

Season 6 | Episode 12

Survival to Service: Rachel LeMaster's Story of Miraculous Healing

Rachel Turner

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Crystal Keating:

This is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast and I'm your host Crystal Keating. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship and practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. As you listen, visit joniandfriends.org/podcast to access the resources we mention, or to send me a message with your thoughts.

When Rachel Bailey LeMaster was 23, she was finishing up a college certificate in nutrition and personal training and desiring to share the good news of Jesus with her community. She even longed to fulfill a childhood dream to be a missionary, but her plans all changed in 2011 after a car accident nearly took her life. Already living with the unique challenges of Turner syndrome, the diagnosis of an internal decapitation, a term not likely known by many, was overwhelming.

Additionally, the accident left Rachel with a severe traumatic brain injury. However, with excellent medical care, a strong trust in the Lord, and a supportive community, Rachel miraculously survived and is joining Stephanie and me on the podcast today to share her story of hope and resiliency through God's strength. I can't believe you're sitting with us here in the flesh. Rachel, welcome to the podcast.

Rachel LeMaster:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a complete honor to be in this space, to be with you ladies, your beautiful faces. And this is just so exciting.

Crystal Keating:

It is so exciting and we are honored just as well to get to talk to you and hear your story. But before we dive in, I just want to get to know you a little bit better and your family, as you and I were chatting, I was surprised to learn that you're one of seven siblings, which I think bigger families are a little bit more unique these days. And I understand that when you were little, you wanted to be adopted by your own parents. What was that about?

Rachel LeMaster:

So I'm the youngest of seven and all my brothers and sisters are adopted except for me. And growing up, my earliest memories were feeling different because I wasn't adopted. And adopted



kids are always told, and rightly so, “You're special. We love you. We chose you to come into this family.”

And I just thought, “So I was just born into this family? What's up with that?” And so my dad, who was an attorney at the time, an adoption attorney, knew the judge. And so when we adopted one of my older sisters, my dad took the judge aside and said, “Would you just ask my daughter a few, fun questions and make her feel like she's one of them?”

Crystal Keating:

No way. That's amazing.

Rachel LeMaster:

And the judge, I remember and this is one of my first memories, the judge saying, “Raise your right hand. No, your other right hand.” And I just remember being, I was four years old, maybe no taller than three feet, standing in front of the judge like, “What do I do? What do I do?”

Crystal Keating:

To be wanted and loved and chosen is a very big deal. Sounds like you have such an amazing family.

Stephanie Daniels:

So amazing. I love that your dad saw that you needed that and just made a way for you to experience that. That's so precious. So you were diagnosed with a very rare condition called Turner syndrome. And the statistics are clear that many girls with this condition don't survive through normal gestation and pregnancy, but you are here. And so can you tell us what Turner syndrome is and can you take us back to when you were first diagnosed?

Rachel LeMaster:

First off, Turner syndrome is one in every 2,000 to 4,000 female births. It is the missing of an X chromosome. You're either missing it completely or it's curled up into an O. I have a rare form of that where some are missing, some are in a little circle. So I like to call myself Hugs and Kisses.

Crystal Keating:

You're Xs and Os!

Stephanie Daniels:

That's perfect.

Rachel LeMaster:

And what comes from Turner syndrome is short stature for one. I stopped growing at 4'6. Lack of development with puberty and all that, endocrinology. A lot of Turner syndrome girls have aortic heart abnormalities. They can have an aortic dissection, they can have webbed hands, webbed feet, learning disabilities, diabetes, thyroid issues, and I was studying personal training, and I realized a lot of that stuff can be prevented, so that just got me further into personal training. I was first diagnosed when I was 14, which is also very rare.

Crystal Keating:

Is that typical to be diagnosed as a teenager, or is it usually when you're a young child?

Rachel LeMaster:

Sometimes girls with Turners can have webbed hands, webbed feet. They can have outward manifestation characteristics, which I didn't except for I was very short. Yeah. I didn't really fit in with my peers; that was tough. Getting diagnosed with that and just trying to figure out, who am I? What's my identity and how does that come to be? I just have one X.

Crystal Keating:

No, that's so true. Teenagers, from a developmental point of view, one of the things that they are trying to master is identity. I think we're always developing our identity, especially if we're Christians. But, for teenagers, they're always asking themselves the same questions that you are asking. Who am I? Am I lovable? Where do I fit in? What's my purpose? What's my purpose in a community? And how do I live with the daily challenges that potentially have social implications? What were your relationships like in high school?

Rachel LeMaster:

I was bullied out of elementary school and bullied out of middle school. I was homeschooled, then went to a charter school, bullied out, and then went back to the same charter school in high school. So I didn't really have a whole lot of friends growing up.

Crystal Keating:

That must have been tough. That is so hard. I know that relationships are the most important part of life. And so to feel different and othered can be very isolating for sure.

Rachel LeMaster:

I felt isolated but I knew I had Jesus. And I knew he was with me no matter what I faced. He was going to help me through it. So I didn't despair. I didn't lash out.

Crystal Keating:

Right and just clinging to the Lord. I think that's where we all have to go when we go through those valleys of life where we just think, "Okay what's the rock of my life?" It can't be that I'm popular or well-liked or accepted, even though all of those things are really good, but we do go back to Jesus for sure.

Stephanie Daniels:

I was just wondering hearing all that you shared about how you experienced bullying and being ostracized, did that help you just get closer to the Lord?

Rachel LeMaster:



Yes. It not only drew me closer, but it made me feel like he had a purpose for my life, being different. Especially with Turner syndrome, there's such a high potential for problems and miscarriages and stuff like that and yet here I am. What's my purpose?

How do I glorify him? and it brought me closer to him and I wanted to be a missionary growing up but God led me another way. I got into golf. I got a golf scholarship and was working as a personal trainer, working at a golf course, and going to school for a physical therapy assistance degree. And yeah, that's when the rest of the story continues.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. I love that you were asking the Lord about your purpose at a young age. So not only do you live with Turner syndrome, but you also survived a catastrophic accident that should have taken your life.

Can you take us back to 2011? When you were struck by that truck and what were the injuries you sustained and what do you remember about that season of your life?

Rachel LeMaster:

Being fresh out of high school I decided to go to community college in Phoenix, Arizona and just wanted a fresh start and got a golf scholarship. And I played golf there, and I was kind of on the way up.

I had turned the corner. I had overcome my disability with Turner syndrome. I had gotten away from being ostracized and all that. Everything was on the up, and then a truck broadsided me going 50 miles an hour on my way to work one morning. And it gave me a severe traumatic brain injury, so my brain was just shaken, like an egg, it broke bones in my neck, it gave me an internal decapitation. So the major ligaments shored off, ripped off, and it bruised my heart, bruised my lungs, displaced my clavicle, cracked my spleen. I was in a coma for a month, a self-induced coma.

Crystal Keating:

What does that mean?

Rachel LeMaster:

Self-induced coma means you're in your own coma. You can have a medically induced coma, so that's where they give you medicine to be knocked out and heal but my body just instantly went into knocked-out rest.

Stephanie Daniels:

It was trying to maybe repair itself.

Rachel LeMaster:

Probably. I don't know anything about that time except for one of the nurses that had me for ten nights straight, she sang worship songs. She was from Nigeria, and she sang worship songs, and I remember going back and meeting her and thanking her. And she was singing worship songs in Nigerian, and I remember the presence of the Holy Spirit. I remember.

Crystal Keating:

This is while you were in a coma.

Rachel LeMaster:

While I was in a coma.

Crystal Keating:

And do you remember her singing?

Rachel LeMaster:

No. I don't, I can't tell you if it was day or night. I have no memory of prior leading up to the accident. I have no memories till a month and a half after waking up from the coma.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. How did you come out of the coma and what were your first memories? Did you know that you had been in a horrible car accident?

Rachel LeMaster:

No. My first memory was my mom standing by my bedside crying, telling me you had been in an accident. I'm trached up, I'm on a ventilator fully paralyzed. I started to regain somewhat function of my right arm shortly after, and so I asked to write down something, and I wrote down, "Was no accident. Have faith."

Crystal Keating:

That's what you wrote?

Rachel LeMaster:

"God knows."

Crystal Keating:

That's the first thing you wrote?

Rachel LeMaster:

The first thing I wrote.

Crystal Keating:

You must have had a lot of people praying for you.

Rachel LeMaster:

My high school church was very tight. And so when the word came out, they prayed. And Caring Bridge also is a website where you can go on and update people on conditions of patients and stuff like that. It had gone viral back then. It happened in 2011. So I had missionaries praying for



me in Africa.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. People all over the world. Oh my goodness. I've been at Joni and Friends for 11 years now and after so many conversations with people on the podcast and hearing from people who write in. I'm still never surprised to hear about how many people's lives changed instantly in a blink of an eye.

And I shouldn't be surprised at this point, but I think it still hurts my heart to hear these stories. So for you, you were golfing, you were going to be a PT of all things, right? A PT assistant. What was the most difficult part of the first year of your recovery?

Rachel LeMaster:

So I keep going back to when I was first waking up. "God knows. Have faith." And when I first left the hospital, I had double vision. My brain was scrambled. You're relearning how to walk, talk, sleep, eat, everything over again. Tie your shoe. I read Job. And it struck me that "Why do bad things happen to good people?" is never answered in Job.

His friends come to him, and try to console him, and talk with him, and just say, "You must have sinned. You must have done something wrong. Repent, or you must have done this or that." And the only thing that is answered in Job is to stay faithful to God.

And God has restored a lot of what was taken away. My encouragement to them is, God knows, have faith. Don't give up. Keep going. God knows your struggles. He made you fearfully and wonderfully and he knows every intimate detail about your life that he can help you overcome any situation.

And being a personal trainer, I was, on top of my game, fitness-wise.

Crystal Keating:

I bet you were.

Rachel LeMaster:

And going from that to just being isolated the first year, like everything was gone. My independence was taken away. Everything. All I could do was just trust and hope in God. He knew. His timing is not my timing. Be patient, have faith, to do well is gain, God knows.

Stephanie Daniels:

Rachel, you were surrounded by a team of people who were in awe of your life. And many of the doctors who cared for you didn't think that you would live, let alone walk again. They pronounce your recovery an absolute miracle. So how do you make sense of your surviving?

Rachel LeMaster:

God, first and foremost. The media, when they picked up on it a year later, they had said doctors were in awe of my survival and this and that and it was a miracle, but the doctors were just trying to get me to the next step of recovery.



They weren't focused on my survival or anything like that. I wasn't diagnosed with internal decapitation until six days late into my accident. So my spinal cord was unprotected for six days. And trying to have surgery on your neck, you have to be on your stomach. Because I had a ruptured or cracked spleen, I was bleeding internally and couldn't be on my stomach. So they had to wait for that, and it wasn't until six days later that they did the fusion and fixed it and all that good stuff.

Crystal Keating:

So they were like in the moment.

Rachel LeMaster:

They were in the moment.

Crystal Keating:

They were like, "Let's just do the next day." You were on no small show. Katie Couric, The Today Show. These are well-known people and you walked onto the stage, right? And you walked off by yourself.

Rachel LeMaster:

Walking onto the stage on the Katie Couric show I still had double vision. And I had glasses at the time. And the producer said, "I want those glasses." Right within seconds of walking onto the Katie Couric Show.

Crystal Keating:

For you to take them off? No way.

Rachel LeMaster:

So I had to give them.

Crystal Keating:

What? That is a disability etiquette faux pas. Big time.

Rachel LeMaster:

Yeah. I had to give him my glasses, and I just said, "God, I have nothing. I have nothing here to give." Whatever it is, I just let him roll and I did my thing and he did his thing.

Crystal Keating:

And you were absolutely delightful on those shows. If you can find it.

Rachel LeMaster:

Thank you. They took the Katie Couric Show is off the air. But the Today Show's on still on. If you Google "Rachel Bailey internal decapitation" you will see articles and the Today Show come up.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, you did a great job.

Rachel LeMaster:

It's not my story. It's his.

Crystal Keating:

Amen, one of the unique things I think about your situation is that you suffered a severe traumatic brain injury. When I look at you and I'm talking to you, I would have no idea that you have a TBI. And I've talked to many people on the phone.

And it's really hard for them not even just to articulate, but just internally, they know they're different. They know that, "Before the accident, I was like this, and after the traumatic brain injury, I'm like this." Or family members will call in and say, "My loved one is not the same." Our brains make such a difference in who we are. So I just want to ask you, in addition to the broken bones, the cracked spleen, I didn't even know your spleen could crack, by the way...

Rachel LeMaster:

It's super glued.

Crystal Keating:

No way, really?

Rachel LeMaster:

Yeah.

Crystal Keating:

Okay, modern medicine is just amazing. How has your traumatic brain injury affected you and did anyone, know like, "Hey, you're different," or "Your personality's changed," or certain situations are more difficult than before?

Rachel LeMaster:

No, so my personality didn't change. I've lost executive functioning ability.

Crystal Keating:

That's like those front-line organizing thoughts, putting things in order.

Rachel LeMaster:

When you do your dishes rinse them off, then you put them in the dishwasher, then you put the pot in the dishwasher... All that just got scrambled.

The first year after the accident, I wasn't insured because of Turner syndrome. When my accident happened I got Medicaid. And from there, that covered some of the hospital bills and it covered some physical therapy.



But it wasn't until a year later that I got into a program called the Center for Transitional Neuro Rehabilitation. And there, they talked about awareness, acceptance, and realism. Being aware of your difficulties and accepting them and making realistic decisions accordingly. For instance, my speed of processing is impacted, so I can't drive the freeways or drive far, but I just limit that.

Crystal Keating:

You're adjusting to what works for you.

Rachel LeMaster:

You adapt.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, that's great.

Rachel LeMaster:

You are aware, you accept it, and that's so hard to accept your disability. It's so hard, I think a lot of times, people aren't even aware of it. And getting through that awareness, acceptance, and realism, along with God first and foremost, that helps you overcome.

Crystal Keating:

It really does. I want to ask you, Rachel, just about the emotional part of acceptance.

Because self-awareness is the first step to acceptance, right? I really believe that where we have to say, okay, this is who I am. It doesn't mean I'm only limited to this, but this is who I am right now. Was that difficult for you to say, "I can't drive the freeways anymore." And, "When I'm loading the dishwasher, I'm going to have to write out what I'm going to do first, or someone's going to have to dictate me," or whatever. What was that like for you emotionally to accept?

Rachel LeMaster:

The thing is, once you are in a position where you have total independence and in a blink of an eye you're going from that to not being able to pick up your hand to feed yourself or having to learn to drink again, it's humbling. And that's where just belief and trust and faith in God that he knows he's seen everything, that you've been through and he will hold you in the palm of his hand. I didn't despair. I wasn't afraid. I had peace.

Crystal Keating:

So now, we're 13 years since your accident and I can just hear your conviction of trusting God. You know, it's so different when you go through the seasons of life and the accident is new and you're just trying to make sense of it and the people around you are trying to make sense of it.

How have you seen God's hand through the seasons since thirteen years has passed, and how has your faith grown?

Rachel LeMaster:



I never have been closer to God than in the midst of the storm. I've seen his grace and his goodness every day. Eleven years ago, I got a dog named Hope. And every time I say "Hope," I'm reminded that there's hope. You're able to hold on to that peace.

When you go through so much, you're able to know God's got it. And no matter what challenges come up in the future, he's got it. He can handle it. And just trusting in him is important and it's the main lesson that I learned.

Stephanie Daniels:

You are like the perfect daily reminder. It's just like, God is in control and it's going to be all good. That's what I am feeling just as you share just so reassured of God's goodness and faithfulness.

Rachel LeMaster:

You can have so many, and it doesn't have to be a physical truck, could just be a doctor's visit and it didn't go well. Knowing that he's there, he doesn't leave and he was there with Job throughout all Job's suffering and I don't think it gets any worse than Job.

Sheer trust. I can't explain it any differently than just belief in Jesus.

Stephanie Daniels:

I love that you said that, because it doesn't have to be a truck for everybody. But everybody, if you are walking around in this earth suit, you need to know that you just have to trust the Lord in every situation.

Rachel LeMaster:

Everybody has their own truck.

Stephanie Daniels:

Absolutely. Yep. So you have felt very compelled to pour out your life for a greater service after you made a full recovery. How have you filled your days since 2011 in following the Lord?

Rachel LeMaster:

You don't fully recover. God has restored a lot in me, but I don't think you can ever fully recover from a brain injury.

Once the neurons are gone, they're gone. But you can do things to help restore new connections. And building new neuropathways, and new relationships. And new things are different, but that doesn't mean they're impossible.

Crystal Keating:

And I feel like you have felt very drawn to volunteering through the years and, yeah. It's so easy when we have such a huge life change to feel like, "I don't have anything to give," or, "I just want to stay at home," and I know Joni has said the best way for her to fight through depression was to go back to the rehab hospital and go through the hallways and visit people who had new spinal cord injuries.



What are some of the ways that you've given back and that you've found really life through that?

Rachel LeMaster:

So I went back to the hospital that saved my life. I went back to volunteer and I have a saying: "To live is to give." So, and I'm sure Joni gets that as well, but when you're pouring out of yourself, even if it's just compassion, or a word of kindness, or empathy or sitting with someone in their struggles, that's a way of giving.

That's why I felt so compelled to share my story is I want to encourage and give hope. Because to live is to give and if you're not giving, if you're not pouring into other people's lives and helping, you're just focused on yourself and your own woes. And so giving to others helps you see there's a world outside of just your own box.

Crystal Keating:

And I think we live in a society that's very fast paced, and so it's easy to underestimate what we've called many times "the ministry of presence." It's simply, you said it, it's being with somebody. It's not being in a rush. It's being in the same room with them. It's sitting in their grief or in their place of life. Some things are just so hard to carry on our own. And so we come alongside people and we hold it until we can give it back to them.

And that is the ministry of presence and what you've done. And I know some of our listeners today are thinking, okay. I want to do this, I want to do something, but I don't really feel like I have much to offer. Rachel, what encouragement would you bring to them who are wondering how they can serve?

Rachel LeMaster:

One of my favorite books growing up was "Puppy Too Small" by Cyndy Szekeres. And Growing up with Turner syndrome, I was short, very short and "Puppy Too Small" is a book about a puppy who's too small to do the dishes with his mom or to hammer a nail with his dad, but he can do these little things like, "I can hand her the dishes," or "I can clear the dishes off the table."

Finding a little thing that you can do and focus on that helps to open up doors and not only others, but yourself. So you're not enough. God is and being aware of, "I can't do this," or, "but I can do this." Focusing on this is what I can do, and this is how God made me. You can fulfill his purpose.

Crystal Keating:

I love that. What a good word. Wasn't this a great conversation, Stephanie?

Stephanie Daniels:

I like have just sopped up this whole thing. I loved it. I loved it all.

Crystal Keating:

Rachel, it's so good to have you on the podcast today. We're so grateful that we get to sit here in person and just hear your story. You're such an encouragement to us.

Rachel LeMaster:

Thank you. It's an honor

Crystal Keating:

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