



Season 4 | Episode # 26

## **Weak Woman, Strong God**

### **Dr. Jean Sutherland**

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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.

When an unexpected disability enters your life and turns it on end, how do you journey through each day without letting depression and discouragement overtake you? Today we're joined by Dr. Jean Sutherland, an internal medicine doctor who has spent her life leaning on the Lord through three bouts of aggressive cancer and surgery which complicated her ability to eat, speak, and practice medicine.

Dr. Sutherland is here to share how God pulled her out of her pit of misery and encourage us to rely on God's strength when we're weak. Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Sutherland. It's so great to have you.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Thank you so much. I am so happy to be on the podcast because Joni Eareckson Tada is my hero. And I am just so honored that her podcast would ask me to be on it.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, well we feel the same. We're so glad that you're here to share a bit of your story, and I know God gets so much of the attention of all that you've been through. So, Jean, please take us back to when you received your first diagnosis of cancer. I mean, you've been through three bouts of aggressive cancer. So, for the first one, when did you notice something suspicious?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Well, I think like many women, I felt a lump in my breast while I was showering one day. And then I thought I felt something in my armpit too. So, I set up an appointment to be seen for that.

Crystal Keating:

So, your first diagnosis of cancer was breast cancer. Wow.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes. Yes. I was only 39 and I had no family history. So, I really didn't expect it to be cancer. But when they did the biopsy, sure enough, it was breast cancer.



Crystal Keating:

Wow. And you know, throughout this conversation, we're gonna be talking a little bit about all three seasons of cancer for you, because they were very different. So, what about your second diagnosis? What kind of cancer did you have?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Well, it was in my mouth, like up in my upper tongue. So, it was mouth cancer. And nobody still understands why I got that because I had never smoked. I had no risk factors at all. And it was back in my mouth, upper mouth, where I couldn't see it. So, I didn't realize until I started feeling sort of a sharp tension sensation. And it turned out that somehow a tooth was hitting it whenever I would yawn. So, I got my flashlight out and saw something and then went to the oral surgeon who assured me that it was very unlikely that it was cancer due to my lack of risk factors, but let's just biopsy to be sure. And next thing I knew, I was getting the dreaded phone call that it was cancer.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, my goodness. No one likes to hear the word cancer. I feel like something similar happened to Joni with her second bout of cancer. I think the doctor saw something unusual and they said, oh, it's likely not. And she went in for something else. So, you know, as a doctor, you must have been more in tune with saying, you know what, let's check this out. Let's be very sure.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes. And you know, I did everything preventative that I could. I got ovarian cancer screenings, got colonoscopies, skin exams. You know, I was going to try to control against getting any more cancer after my breast cancer. But I never thought about getting a flashlight and looking in my mouth every month. So, it just snuck up on me.

Crystal Keating:

No. Totally unexpected. And Jean, what about your third diagnosis of cancer?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Well, that one was tongue cancer, and it was actually related to the mouth cancer. It wasn't a spread from the mouth cancer. But when I had the surgery from my mouth cancer, they had to remove so much tissue that I couldn't open my mouth very far at all. And so, my tongue was scraped on by my teeth for years. And so, I had this ulcer on the back of my tongue, and it just, it would get better, and then it would get worse. It would get better. It would get worse. I even had a couple of biopsies early on that didn't show cancer, but then it ultimately did.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. That must have been a shock for you. What were some of the things running through your mind when you were first diagnosed or with all of the diagnoses? What was your prognosis?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Well, the breast cancer was the one that gave me the biggest shock because I just totally didn't expect it and I was so young, and I'd never had any significant health problems.



And I was not one of those medical students or medical doctors that thought they had every disease that they studied about. They think they have every diagnosis. And so, the breast cancer, when they told me it was cancer, my mind immediately went back to my rotations on oncology, the cancer ward.

But I saw people getting chemotherapy and how sick it made them and how they lost their hair. And then I saw a young woman that died of cancer. So, I immediately knew what this could mean. And when they did the pathology, it was not into the lymph nodes for the breast cancer. But it was the most aggressive type of breast cancer. And I was so scared that I was going to get metastasis and die because I had two very little sons. I had a one-year-old and a four-year-old when I was diagnosed, and I was just terrified that they were going to grow up without a mother. So that was the emotions that I felt. I remember I was diagnosed with the breast cancer at the end of May, finished my chemo, maybe in September. Then I got my radiation and so Christmas came and went that year, and I was shopping at the mall at the after-Christmas sales.

And I saw this cute Christmas sweater marked down and I thought, I can't buy that. I might not be here next Christmas to wear it. It was things like that. Like that would just pop into my mind and I would just be scared.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Everything was so uncertain for you.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yeah. Yeah, and I mean, I think looking back, I felt more fear than I should have, but that was just a reflection of my small faith in God at that time. I had an older friend that told me, even if you are taken, and God takes you to heaven, he'll take care of your little boys. But I didn't have the faith to believe that, and I think it would still be very, very difficult for me in the same situation. But anyway, I just, I had a lot of fear. Anxiety would just hit me and suck all the joy out of my day sometimes.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and God has a way of calling us to himself, and it's often through times like these where we don't have a light at the end, or we don't know what the end will be. And of course, it's natural as a mother for you to feel completely concerned for your children. How did you see God working in your life during that initial shock and you know, the weeks and months that followed your diagnosis?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Well, yes, I have been quite the work in progress. All the reactions I've had them. The hardest time for me, and I think for most people, was in the middle of the night. Cause my husband was asleep, the house was quiet. There was no one to talk to. I didn't get up and watch TV and all the fears would attack in the middle of the night.

So, what I would do would be, sneak out of bed, go in another room, turn on the light and just read my Bible and just look for verses that spoke to me. And then I would type up the verses



during the day and print them out. And I hung them all over the house. They were in the kitchen cabinets and mirrors, the walls and they were all the reassuring verses that when you walk through the waters, I will be with you when you go through the fires, you will not be burned. Especially Psalms, I just love the Psalms and I still do. I still read Psalms every night right before I turn off my light cause every emotion that we feel is there in the Psalms to read.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. Well, and that's so good because. If you're anything like me, our emotions can be so loud and so powerful.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And feel like this is true. This is true.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

What's even more sure than our emotions is what God has said.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes. You know I'm a very feeling person.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, me too.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

I think that's what made me a good doctor, 'cause I felt for my patients. But then it turns around and hits you over the head in a bad way. So, I've had to learn to deal with my feelings. And let's say fear is false evidence appearing real. And that's what it was. Like you said, my emotions would just feel so real.

Crystal Keating:

False evidence appearing real. Wow. It sounds like you were dealing with fear as you thought about the future. What other emotions were you facing, especially as you considered your family and your practice?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Well, when I had breast cancer, I was in private practice. I did not do well with chemotherapy at all. So, I was not able to practice for I think about, oh, six months. But then I did go back. I started out part-time and took my hours back up. And I had been practicing again for about 12 years before I got the mouth cancer.

Crystal Keating:  
Wow.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:  
So, yeah, I practiced medicine for over 25 years.

Crystal Keating:  
And when you were considering your future, did you have a sense that, what if I lose my practice? Like who am I? I mean a lot of people wrestle with that loss of identity when we lose something so significant. Did you face that at all?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:  
Well, yes, I think it was especially hard for me because I was in the office seeing patients when I got the call from my oral surgeon that I had mouth cancer. And they sort of moved things right along. So, I had a surgery appointment to see the surgeon the next day. And it turned out that I never, ever went back to the office to see patients. It was just overnight and of course, I just assumed I would be coming back.

Crystal Keating:  
Of course.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:  
But after the mouth cancer, the surgery was so extensive, and I was in ICU with a trach and a feeding tube. My face was just all cut open and then they gave me chemotherapy and radiation. And I guess it was because it was my second time with chemo and radiation, but I was so lightheaded and weak and debilitated, and I just did not retain my strength. And so, I was never able to go back to private practice again. And that was just terrible 'cause I never had any closure.

And I had so much grief over my lost life because the career was a lot of my identity. And plus, I am a person who just loves being around people. So, I'd have all these patients I would see every day, and I had my medical appointments and the staff to talk to.

And then, next thing I know, I'm sitting in my house all alone all day 'cause my sons are in school, my husband is at work. My whole life was just turned on end and I was just so confused.

Crystal Keating:  
That's a good word, confused. I heard someone else who faced tremendous grief saying that they were just bewildered.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:  
Yeah.

Crystal Keating:



It's like you can't make sense of where you're supposed to put your thoughts or what's happening, or even who you are.

It is so disorienting. You know, one of the marks of depression is this sense of like, almost like a, a grand scheme of confusion about who am I and the sense of worthlessness. Did you deal with depression?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes, I did. With my breast cancer, I mostly dealt with anxiety. But after the mouth cancer, it was about three years that I did not regain much of any strength at all. And I was just so lonely, and I felt like I was letting my family down and I did not understand. It made no sense to me, what God was doing in my life. I never had any depression before. But it was like this heavy weight of sadness and despair that just surrounded me 24 hours a day, and I tried to counteract it with everything that I knew.

I went to like three Bible studies every week. I went to a counselor. I took medication. I met friends for lunch. Just everything but the sadness of the depression was just always there during that time. And I would call it just my pit that I've fell into during that time, and I hope ...

Crystal Keating:

That's what it feels like.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

I never go through that again.

Crystal Keating:

God forbid. Cause you just feel like, how am I ever gonna get out? I'm doing all the right things. I'm doing all the things that I know to do. And yet the cloud is still over me.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes. I had this bracelet I wore all the time and it said, with God, all things are possible. Yeah. And I remember looking at that bracelet and just thinking, but it doesn't seem possible. It just didn't seem like things would ever change. And I guess I wore that bracelet because I hung onto hope that it would change, but it just didn't seem like it was going to.

Crystal Keating:

And even that is the work of the Holy Spirit to give you even just a flicker of hope.....

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

...that you will get through this. So how did things change for you as far as your depression went?



Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Well, you know, I look back. It was very gradual. But I think the key was that I decided to just immerse myself in things of God.

So, since I had all this time on my hands, I would read my Bible for two or three hours a day. And I was reading in the Old Testament. And God would just speak to me through those Old Testament stories. And when I was reading about the children of Israel when they were wandering in the desert, the wilderness for four years under Moses, I started thinking. That's what I feel like, like I'm just wandering in this desert wilderness, and I don't know when I'm gonna get out of it or if I'll ever get out of it. And then I'd kept on reading and God was leading them to the Promised Land. And I'd think, well, I sure wish I would get to a Promised Land.

And then there was a story if you might remember that the Israelites attacked this little city called Ai with every expectation of being victorious. But they were totally defeated. When Joshua asked God what happened, God said there is sin in the camp. And they found out that there was sin and they had to deal with the sin before God would let them into the Promised Land.

That doesn't seem like it applies to me at all. But the Holy Spirit spoke to me and said, "There's sin in your life, and it's the sin of bitterness." But I had no idea I was bitter. It was a total surprise to me. But I started thinking and I had developed a bitterness towards God that I did not understand what he was doing. And I was angry because it didn't make sense and I also had developed some bitterness toward some of the people I loved because I thought they hadn't responded the way that they should respond.

So, I told God that I repented and that I was sorry, and I started reading the Bible with the intention of putting everything to practice, that I read there. Like in the Proverbs, there's a verse in Proverbs, Chapter 14 verse one, and it says, a foolish woman tears down her house with her own hands. And I realized I was tearing down my home, with my bitterness. And then I would read back in Ephesians, be kind one to another tenderhearted forgiving one another. So, I started really trying to practice this and truly loving people and trusting God instead of just mouthing the words and reciting the verses. And my life started turning around through that and the bitterness dissolved.

Crystal Keating:  
Incredible.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

And then the next stuff was, I kept feeling over and over that God wanted me to go back to work. I just felt pulled back into medicine and I was like, I can't work. I couldn't even be up and around for two or three hours. But I decided to try to get re-certified in internal medicine. I still had my license, but my re-certification had expired while I was out of work. So, I started going to the university library for about two hours a day and studying. And at first, I had terrible chemo brain from the chemotherapy, and I couldn't even think straight or retain anything. But I just kept at it. I started studying hours a day.





And I had to walk quite a distance from the library. So, I would have to walk to and from the library. And I think that built up my physical strength. So, over a year I started recovering. And I think it was the things altogether, the dissolving of the bitterness, God gave me some feeling in my body. I had very bad GI effects from the chemo and those improved and I just started getting strength again, finally.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So, it was all of those things together, but bit by bit. And God has a way, you know, as we walk with him, to show us things in different seasons of our lives.

And sometimes it's horrifying because it's like, have I been hiding this my whole life and I didn't realize it? But part of that is God's grace to show the things that we cling to instead of him. We, we often don't see it, but that's God's kindness and that was the very thing that started your trek out of the pit.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes. I think I've always been sort of a control freak and a real type A person. Probably a lot of medical doctors are, you know? And suddenly I could control nothing.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And surrendering to trusting the Lord in all aspects of your life.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

You know, I'm curious who, who were the most important people in your life through different bouts of cancer that really supported you, and what was most meaningful to you?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

I could probably spend an hour saying all the people that supported me. But my number one was my husband, who has just been my rock through these three cancers, and it was my sons, especially the last two cancers they were older, and they have been extremely supportive, which really, they had to grow up before their time. And then I would say the next source of support would have to be our church. They've brought us meals for months at a time.

I had a drive-by parade with my tongue cancer that took, I don't know, an hour for all the cars to go by. We ended up moving from a home during mouth cancer. So, we downsized right in the middle of cancer therapy and those church people helped us to fix up our house to sell.

They helped us move. Totally the hands and feet of God and I'm so blessed that I belong to such a great place, and I have to give them a shout-out. Then I had friends that came and stayed with me all day after my mouth cancer when I was too weak to be by myself and my husband had to be at work. There were certain days that they came. My sister-in-law came and stayed with me.





My other sister-in-law came and stayed with me a whole week after my tongue cancer. Again, I could just go on and on.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and God brought each one of those to support you in various ways. And I just love the whole idea about the parade just to show, hey, we love you. We celebrate you. We're here for you. That had to lift your spirits, for sure.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Yes.

Crystal Keating:

Well, Jean, how we feel about our appearance is often important to many of us. So, what was it like for you to undergo surgery that saved your life and removed the cancer, but diminished your ability to speak, eat, and changed how you look?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Uh, I'll tell you, it's been very difficult. I think that my self-image was hinged pretty strongly on my physical appearance and my profession as a medical doctor.

So, after my mouth cancer, I just looked horrendous. I mean, just, they had to cut clear up, like into my sinuses and the roof of my mouth. I just had all these disfiguring scars plus I went down to 113 pounds and I'm five foot nine.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, you're very tall. Yeah.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Exactly. I looked like a skeleton and all disfigured. And then of course after my tongue cancer, I've been disfigured more.

I actually drool, like, I, I can't seal my lips. So, the saliva runs out of my mouth some but if you don't think that's embarrassing. It, it's awful. And then, you know, my face is disfigured, and I don't talk like myself at all anymore. So, it's been very hard for me. We moved to another new house a year ago, and we're in a suburb now of Lexington. So, we don't know anyone here.

So, when we're out walking in the neighborhood, or somewhere and we meet new people, I would try to talk to them, but a lot of times they couldn't understand me. That's very hard.

And so, they would just ignore me and talk to my husband. And like I wasn't even there and sometimes they acted like I was intellectually disabled, which was really hard for me.

'Cause you know, I had never had my intelligence questioned before. So, I started withdrawing. I just stopped talking to people and I started turning from an extrovert to an introvert, but then I



started praying about that, especially at church. I had always been somebody that just introduced myself to anyone I didn't know and tried to make people feel welcome.

And so, I had stopped doing that. So, I prayed about it, and I just started putting myself out there and just acting like normal and being friendly. And I found over time that people sort of get used to you. They feel awkward, they don't know what to think and it puts them off.

But over time they get used to me and then they treat me like a real person again. And so, I've actually gotten back to being more my normal self and I even joined the pickleball club here. I get out and say I'm trying to learn to play pickleball, yeah. So anyway, God has helped me with that too. I have to just accept that I'll never be my old self. But this is the self that God is trying to work through to reach other people.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That is so profound. This is the self that God is gonna work through to show himself to other people, and that is so, so very true. Well as Christians, we're called to focus on Jesus and set our minds on heavenly things as we rely on God's promises- what you were doing when you were going to the scriptures.

And yet it's natural for us to focus on the daily responsibilities in front of us and cling to those normalcies like just eating, not to mention, setting aside time to care for our health, especially in the midst of a battle with cancer. So, Dr. Jean, how did you deal with this tension through each bout of illness?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Well, first of all, for cancer patients and other patients with disability, the old former state of normalcy, it's something that we would just love to have again.

Crystal Keating:

Oh yeah.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

So, when I was going through, I would find myself just enjoying folding a load of laundry because it felt so normal. Or just sitting and chopping up vegetables for dinner. Those are the only little pieces of normalcy that were left, and I would never say, I would just do anything to have a routine day again like I used to have and like I used to think was just so full of stress and problems. But you just wish for normalcy.

And as far as eating goes, that's another normalcy that we totally take for granted. Since my tongue cancer, I have not been able to drink or eat anything by mouth. I initially tried very hard, but it never progressed. Having radiation just severely affected my swallowing. So, all of my nutrition goes into a tube into my stomach. So, you don't realize how much life centers around food. All the family celebrations. Yes. And so that's been very hard, and I think it's very hard for those around me. But I've tried to just hang on to part of that.



I still host Thanksgiving dinner at our house and have family over here and I'll make the food and they'll ask me; doesn't it bother you that we're all sitting here eating and you're just sitting there? But it really doesn't 'cause I still have the love of the people and the joy that comes from that.

When I go out with friends for coffee or something, you still have the ambiance. Our church has potlucks and I just sit there and not eat. But I so enjoy being with the people and I love to smell food. That's the first stage of eating. So, I really enjoy smelling food. So, I think that in my own small way, I've learned to focus on what I can still do, not on what I can't do. I really don't even think about not being able to eat anymore.

I just think about how happy I am that I can do the things that I do, and I imagine that's what Joni Eareckson Tada does. She does artwork. She sings. She speaks. She has this ministry, and she seems to just accept that she's in a wheelchair and with all her other limitations. So, I think that's a key, to learn to focus on what you can still do, not just on what you can no longer do.

Crystal Keating:

That is a good word. Wow. You know, for our listeners today who are facing an unexpected diagnosis and are feeling fearful of the future, Dr. Jean, would you like to share some encouragement to them?

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

I sure would. If I can encourage anyone today, I'll be so happy. My advice is, first of all, if you get an unexpected diagnosis, whatever it may be, realize that you're gonna have to go through stages, just like grief, like when someone dies. But you're gonna have to go through anger and fear and then finally get to acceptance.

And I found with myself and with my patients that I used to have, we expect ourselves to get better, much faster than we usually do, to give the self-grace and try to be patient. And then as far as spiritually, first of all, spend time reading the Bible and praying to God. And it's really powerful to play scripture verses back to God that you see in the Bible. You know, like I will not fear because I know you are with me. I have found that me saying things out loud has a profound effect and I start believing them. Whereas if I just think them, it doesn't seem like it's near as effective as speaking them out loud.

So, speak the truth of God and his word out loud. Then a third thing is that I have found, listening to hymns and worship music is powerful. And I know that Joni leans on this a lot too. She's always singing and talking about hymns. But I made myself a playlist on Spotify, and it's about two and a half hours long. And it's mostly old hymns, but a few newer worship songs, and I get my earbuds in every morning right after I get up and just start saying those hymns. And those words just reverberate in your mind all day and all night. I can only listen for maybe 15 or 20 minutes now, but those words are in my mind the rest of the day and it's so powerful. What goes in your mind affects how you react to things. And then the first thing I found, which is nothing new or different, is the power of gratitude.



I especially learned this in my tongue cancer. After having had such a nightmare experience with mouth cancer, I was so afraid that I would go into the pit again, that I would be debilitated, and unable to do things nearly ever again. But so many things were such a blessing that God just poured out his blessings on me during my tongue cancer experience. And my heart just overflowed with gratitude for every little thing, and it still does. I'm so thankful to have any energy. I'm so thankful that I'm able to talk at all. They actually cut most of my tongue out and I have a replacement tongue.

Oh, that's not muscle and that's why I can't pronounce words right. But I thought that I would probably have like a mechanical, electronic voice and instead at least I'm able to talk. So, I'm so grateful for that. I'm grateful because I am able to work, not at the job I used to be at, but I work.

I'm so thankful that my marriage is so strong, thankful for my wonderful sons, for my friends, for flowers and trees and little bees that buzz by, every little thing is a joy to me now. I don't think you can really appreciate the good until you've had all the bad things. But I sure do appreciate them now, and I'm grateful every day. So, I would encourage people to practice gratitude even if you don't feel it. Find things to be grateful for.

Crystal Keating:

I love those. What good words of encouragement. Speak the word of God out loud to yourself. Spend time in the word. Sing hymns. Remember that God is faithful and give thanks in all things. Dr. Jean, it's been such a blessing speaking with you today. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Dr. Jean Sutherland:

Thank you so much. It's been just such an honor to be here, and I just pray that God would use this to bless someone that's going through something today.

Crystal Keating:

Amen to that.

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](http://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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