

Season 5 | Episode #27

Growing a Heart for Disability Ministry

Wilame Leal Silva

Crystal Keating:

Wilame Leal Silva and his wife Erica Leal were overjoyed to hear they were pregnant with their second child, and yet we're shocked at the news relayed by the medical professionals. Your son will be born with a significant disability and will likely not live for more than a few minutes after birth. Not only were they heartbroken to learn, their child would likely not survive, they began to encounter ongoing pressure from the doctors to terminate the pregnancy. But God had a completely different plan than what the doctors expected. So today, Wilame is joining us to share this incredible story in how his experience led him and his wife to minister in a specific way to families impacted by disability. Welcome to the show, Wilame. It's so good to have you.

Wilame Leal Silva:

Hi Crystal, it's a privilege to be here.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I'm so glad we're talking about this. You know, you and I were on a Wheels for the World outreach in the country of Cuba, and we got to know each other a little bit better over breakfast and you shared the story of you and your wife and your family, and so I'm so glad you're willing to share it on the podcast today. So Wilame, would you please take us back to when you and your wife were in the doctor's office and medical professionals started expressing concern over Erica's pregnancy? What was going on?

Wilame Leal Silva:

Absolutely, Crystal. On August 13th, 2015, we had a routine appointment here in Dallas with my wife's obstetrician. At that point she was 33 weeks pregnant. That day the doctor told us that they had to run a blood test on her and came back positive for trisomy 13. The doctor explained that this kind of trisomy was incompatible with life and the baby would have heart defects, extra fingers, or cleft lip and also emphasized about the severe retardation. However, he told us that the baby would live for minutes or hours, or maybe most three days. You can imagine how that news was shocking for us and we ask him what would be the next step and he suggest us that one option would be the termination of pregnancy. And that same day he refer us to a geneticist doctor. In the visit the doctor explained more about the trisomy 13 with more details, and present us with an exam they call amniocentesis.

He explained that the exam had a risk for the baby, risk of infection or something like that. And she asked to my wife if she want to reschedule that exam the same day because the pregnancy was already advanced. And at the same time that the doctor asked my wife, she was performing a ultrasound on her and during that moment I was close to my wife and just came to my wife's mind. We had been doing a devotional as a couple weeks before and there was very specific ally word during the devotional: waiting.

And I remember my wife weeks before asking me what God wants to tell me to wait. There's nothing that I need to wait, but that word waiting was very strong. And during the appointment with the geneticist doctor, she just realized, no, I remember God was telling me to wait and so my wife told the doctor that should not do the amniocentesis exam, but would wait for the baby to be born.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So here you are at the geneticist. The doctor is offering your wife the amniocentesis, and your wife is just feeling a strong sense from God to not go forward with that exam. Were you feeling the same way?

Wilame Leal Silva:

Yeah. So all this process about abortion was new for us because remember back in Brazil, there is no such thing like this.

And the doctor explained to us here in America, you guys can do abortion. That was not a thing for us, but we didn't realize the implication of this kind of exam. Of course, we never opt for abortion, but I had no idea about the amniocentesis exam.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. Okay. So a little backstory for our listeners since we didn't explain this. You and your wife are Brazilian. Which city and area are you from?

Wilame Leal Silva:

We are from Sao Paulo, the capital. Big city, Brazil.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, that's right. And so, it sounds like abortion is not a common option in your country there. Is that right?

Wilame Leal Silva:

That's right.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So what are some of the thoughts running through your minds as the weeks and months passed and the doctors continued to cast doubt on your choice to wait and protect the pregnancy?

Wilame Leal Silva:

The first day we received the diagnosis from the doctor, I remember the doctor gave us some time, so he left the room. My wife was crying of course with everything new, and we just came and, and we cried to the Lord at the moment that we received the news.

We are humans and so there were moments that fear and uncertainty want to reach our hearts, but God was graceful and we thought that at the beginning, why, Lord, did you bring us to a foreign country with no family and friends? We had moved from Brazil less than six months. But he answer with the words, wait, trust, and rest in me.

Crystal Keating:

Wait, trust, and rest in me.

Wilame Leal Silva:

Yes. And because my wife declined to do the amniocentesis test, she had to visit the doctors weekly. And they keep in asking is the baby still moving? Have you changed our mind about doing a termination?

Crystal Keating:

Wow.

Wilame Leal Silva:

And I remember that I started praying and asking God to guard our minds every time we visit my wife's obstetrician. And God did guard our minds. Our prayer was always asking his direction and peace. I remember my first praying in the following days was like just giving us direction and peace on our hearts and minds. Direction that help us to navigate this new season because everything was new for us.

Crystal Keating:

Right. You're in a new country, you're speaking English regularly, your wife's pregnant. Now, did you have community around you? Were you connected with the church, Wilame?

Wilame Leal Silva:

So, yes. When we moved, we had a church, First Baptist Dallas. And we have a very strong Bible study that we attended. And that was everything for us because God provided a community. Of course, our family, our home church back in Brazil, and our friends were praying for us, but also here in Dallas, we had our Bible study, our church community checking on us, praying for us, even my professors at Dallas Baptist University. Very good professors checking on us, invite for lunch, dinner, just get to know and support us in prayers. And that was how God supported us during that time.

Crystal Keating:

Wilame, when you and I were talking in Cuba, I was actually struck by some of the prayers you were praying. I think you specifically did not pray for this child to be healed. Did I hear you right?

Wilame Leal Silva:

That's right. We never asked him for a miracle in a sense that God would heal the baby. Our prayer was always God, just give a direction and peace and direction how to have a child with special needs; how we can raise a child with special needs. My wife has a older brother who is blind, so disability was not new for us. And he was the one who evangelize her and her mom. So we were praying for God just giving us strength, direction how we can support and raise our son with special needs.

Crystal Keating:

That's amazing and it's amazing that God really ministered to you in your own hearts through the Holy Spirit, but also through the community. Well, so Wilame, you're at 33 weeks, and as the weeks progress, bring us to maybe the last moments before your wife gave birth. What was happening with the doctors? And, and then bring us into the delivery room. What was that like when your son was born?

Wilame Leal Silva:

Yeah. So we had this kind of routine from 33 weeks of the pregnancy and we were in the labor room waiting for the doctor who gave us the diagnosis and who was going to perform the c-section. And he arrived with the director of the neonatal and from the Methodist Hospital at Dallas and some other doctors. He asked us if we had understood the whole situation and what would happen with our baby that day. He explained that we would not be able to have our baby right after the birth because he would need intensive care going directly in ICU. And I ask if I could pray and they agreed. So I prayed for my wife and my wife was taken to the delivery room. And right before the c-section starts, medical team composed of doctors, nurse, and director of neonatal and NICU. I think 13 professionals there carrying a neonatal incubator waiting for our son's birth. And that was scary because there were so many things and Daniel was born healthy.

Crystal Keating:
Wow.

Wilame Leal Silva:
No trisomy at all, for God's glory. And the doctors were surprised. They examined Daniel and they found nothing wrong but by only God's grace. And so the director of neonatal left their room telling my wife that Daniel was healthy and that he had no job to do there.

Crystal Keating:
Wow. Wow.

Wilame Leal Silva:
Yes. That was an amazing moment.

Crystal Keating:
What were you and your wife feeling in the moment?

Wilame Leal Silva:
I just could glorify God, Crystal. That was the only words that came to my mouth. Like, glory to God, glory to God, because we never prayed for this and suddenly God performed this. My wife was just crying and yes and it was a shock for all the 13 professionals inside the room.

Crystal Keating:
No kidding. Did they make any remarks to you? Any apologies, any regrets?

Wilame Leal Silva:
No, they just came and said, I don't know what's happened here. Your son is perfect. There's nothing we need to do, and we just say, glory to God, because the glory was for him.

Crystal Keating:
Wow. That's such an incredible testimony of you listening to the Lord along the way and being attentive to his purpose and plan.

Wilame Leal Silva:
There was one nurse that later she came to my wife and told that she was praying during the whole time. Even they, they didn't realize they believe in the exam, in the positive exam for trisomy 13, she told to my wife that she was praying during the whole time for us.

Crystal Keating:
That's amazing. Well, you and your wife were really transformed by this whole experience, and you were sharing with me that you started feeling such a compassion and a burden for other families who have children with disabilities. So what were some of the ways you saw God open doors to lead you to minister more closely to the disability community? I mean, you had come from Brazil. You were an attorney and your wife was working for the Brazilian federal court as a civil servant, and you came specifically to go to seminary, right? So ministry was in your pathway. Is that right?

Wilame Leal Silva:
That's right, so...

Crystal Keating:
But disability wasn't necessarily.

Wilame Leal Silva:

No, we never thought about disability, Crystal. And after Daniel's birth we start to thinking about so many families, especially those who don't know about Jesus, the suffering and pressure that they can face receiving diagnosis like this. Maybe they will say yes for abortion or they will wait until their child's birth, but they're gonna be feeling lost, alone, isolated, in the midst of dealing with all this new season for their lives. And so my wife starts serving at our special needs at our church in Dallas and we starting asking God's guidance, how he could use everything that we came through for him. Because this start like a holy discontent in many our hearts. We're like, we need to use this for God's glory. And so we started asking close friends and the children's ministry at our church told that she had a friend, a professor at DBU who could kind of give some direction for us and talk with us because we were looking for organizations, Christians organizations, to help those kind of families. And I came to Dallas Baptist University and talk with Dr. Malia. and she told we just have a new partnership with Joni and Friends here in Texas.

Have you heard about Joni and Friends? And it's like, no, I don't about this ministry. And so she connect us with the Texas office. And then following week we came to the office and talked about our experience in Brazil, what we face here in Dallas and our hearts to serve and looking for volunteers opportunities.

At that same day, Crystal, he asked me, can you help me with a call conference? We are trying to ship a container to Brazil for our Wheels for the World and our broker in Brazil doesn't speak English and there is some legal issues. Can you help? And I said, absolutely, yes. So I help in the call with the translation and some explanation and he invites us for lunch. At the same day he invited me to go to California in the following week because he want to present me to some people at Joni and Friends. Everything was like God's timing, you know? And we were like, just surprised how God was moving so fast, because remember when I came from Brazil, when we came from Brazil, we had a calling from God to serve the kingdom, but we didn't have the clear pathway. We knew we need to be equipped to serve him, but we didn't have the clear pathway.

And so this happened because you connected with someone at Dallas Baptist University, right? And they said, we have a new partnership with Joni and Friends.

That's right.

Crystal Keating:

And you provided translation services to get a container of wheelchairs and other mobility devices into Brazil and then here you are in California, meeting people at our staff conference, even though you weren't part of the staff, right?

Wilame Leal Silva:

That's right. That's right.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, God is so good. To me, this is such a clear testimony of listening to God the first time and then trusting him for the details that you move and you respond to his voice, not knowing the whole picture, but knowing the next step, and that's what you and your wife really did. So what's your current role with Joni and Friends, Wilame?

Wilame Leal Silva:

So I start in 2017 as intern. I was hired here as an intern at the Texas office to expand the ministry, specifically in Brazil. And I was hired in 2018 as soon as I graduated from my Masters at Dallas Baptist University. Since 2020, I've been working the International

Ministry Department with our international partners in the Western Hemisphere that includes South America, including Brazil, Central America, and Caribbean.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. And I bet you've seen God really move and expand in that area of the world to minister to more families affected by disability.

Wilame Leal Silva:

Absolutely. Yeah. It's, it's incredible to see the urgency that the church is looking right now to evangelize people living with disabilities and serve them. Visiting different countries in South America and Central America, you can see this urgency, kind of God's opened eyes of leaders that is where the church need to grow.

Crystal Keating:

Right. Yeah. Especially in other countries where, you know, we've heard that families often may hide away their children affected by disability or they don't have the resources, or they don't have the understanding of God's good plan for families who have children living with disabilities, and that they are made in the image of God, that they have dignity and a purpose. And they are worthy of love and acceptance, especially in the church. And so I just love what you're doing, Wilame, all over the world, especially in your own home country and in South America, in Central America, even the Caribbean. It's been wonderful to work alongside you and I know many others have been touched by you and your wife's story, so would you like to share some words of encouragement specifically to our listeners today?

Wilame Leal Silva:

Yes, Crystal, so I could not imagine it going through this time, this season in our lives without having the assurance that God was with us every step of the way, even preparing our hearts and minds before we received the diagnosis.

Remember that my wife and God's spoke very clear to her. And to be surrounded by a community of faithful brothers and sisters that support us with their prayers. That season of suffering and the uncertainties brought us as a couple and family closer to God and being open to God and asking his directions and brought us his purpose for our lives, for our family.

As Christians, we are called to die ourselves and give all to Christ, but I fail at this far more than I succeed. And when I see the level of sacrifice that those families with special needs do, me and my wife or family are truly humble. We have few earth examples of true sacrifice and those families are one of them for us.

Those families are amazing example and inspire me to more prayerfully consider God's call in my life. In any situation, do not allow the lies that the world speaks define who you are in God's creation. But use every situation to see God's purpose through your life. And that was true to me and my wife, because the world just bring a lot of lies. And if you are not focused on Jesus, on God, you just be desperate, helpless. And for us, the community was so very important.

Crystal Keating:

Well Wilame, thank you again for sharing your story on the Ministry Podcast. And we just continue to ask for God's covering over you and your wife and your children, and that God would continue to bless your path. So thanks so much for sharing.

Wilame Leal Silva:

Thank you, Crystal. It was privilege for us to share our story with you.