.

Jennifer Evans:  
Mm-hmm. Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And we all need hope. So how do you coach people toward a life of hope and freedom in Christ? I mean, just giving your testimony is so powerful.

Jennifer Evans:

Yeah. I mean, I just like to share my disciplines. When I was using drugs and alcohol, I wanted to do whatever I wanted.

Crystal Keating:  
Right.

Jennifer Evans:

That was some rebellion, right?

Crystal Keating:  
Sure.

Jennifer Evans:

But now I've learned that discipline is my friend, and so I have a discipline of not turning on my phone until about eight o'clock in the morning. And I spend the first two hours with God. So, I





wake right up, and I say, this is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad. Because the enemy will try to attack me if I don't.

And so, I've just had to learn what works for me and I go on a walk with my dog, and I recite scripture. And I pray in the spirit, and I come back in my house, and I read the word and I spend time with God and have my coffee. And so, that's really what helps me be built up to go out and be able to handle the day and to just pray to God. Show me your will, God, what can I do today and to help really put some peace on me in that armor. And so that's what I encourage people to do. I also encourage them, you know, it's spirit, soul, and body. And so, the things we eat affect how we feel and how we sleep.

And also, you know, working out, doing that two or three times a week. There's a lot of things, but it, it's one day at a time, you know. And the more I go on this journey, the more things that I grow in, you know, so I'm just continuing to grow.

But I think at the beginning, it's just one day at a time staying sober. You might have days of anxiety, and if you can make it through the day without using, that's a win.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That's good, little by little. And God is so faithful. He will help you as you get to the very end and say, I can't do this. And the Lord will say, you can't, but I'll do it in and through you.

Jennifer Evans:

Amen.

Crystal Keating:

You know, we can't do this alone. And you talked about mentors and people helping you, but who are some of the most important people in your life who continue to support you as a new creation in Christ, free from the bondage of addiction and living a holy, and healthy lifestyle?

Jennifer Evans:

The person that comes most to my mind is a woman named Nicole that I met in Austin, Texas when I was newly sober. She heard my testimony. I was speaking at an event. It was a business event, and I just said about how I get on my knees in the morning and ask God for help.

And she like beelined to me after the event and wanted to get to know me. And she was a Christian. This was when I was still seeking and kind of new. And so, she asked me to coffee, and then she asked me if I wanted to study the Bible with her. She was the first person I opened the Bible with, and I remember her meeting with me weekly to disciple me.

And she still meets with me to this day. Now, it's over the phone. And I prayed with her this morning. Wow. I also have a woman named Petya, in LA, a spiritual mother. She really helped me on my identity in Christ. And you know, looking at it from that new creation, I have my sponsor Tracy, and I have a woman named Kathy that discipled me. So, I've put parameters in place.



I used to make hasty decisions, you know, with relationships and, quitting jobs or moving. That was, maybe part of running, I don't know. But now I don't make any big decisions without going to my mentors and telling them what's going on and seeking Godly wisdom because I don't wanna make any more big mistakes.

Right? And I always go to the Lord now. And I mean, at the beginning when I didn't know the Lord's voice and I didn't know the word very well, having those women really help me make decisions was great. But it's now that I've grown in the word, I have to make sure that I don't rely on people and have them tell me what to do.

But I sit down, and I ask God, and I don't move unless I feel the Holy Spirit telling me to do something, but still seeking wisdom.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. Which he promises to give. You know, I just think of the beautiful gift of constraint. You know, if you think of a train and a train is a very powerful locomotive. But how does it best operate? On a track, which is very constraining. But it's the very thing that makes it excellent at what it's supposed to do. And that is God's gift to us. Just that your guardrails, especially as a young Christian, were women that we're saying, this is the way, walk in it. And God develops that in our hearts, but we really need that. We really needed our whole life, which is why the church is so important.

So, let's talk a little bit about the church. I mean, we're not naive to think, oh, once you're a Christian, you'll never struggle. Right. There are people in the church who are dealing with addiction. You know, I was reading some statistics about actually people with disabilities or intellectual disabilities who struggle with addiction and, and the numbers are kind of wide. But it's anywhere from like 6 to 15% of people with intellectual disabilities, that struggle with addiction. Because in their minds helps them to do what they can't do without the substance abuse or its comforting. And so that's a reality. I mean, Lamar Hardwick said that he struggled with substance abuse because it helped him as a person with autism become more outgoing. And it made him feel comfortable in social settings.

That was before he came to Christ. But this is a reality. So, let's go back to the church. How can the church better recognize those who may be struggling with addiction and help them find and accept their new identity and perfect purpose for living? What kind of eyes do we need to see? What are we looking for?

Jennifer Evans:

Mm-hmm. I think we need to start having the conversation in churches more. So many people with special needs or disabilities feel unseen and then knowing there's an extra layer to this. Right. Or the caregiver or the parent. Churches being able to have a sermon on it, have a, you know, a mental health awareness or addiction awareness Sunday, letting people know that we know people are struggling. And if they're struggling with that, they can contact this number or go see somebody. The churches that have these Christian recovery programs are excellent.

The Celebrate Recovery Program, there's some other options as well. But again, being able to just speak it and have some resources, I think is a great first step.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That's so good. Well, Jennifer, how have your own struggles increased your desire to serve alongside people with disabilities specifically?

Jennifer Evans:

Mm-hmm. Well, I wanted to say that it takes time to get sober and it is difficult, yes. But for anyone struggling, the peace and joy that I have now is that beyond understanding the promises in the Bible. So, I just wanna encourage people that there is so much joy on the other side. It might take a year or two but that it is so much better than where you're at now.

I just love serving alongside people with disabilities. You know, addiction is considered a disability because of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Thank you, Joni and Friends.

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Jennifer Evans:

But you know, also people with physical and intellectual disabilities. I have friends of all different abilities now, and I have relationships with them and so I think it's just showed me that we all have something we're dealing with. You know whether it be a physical disability or a mental health issue, and we can all encourage one another and that's beautiful.

Crystal Keating:

So true. So true. Jennifer, it has been an absolute pleasure to speak with you. Thank you so much for your transparency, just for the hope that you've found in Christ. That there is nothing so shameful that you cannot come to him about and he will give you forgiveness as you repent and believe and trust him and walk in him. So, praise the lord.

Jennifer Evans:

Praise the Lord. Thank you so much, Crystal.

Crystal Keating:

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