

Season 6 | Episode 16

## Overcoming Fear: A Conversation with Michael Hingson

Michael Hingson

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September 5, 2024

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](https://joniandfriends.org/podcast) to access the resources we mention, or to [send me a message](#) with your thoughts.

Stephanie Daniels:

I'm Stephanie Daniels, and I feel so blessed that I get to bring you stories of faith, resilience, and the incredible ways God works through his people, especially in times of trial and crisis. Today, I'm honored to have with us Michael Hingson.

Many of you may recognize Michael's name from his incredible story of survival on September 11th, 2001. Michael, who was born blind, escaped the World Trade Center that day with the help of his guide dog, Roselle, walking down 78 flights of stairs. His courage and trust in God through that harrowing experience has inspired countless people worldwide. He spent nearly two decades as a keynote speaker, sharing his story and spreading a message of hope, resilience, and the power of trusting in God, no matter what life throws at us.

Today, we'll hear about his experiences on 9/11, his life as a person who's blind navigating a sighted world, and how the church has played a role in his journey.

Michael, thank you so much for joining us today.

Michael Hingson:

Thank you. I'm always open to talking about it.



Stephanie Daniels:

Awesome. Well, let's get into these questions. Being born blind, you've navigated a world that isn't always designed for people with disabilities.

Can you share some of the challenges you've faced and how you've seen God's hand guiding you through those times?

Michael Hingson:

So, for me growing up my parents discovered I was blind at four months. That happened at birth, but when it was discovered, the doctors told my parents to send me off to a home because no blind child could ever grow up to be a contributor to society and I would just be a drain and my parents said, "No, you're wrong." And they brought me up with that attitude.

My father and I spent a lot of time reading the Bible, reading stories about Christian life and so on. One of my favorites and we read the books together was "The Greatest Story Ever Told" by Fulton Oursler, and I remember us sitting in his den reading it together. I've always had a very firm and strong belief in God. I think the challenge is people think that because a person is blind they're less capable than others, or people in a wheelchair are less capable than others. My wife was in a wheelchair her whole life. She was a paraplegic a t3 para. The marriage worked out great for 40 years. She reads I pushed, worked out really well. Unfortunately, we lost her in 2022. But, we all have abilities and we manifest the technology or we manifest the process of bringing those abilities to light in different ways.

Some of us have gifts that others don't have and others have gifts that we don't have. We need to recognize that and begin to understand that it is not our place to judge who can do what and who can't. Who's capable and who's not. That's God's job.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. And you said in your book your parents knew the only way to help you learn to live in this world was to let you explore. With parents who raised you to be courageous, can you talk about what it was like growing up with that kind of influence?

Michael Hingson:

When I was probably about eight, I was out riding my bike around our neighborhood, which I had learned to do, and learned to listen for traffic, learned to listen so that if I got too close to a curb I would hear the dirt on the tires creating an echo. So I was able to ride my bike as well as anyone else. Rode it to school. But I came home one day from riding around my neighborhood and I put my bike away and was going into the house when the phone rang. My father answered it and listening to him talk to whoever was on the phone it was clear that they were talking about me. And basically this guy said:

"I'm calling about your son."



And my dad said, "Well, what about him?"

And he said, "He was out riding his bike."

And my dad said, "Well, yeah, of course, what about it?"

"No, I'm not talking about your older kid, the sighted kid. I'm talking about the blind one."

And my dad said, "What about it?"

"Well, he was out riding his bike."

And my dad said, "Did he hit anyone?"

"Well, no."

"Did anyone hit him?"

"No."

"Did he have any problems riding his bike?"

"No, but he's blind."

And my dad said, "Well clearly there wasn't a problem."

And the guy hung up. He couldn't cope with the fact that just because I might have used different techniques and still accomplished the same task that it was okay. All that guy focused on was I couldn't see with my eyes. The Gallup polling organization for several years back in the 1980s and 1990s, were doing surveys of people's fears, identified regularly that one of the top five fears that people had was going blind. We so emphasize eyesight that we can't recognize there are other ways to do the same things that other people do.

Just because people are different than we are, that doesn't make them less. And it also doesn't mean that they might not need help, but the best way to deal with that is to ask "Can I assist?" Not assume. That's something that my wife's encountered all the time and I encountered all the time. I like to try to educate where I can. The unemployment rate among employable blind people in this country for many years was 70 percent. And it's true for persons with other kinds of disabilities as well. But the reality is it's not that we can't do the work, it's that others think we can't do the work, and that prejudice is what takes over.

Stephanie Daniels:

Michael, you just have such a confidence about you, and I'm just curious where that comes from. You know, my dad is blind, and he does not have this same sort of confidence. Now, he wasn't born blind. He did lose his vision later in life. But he's been blind for about 30 years now. You're very confident. Where does that come from?



Michael Hingson:

Training. It's as simple as that. Let me tell you a story about a friend of mine who's now, since passed, his name was Don. Don had diabetes. Don lived in Iowa, and in the 1960s, Don worked for Iowa Bell and Don was the top salesperson by far in Iowa. He sold twice as much equipment as anyone else did, but he had diabetic retinopathy and lost his eyesight literally almost overnight. In Iowa at the time, the top training center for blind people in the country was the Iowa Commission for the Blind. Don went to this agency, spent nine months as a resident of the Commission, learned all the skills, learned the philosophy of blindness, learned to read braille and cook, and so on. Then went back to work for Iowa Bell and continued to be number one sales guy.

Then one day, Iowa Bell offered a new position, that was a trainer to teach people how to do the things that he and other salespeople were doing. Don applied for the job and was summarily rejected. Now it would have been an increase in salary for Don and it would have been a step up if Don had gotten the job. But Iowa Bell wouldn't give Don that opportunity.

Don got proper training at the Iowa Commission for the Blind and realized that blindness wasn't going to hold him back. The reality is so many people today don't have that kind of an attitude because society has taught them not to have that attitude and they don't tend to have access to resources that truly give them that kind of philosophy. Most of the rehab agencies in the country, they don't teach them that they're just as good as they ever were. They're just going to do things differently. So training is the answer.

Stephanie Daniels:

Love that. Well, your story of escaping the World Trade Center on 9/11 is truly remarkable. When I think back to that day, I think all of us can remember where we were when we saw those airplanes fly into the twin towers and how we felt. Can you take us back to that day and share what was going through your mind? We know what we saw, but I can only imagine being in the buildings as that was happening and being 78 flights of stairs up. What was going through your mind as you got out of the building with your guide dog Roselle?

Michael Hingson:

I was in my office actually, when we heard a little bit of a muffled thump, the building sort of shook. And then it literally began to tip in one direction because the airplane hit the building and was pushing it. The building was stronger than the airplane, so it eventually came back. Tall buildings like that are made to be flexible in windstorms, so the building did everything it was supposed to do.

Immediately I asked a colleague of mine, David, to get our guests to the stairs I told him don't let them take elevators, because when I started working in the World Trade Center, I spent time learning what to do just in case we had another emergency, because there had been a bombing in 1993, although it wasn't much of one. I learned how to travel around the World Trade Center.



The dog's job is to make sure that we walk safely, but it's my job to know where to go, how to get where I want to go, and to give the dog commands to get us where we need to go, and then the dog follows those commands, or doesn't if the dog perceives that there's a danger in doing what I want. That's a process called intelligent disobedience. And I respect my dog for having the authority to do that. If we come to a street corner for example, and I tell the dog to go forward to cross the street, and the dog won't go, I'm going to immediately assume there's a reason for that.

So, I told David to get our guests to the stairs, because I knew that if there was fire in the buildings and if that got into the elevator shafts anyone in the elevator cars would perish. David did that then he came back, and we got to the stairs, and we started down. Almost immediately I began smelling an odor and it took me about four floors to realize that it was something that I smelled all the time as I went through airports. I did a lot of flying for my company. I realized it was the fumes from burning jet fuel.

No one on my side of the building knew what happened. We assumed because of the smelling of fumes that an airplane hit the building, but we had no clue. The airplane hit 18 floors above us on the other side of the building. As we were going down the stairs with hundreds of people, none of us knew what happened. In fact, I didn't learn what happened until after both towers had collapsed, and I finally reached my wife, and she's the first one who told me how two aircraft had been crashed into the towers, one to the Pentagon, and a fourth was still missing.

But the fact is, none of us knew as we were going down the stairs. I learned how to be prepared for an emergency, and what that did is it created a mindset in me that took over when the building was struck. And so I was able to do the things that I had already learned how to do. Knowledge is the absolute power of being able to deal with situations like that.

So we got down, we got out, and then we were actually only about a hundred yards away from tower two when it collapsed. And when it did everyone just turned and ran. David, who was with me, turned and ran he was gone. I turned Roselle 180 degrees and we started running back the way we came to get a little bit further away from the tower. And immediately as we started to run the first thing I thought to myself was, "God, I can't believe that you got us out of a building just to have it fall on us." And immediately when I said that I heard a voice in my head as clearly as you hear me now that said, "Don't worry about what you can't control focus on running with Roselle and the rest will take care of itself." And I had this sense of peace and certainty that if we work together, we would be fine. Without going into every detail, because all of that is described in "Thunder Dog", my first book. The fact is that we did survive and Roselle and I had to work as a team to be able to survive. We did, and then we were a little bit further away when tower one collapsed. But that voice, was that God? Absolutely it was. And what it really taught me, and is something that I continue to tell people, don't worry about what you can't control. And "Live Like a Guide Dog", the new book that has just been released, it's all about learning to control fear.

We grow up in a society that teaches us something happens, you get afraid. And we never learned to control it. What happened to me was because of the preparations I had made in learning about an emergency process that could happen in the World Trade Center, I created a mindset that took over when there was actually an emergency.



Now, the building could have collapsed and we wouldn't be here talking about it today. And I'll tell you, going down the stairs I was listening for any creak or groan that the building might make, but I wasn't worried about the building collapsing because I knew that there was nothing I could do about that. So I focused on encouraging Roselle, telling her she was doing a great job. "Wonderful. Good girl." And all the way down the stairs, people followed me because, they told me later, "If you could go down the stairs and you could be talking to your dog like that, then we're going to follow you."

David, my colleague, who was in our corporate office for the day, at the 50th floor kind of lost it. He said, "Mike we're going to die. We're not going to make it out of here." And I just said, in my best teacher's voice, "David. If Roselle and I can go down these stairs, so can you." And he told me later that that brought him out of his funk. But he said "I got to do something to keep my mind off this so I'm going to walk a floor below you and shout up to you everything that I see. Is that okay?" And I said, "Sure, if you want to do that." I knew it would help him. So, for example, when I was on the 45th floor, he said, "Hey, I'm on the 44th floor. This is where the port authority cafeteria is not stopping." And he went on down the stairs. The reason I mentioned all that is because, David was shouting up to me what he saw, but I think that's one of the most incredible experiences I had that day because in reality, by David shouting to me, anyone who could hear his voice had to know that somewhere on the stairwell above them or below them was somebody who was doing fine on the stairs. And that had to help keep panic down.

So, it's using fear as a powerful tool to help direct you and to help you focus on what you need to do. We need to learn to control fear. And that's what "Live Like a Guide Dog" as a book is really all about. It's lessons that I've learned from all of my guide dogs that helped me learn to control fear.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. Yeah. How long did it take you to get out of the building on 9/11?

Michael Hingson:

The plane hit um, I've heard 8:45 and 8:46. We got outside of the building at 9:45. So it was basically an hour.

We got downstairs into the lobby and then there were people escorting us and others to where they wanted us to leave the building. I don't know whether they knew yet that the buildings were going to collapse. I've heard that people realized a half hour before tower two collapsed that it was going to happen.

When we got to the bottom, a guy came over and , he said, "I'm with the FBI. I'll get you where you need to go." And I asked him, "What's going on?" And he said, "No time to tell you." I wish he had. It would have actually made a little bit of a difference in the choices I made, but I like information and I'm not going to panic from it.





Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. How did your faith in God, and your relationship with your guide dog, help you during that critical event?

Michael Hingson:

Well, it helped keep me very calm and very focused. One of the things that I constantly observed as we were going down the stairs was how Roselle was reacting. If she had done something that I didn't expect, that would tell me that there's something going on I'm not detecting. But all the way down the stairs Roselle walked, she did exactly what she was supposed to do, and she remained very calm and focused. Now, I encouraged her. I praised her. But still, she had to sense all the fear and all the things that were going on around us.

Stephanie Daniels:

Our founder, Joni, has spoken about how people with disabilities are often the ones who get left behind in times of crisis. We see this during natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes. And conflict, like the war in Ukraine. And Joni encourages people to get to know their neighbors and be aware of who might need assistance in times of crisis.

Michael Hingson:

Yup

Stephanie Daniels:

And to help out. So, how would you encourage others to ensure that people with disabilities aren't forgotten in those moments?

Michael Hingson:

I think that we need to talk to them and we need to teach them more about us and learn more about them and develop those trusting relationships. One of the things that I talk about in emergency preparedness is that in work environments, I believe in the buddy system. One person needs to be responsible for at least another person, but I'm not a great fan of just the buddy system I think it needs to be at least a team of three, and one of the three has to be from a different office. So, you might develop a relationship with a teammate in your office so that you'll help each other. But there also has to be another person involved in that triumvirate from a different office that may or may not be affected by the same things that are affecting you in your office. People need to create those relationships.



One of the things that I encourage people to do is meet with their neighbors, their colleagues, especially when you have certain physical needs, like you are in a wheelchair and you're not going to necessarily function exactly the same way other people will. You need to make sure that there are some people who you have trained to help you and you're going to be helping them too. If they're doing that for you, they're also focusing on helping you and they're going to be less fearful.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's good. Check on your neighbors, check on your friends. Get outside of yourself and make friends. I love that advice.

Well, each of your canine friends has a different personality. And in your opinion, what's the most important trait for a guide dog to have? And is there something special you were looking for when you connected with your guide dogs?

Michael Hingson:

When I get a guide dog, one of the things that I get to do is have a conversation with the training staff that will be involved with the class that I'm going to go to. And one of the things that I say I want in the dog is I want the dog to have an on and off switch. That is to say, I want the dog to know when it's time to work and when they can play.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mhmm.

Michael Hingson:

And you can play when the harness comes off, but you can't do it when the harness is on. So when the harness comes off, the dog gets to visit and be a more normal dog. When I'm traveling around, I've heard children say "I wanna go pet that dog." And I will always stop, I'll take the harness off and say, "It's perfectly okay the dog's got the harness off." And I'll use the opportunity as a teaching moment both for the parent and the children as to what guide dogs are all about. If it's just an adult who wants to visit, I may or may not stop depending on how rushed I am.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mhmm.





Michael Hingson:

But even then, I will, when I can, take the time to stop and take the harness off because I don't want anyone petting the dog when the harness is on, because I don't want the dog getting into the habit of visiting with people when they're supposed to be focused and not being distracted.

I remember once a woman came up and she wanted to pet my dog and I said, "No, I'm really kind of in a little bit of a rush." But she started petting the dog anyway, and I knew it because Roselle kind of turned and was looking at her and that was pretty obvious what was going on. So I gave a tug on the leash, not a sharp one, but I just said, "Leave it, Roselle." And then the woman said, "No, don't get mad at the dog. I was petting the dog, you said not to." And I said, "No, you don't understand. You got the dog in trouble. The dog should know better." And it's important people understand when that dog is in harness, that dog is supposed to focus.

Stephanie Daniels:

Such important lessons and it's good to be reminded. There is just something in us that's like, "Oh, it's cute, it's furry, and I want to pet it." So, that's really important lessons. I'm glad you're sharing that with us.

Michael Hingson:

We need to control. We need to learn to control.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes. Self-control is important.

Michael Hingson:

Yes.

Stephanie Daniels:

Well, community is such a vital part of life and especially as Christians, you know, we're called to be one body. Can you tell us about the community that's surrounded you over the years and how they've helped you continue to trust in God and live out your faith?

Michael Hingson:

I've been blessed by having a lot of friends who understand what faith is all about. When we moved to the San Diego area in late 1989, we learned about a program called "Walk to Emmaus". If you go back to Luke, you'll learn about Emmaus, which is a town that people were going to after Jesus was crucified and he walked with them. And when they got to Emmaus, they



broke bread, and they were having discussions, and suddenly he appeared to them. So, we joined that and that helped us to surround ourselves with people who had faith and who really understood what God was about.

Stephanie Daniels:

Love that. Michael, as we wrap up today, what encouragement would you offer to our listeners who are facing their own trials, particularly those who might be struggling with disability?

Michael Hingson:

I think that what people need to do if they're facing crisis, if they're facing challenge, or even if they're not, what we need to do is to step back and take time to be introspective and analyze ourselves. Look at, why are we afraid of this? What can we do about it? Think about the day, what worked, what didn't work? I don't use the term failure, rather than things that maybe didn't work as well as you thought. Why didn't they work? Did you contribute to them not working? What are you afraid of? What fears caused you to react the way you did that maybe you can overcome? And start to really think about those things and the more you do think about them the better you will become at putting all of that into perspective and learning to develop your mind muscle to be able to listen to God and to that inner voice that will help you learn to control those fears. And will help you resolve whatever comes along.

Stephanie Daniels:

Michael, thank you so much for sharing your story with us today. Your experiences and your faith are powerful and they're a powerful reminder of God's presence in our lives, even in the darkest times. And to our listeners, I hope you found today's conversation as inspiring and encouraging as I did. Remember, no matter what you're going through, God is with you and he is faithful.

If you want to learn more about Michael Hingson and his work, we'll have links in the show notes. And as always, thank you so much for tuning in. Like I said, Michael, thank you for joining us today.

Michael:

Well, it's my pleasure. Thank you very much it's been great.

Crystal Keating:

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