

Ep 229: If God is Good, Why Do Bad Things Happen? w/ Michele Cushatt

Shelby: [00:00:00] Hey everyone and welcome back to the Daily Grace Podcast. This is Shelby and today I have someone with me who I'm really excited to introduce you to for multiple reasons I have . Cushatt here and Michele is a ,speaker an author, a three-time cancer .Survivor and she's married to Troy. Together they share a blended family of six children including biological [00:01:00] children stepchildren and foster-adopt children. And Michele, you say that you are a reluctant expert of trauma, pain and the deep human need for authentic connection, and enduring faith. So that's kind of Michele's official bio and as you can probably tell from that bio she's someone who just has a lot of experience, a lot of wisdom to share with us today. But I also wanna add a little bit of unofficial information to Michele's bio.

Michelle: That's the best kid right? The best kind.

Shelby: That's the kind we're all here for right?

Michelle: Yes.

Shelby: You know we get podcast pitches all the time and I often recognize the names because they're speakers or authors and I'm familiar with their books but Michele I felt like I really knew you because you had a podcast called Communicator Academy with Kathy Lip and about eight years ago, and I thought you know what I'm just gonna pursue writing and I'm gonna pursue speaking and see where it goes. I had no idea where to start but I searched in the podcast app [00:02:00] Christian Communicator and your podcast was the one that came up. And I devoured the episodes and I took your recommendations and I made connections through groups that you suggested in the podcast that led me to freelance writing and eventually led me here today. And so when I saw your name I was like, it's Michele Like I know Michele and I love her!

Michelle: We're best friends. We've never met but we're best friends!

Shelby: We're best friends. So on multiple levels I'm just so glad to have you here today.

Michelle: Oh, likewise. That is just a sweet wonderful story that just encourages my heart. You know you do these, as you know, do these podcasts

and you don't know if anybody's listening or if it's helpful, but we had a blast. Kathy and I had a blast doing those podcasts and I love that we got to hang out with you eight years ago, and now we get to hang out in real life.

Shelby: I know! Who would've thought? I never would've thought! Well, Michele today we're here to talk about your new book *A Faith That Will Not Fail*, and when I [00:03:00] saw the way that you described this book something really stuck out to me. You said that this book is for those who are yearning to find hope in the trenches. And goodness doesn't it feel like so much of life is lived in the trenches. And I think maybe we don't talk about finding hope there quite as often as it would be helpful for people. And so we're super glad to have you here today, and I'm wondering if you can just kind of start us off by sharing what led to you writing this book *A Faith That Will Not Fail*.

Michelle: Yeah, well my parents became Christians when I was just about six, seven months old, so I don't really know life without Jesus in it. So faith has always been a part of my life. However I didn't really get tested, like fully tested vetted, until my adulthood. And simply you've read my bio so I don't need to go into all of that, but from the age of about 21 to today, I'm 51, so in about 30 years I've had an unrelenting [00:04:00] series of consecutive seasons of loss, grief, and suffering and I'm not just talking a couple hard things. We're talking like really significant, you know, facing cancer three times. The third time almost killed me like took me two years to recover from. Almost dying. I've had family members I've lost. I've gone through unexpected divorce and single motherhood. I've had church hurt, all kinds of church hurt, in what's supposed to be safe communities. I've raised adolescents, I have three more teenagers in my home right now. And dealt with just the challenges of parenting and kids that sometimes go their own prodigal way, and dealing with that. And we could go on and on and on. The amount suffering, I kept thinking, surely God's done allowing me to go through hard things. Surely it's done, surely this is the last hard thing. And then about the time I say that, one more incredibly hard thing would happen. And in the middle of all of that I was wrestling with, what do I do with this faith in a good God [00:05:00] who says he will never leave me or forsake me, who says he loves me and he is compassionate toward me, and yet my suffering will not end? Like no matter what it's just hard thing, after a hard thing, after a hard thing. And what do we do in that space? And then furthermore, and this kinda leads to the book, how do we become men and women who have the kind of faith that is so deeply embedded in like cement of truth that no matter what happens to us, no matter what we're in the middle of today or what may or may not happen tomorrow, that we will not be shaken? I think that was one of my biggest fears, is life is hard, but what if in the middle of the hardness of life, God turns out to not be real or not be good. What do I do then? And I wanted to know that I could know that I could know that God is

real, he is good, and he can be trusted no matter what happens. And that is kind of the soil from which was birthed this book. [00:06:00]

Shelby: Hmm. And that's the question that we all have, for so many of us I think it's left unspoken. A lot of the time we're almost afraid to even say it out loud. And so that's why I'm really excited to get into this topic, because I think it's gonna answer questions that we all have, but maybe haven't even let ourselves admit that we have. I wanna talk really quick just about the book for a second because I think this is really important. So this is written for people who are in the trenches, but somebody in the trenches might say I don't have time to read a book

Michelle: Exactly I've said that.

Shelby: Yeah I have also said it. And so I just thought this was important to say at the beginning. Do you wanna explain just a little bit about how you've broken this book down, so it can be really easily digestible for somebody maybe even in a really hard season.

Michelle: Yes. So the book is called A Faith That Will Not Fail: 10 Practices to Build Up Your Faith When Your World is Falling Apart. And I hesitated even using the word practices, because to me that sounds like homework. I used to be a piano teacher and the things that my students hated doing more than anything else was practicing, right? We don't [00:07:00] want to practice anything. It just it feels like homework. It feels like heavy lifting. And when we are in the trenches, when we're overwhelmed by pain and suffering, the last thing we want to do is have another burden placed on us. But I want to reframe this word practice cuz practice in this sense, in this book, is less about doing and more about being. This is not a scramble your way to being a good Christian girl. This is not a, you know, check all the boxes and do everything right so hopefully you can end up with a good result. That is not what this is about. This practice, this book of practices, are a somewhat unconventional practices. I'm not telling you to go do a three hour Bible study, and do basically two weeks of fasting, and then you know 48 hours of constant prayer That's not what I'm asking you to do. If you wanna do that, that's great. What I'm doing is in little bite size building practices to get more grounded in what is already true. And so these practices, again [00:08:00] remember they're more about being not doing. And so many times as a Christian we get caught up in the doing of Christian activity, rather than being in what's already been done.

Shelby: Yeah. That's so good. I think that's important to get clear right off the bat. Cause I could see somebody tuning out thinking, oh just another checklist. But I think it's also important to mention that you've lived this in your hard

seasons, and so these things for you weren't a burden. It sounds like they were more of a lifeline to you.

Michelle: Yeah, so I used two criteria when I selected these 10 practices. And again some of these practices will take you by surprise. They're not what you would typically expect. But my two criteria are, one it had to be grounded in some kind of biblical precedent that said, Hey this is something that's an important part of spiritual formation, spiritual growth. But the second was equally as important, and it had to be something that I actually did, and actually helped me. If it was not something that was truly [00:09:00] enriching, and helpful for me, then it didn't get included. And so that's why, you know, the book opens with the practice of Lament. And by the way side note, lemme backtrack real quick There's 10 practices, but I've broken them down into five chapters per practice. So that means the book is 50 short bite size chapters. You can do it in five to ten minutes tops. Like sit, read, do it as you're able. There's no calendar that you have to follow. Like literally you can go to get what you need, take what you need, leave everything else. So the book opens with lament, this idea of vocalizing our grief. The book doesn't open with somebody telling you you need to slap on the happy face and pretend like everything's fine. Nope. We're not gonna play that game here. We're gonna tell the truth about our reality. We'll eventually turn to the goodness of God but it is okay to be honest about the fact that this life that we're living, this human experience is sometimes brutally hard and painful and it's worth grieving over.

Shelby: [00:10:00] Yeah, absolutely. That's so important to acknowledge. Well let's kind of pivot here and get into some of these big questions that you wrestle through as you present these practices in the book. And the first one I think is one of these unspoken questions I mentioned. If God is real and he is good how can he allow so many bad things happen?

Michelle: Mm. Every time I hear that question, I get asked that question a lot and I've asked the question a lot. The consideration that we have to make when it comes to this topic of detention between the reality and existence of a good and loving God with the reality of pain and evil, is the fact that we must acknowledge that we are culpable for some of the pain and suffering that's in our world. We're not just victims that you know, as much as we would love to point a finger, the reality is there are some things you know, I'm not saying that I cause my cancer that's not what I'm saying, but there are some things in the reality of this broken world that we live in, that we are culpable for. We're responsible for [00:11:00] and some of that, we just have to own it. We can't just project blame. We've got to own some of that. And then the final piece, and this is the hardest one, it's okay if you feel some tension or resistance to this, cuz I certainly have it many times. But the third consideration is that we need to at

least allow the possibility that our definition of what is good and what is bad is not ultimate.

Shelby: Hmm

Michelle: So for example, once upon a time when I was first diagnosed with cancer, the worst thing that could ever happen was for me to have cancer come back again multiple times. I'm like that was the worst case scenario. That was a bad result I prayed against, that I certainly you know didn't want it to come back, and I'm like God please help this to be done. Never again you know heal me completely all of this. And then it came back a second time and the third time. However that said as I have watched what God has done in my life, after the third cancer diagnosis, so you can hear I talk with a lisp, and the short of that is on my third [00:12:00] diagnosis the cancer was so advanced I had to have two thirds of my tongue removed as well as multiple glands and lymph node in my neck my arm and my leg. All were cut open to kind to put me back together again, so I could have some ability to eat and drink and talk again. It's quite a miracle that I can talk at all. Okay so as I have walked through the reality of the fact that I now live with permanent physical disability, and chronic pain, and a body that doesn't work based on a third round of cancer. I can't deny the fact that some of the ministry and opportunities to talk about the goodness of God in places of suffering didn't come in spite of my suffering, but as a direct result of it. Now I was a little girl who prayed, God I wanna follow you. Use me God I I love you with my whole heart, I want to follow you, I wanna serve you in ministry. Do what you wanna do in my life. That was my prayer. What my worst case scenario, this bad outcome which was having cancer come [00:13:00] back a second and third time, was actually part of this beautiful unfolding of the work of God's grace and ministry in my life. And this is tough, I understand the tension cuz we don't want the bad things to happen, I get it. But Tim Keller says it this way, God gives you what you would ask for if you knew what he knew.

Shelby: Mm-hmm Yeah

Michelle: It's a hard concept, but the truth is as much as I never wanna go through that suffering again, if God had asked me 20 years ago, Michele I have beautiful plans for your life, I want to use you to talk about the good news of Jesus, but you're gonna have to go through some pretty significant suffering first to be ready for that. Are you willing? Hands down I would've said yes. And so wrestling with, can we accept that sometimes our definitions of what is good and what is bad is incomplete because we don't see what God sees.

Shelby: Hmm Yeah, I think, I love what you're saying. I [00:14:00] think over and over again, you're just pointing to the fact that we can't understand God. We can't understand all of his ways. And I love even that point there in the end that if we knew what he knew, then we'd probably be at peace with where we're at. And so, but you're right, that's a hard truth, and and one we'll probably wrestle with until the day we enter eternity. So let me ask you another difficult question here. So Jesus says that if we have faith as small as a mustard seed, that we can move mountains. And but many of us have had situations where we've prayed for God to do something. We've believed in faith that he could do that and yet maybe the healing or the breakthrough that we've prayed for it has not happened. So does that mean that we didn't have enough faith? Does that mean that God wasn't faithful to keep that promise? Like what's happening there?

Michelle: Yeah I have a little jar with a mustard seed in it in my office and uh and I've looked at that many times going, boy I prayed with faith. I [00:15:00] believe. I know you're able, so why didn't he you know why didn't he come through in the way that I asked him to? I remember my dad was diagnosed in the middle of my second and third cancer diagnosis. So in between the two, my dad was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer and he actually only lived three months after his terminal diagnosis. And I remember about three weeks before he died he called me on the phone, and he said he had just gone to see the doctor again, was going to do another chemo treatment, and he called me and said, Michele the doctor said there's nothing more they can do we're at our end of our options. And so I'm going home and we're calling hospice and I remember sitting in my car so upset, so frustrated because not only had I gone through cancer twice, and continuously prayed for healing, but I had prayed for my dad's healing too. And I'm like, seriously what's going on? I keep praying, I keep praying believing, and you're not delivering. And as I sat in the car I remember just being so [00:16:00] angry, disappointed, frustrated, confused and I said God we asked for good news today. We asked for good news from the doctor today. Why? Why? All I wanted was good news. And even though I didn't hear God speak idly, I felt it so clearly in my spirit. God said Michele all of you already have the good news, don't you see? And it didn't remove the sting and the pain of the reality that my dad was dying. But boy did that moment reframe the fact that greater work had already been done. Every single member of my family, my dad, my mom, my brother, me, the people we were married to, all had the good news. And that was the bigger miracle The fact that we knew that Jesus is the son of God, that he came, he loved us, died for us, and that we were saved. That was the good news, that we needed most of all and we already had it. I think of too, the story of Shadrack Meshach and Abendigo, in the Bible where you have these three men who love [00:17:00] God, but they won't bow down to the idol that King Neer wants them to bow down to. And as they stand before the king the king has already said, if you don't bow down to

this idol I've created, I'm throwing you into this fiery furnace, right? I'm throwing you into this fire, you're gonna die, and it's not gonna be fun. And they stand there and they look at the king and I paraphrase, but they say, you know our God is able to deliver us and he will deliver us. Now that is a prayer of faith, a believing prayer. They know that God is able, and God will deliver them. But then they go on and say, but even if he does not, King. We want you to know that we will not bow down. And I'm like looking at that going, do they believe or not believe? Is this, we believe, I'm gonna have a plan B just in case. What is that? And what I've come to learn as I studied, that is they fully believed in God's ability and willingness to deliver them, but their faith wasn't in an outcome. Their faith was in a person.

Shelby: Yeah [00:18:00]

Michelle: And that's the difference. And that's exactly what I experienced that day in the car. After talking to my dad my faith, my good news needed to be based not in an outcome but a person. And the reality was I already had the person. I already had the good news regardless of what happened And that creates an entirely different scenario

Shelby: Hmm Yeah I think that's such an important point for us to understand and I'll admit that for most of my childhood and into my early college years I didn't understand that. And so the fact that my prayers went unanswered made me question a lot of things about my own faith about the goodness of God. But exactly what you just taught right there that it's a faith in a person and not an outcome. Everything changed about my prayer life. About just recognizing and living in the faithfulness of God and so I hope that that's been a light bulb moment for somebody listening here today. So maybe there's some of our people listening who aren't going through an in the [00:19:00] trenches season in their own life right now, but maybe there's someone around them whose faith is failing. Maybe they're asking these big questions and they're really struggling with finding the answers to them. How can we offer help and not harm to somebody around us whose faith is failing?

Michelle: Yeah. Well a couple things to remember. I think our tendency when somebody that we love is struggling with their faith we almost feel like our own faith is threatened as a result of that, If that makes sense. We see them questioning and we all of a sudden feel a need to defend what we believe because we have this kind of seed of insecurity ourself. Like, what if you know I have to hurry up and defend this. I have to explain it, I have to get them to see the light, all of that. But I think it's really important for us to remember that we're not called to defend the gospel as much as we're called to embody it. Jesus doesn't need us to defend his [00:20:00] reality, he stands on his own. And I'm

not saying that that apologetics isn't helpful, It is. That's not what I'm saying. But if we are defending the gospel to the neglect of our embodiment of the gospel, then we have lost the ground on which we have to stand. Our job, our calling, our mission is to be ambassadors of the good news, okay? Ambassadors to embody the reality of God's presence with us. That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And that means when somebody is struggling, sometimes the best thing we can do is just sit with them in it, and allow them to have a safe space to voice their question. To ask the hard questions. I know for a fact, and I've read the Bible for as long as I could breathe, so I knew scripture, I didn't need somebody coming and quoting more scripture at me. I knew scripture. I needed people that were strong enough in their own faith to allow me the process of wrestling with mine. That they weren't threatened by my questions. They weren't threatened by the fact that I was wrestling with some doubt, but they actually were so [00:21:00] comfortable, and confident. And that their love for me allowed them to create the space for me to give voice to that. The Holy Spirit was working in my heart and they could trust that the Holy Spirit was gonna lead me on that journey. I was pursuing truth, but one of the best things we can do is create that safe space. The other thing that's really important, and this is hard because when we feel insecure or threatened in some ways our empathy goes out the door, but we need to start with empathy. Often they're not asking the questions to get an answer They're looking for compassion and empathy. And one of the best things you can say to somebody who is struggling is to say, I am so sorry for your suffering. I see your suffering, It makes sense that you would be wrestling like you are. It makes sense that you'd be struggling with these questions. There's nothing wrong with you, you're just suffering and I am so sorry for your suffering.

Shelby: Yeah

Michelle: Starting with empathy being committed to embodying the gospel, not defending it and then [00:22:00] finally asking kind questions. So rather than coming in with all the answers, come in with kind questions like, what do you need most right now? How can I best love you? What would feel good right now? Would it feel good to have a good conversation about this, or would you rather just watch a funny movie and laugh? Or do you need space? I want to walk this out with you, I'm committed to you as long as it takes. There's no timeline. And those kind of kind questions. What do you need most right now? Are ways to literally embody the gospel and demonstrate empathy.

Shelby: Yeah. I love that advice. As someone who's been in a couple spots, like that was what I desired. And then I love at the very end when you said there's no timeline. You know, I was thinking of a specific person in my family who walked through a prolonged and difficult season, and I had a timeline in mind

for them. Of when I you know hoped that they would maybe return to a strong faith, and return to prayer, and to church, and to [00:23:00] being in the word. But God's timeline and their timeline was not my timeline. And so just walking with them for years, and years, and years was, I hope and encouragement to them, although I definitely had to bite my tongue. And I'm sure I did it imperfectly on many occasions, but I think it is so important to point out that the Holy Spirit is working, and that God has a timeline, and that we can trust that.

Michelle: You know at the beginning when you read my bio we talked about how I'm a reluctant expert of pain and trauma. And that comes from multiple ways. Sides. I have some childhood things, like cancer, you know I've had some significant medical trauma, but I'm also raising three kids that we foster adopted that have a history of severe abuse neglect. So trauma is something I've had to study, and learn and pay attention to. But one of the most important things about healing is that healing can't happen in an environment that lacks safety.

Shelby: Hmm

Michelle: And we're not just talking about physical safety, we're talking about spiritual, emotional safety too. So if you really want to help [00:24:00] someone heal, the best thing you can do is make them feel safe.

Shelby: That's so good.

Michelle: It's so critical and unfortunately many times as Christians we don't, we we come out with both barrels, and heavy handed, and try to convict, and confront, and that's not creating safety. One of the phrases that is often used in circles around trauma and healing is connect before you correct. That connection, that creating safety. There is no healing, no correction can be received without having first an environment of safety and relationship. And we need to become experts at that first before we ever start thinking about correction.

Shelby: Yeah, I love that. What sound advice for many of us. Well final question for you Michele. We ask this to every guest who comes on the podcast. At the Daily Grace Co, we always say that the gospel changes everything, and we would love to know what has the gospel changed for you.

Michelle: Everything. That's the easy answer. I you know I grew up in church, we talked about [00:25:00] that, but somewhere along the way I had turned Church faith into an equation that two plus two needs to equal four. If I do this

and I do this right, then God is on the hook to give me a good life. And I had confused what really it's about. That was religion. What the gospel has done, understand the gospel is to help me realize that the work was already done. I don't need to scramble, and try to be a good girl, and do everything right. And avoid doing things wrong. I don't need to assume that just because I'm dealing with something painful, that God is mad at me, or I've done something bad. That the reality of the gospel is that while I was still a mess, while I was still kind of wrapped up in myself, and beyond any ability to make myself good enough, Jesus said, I see her and I want her. And that right there, that good news that God chose me, saw me, loved me before I could do anything to love him in return. That has changed everything [00:26:00] about the way that I live.

Shelby: Amen, I love that reminder. Well Michele, thank you so much for being here today. Thank you for using your story to just reflect on the faithfulness of God, and to help others who are maybe struggling to do that. To point them towards Christ. We really appreciate you being here today.

Michelle: Oh such a gift Shelby, I've enjoyed every moment.

Shelby: Likewise, and thank you to our listeners for joining us today on the Daily Grace Podcast. We'll be sure to link Michele's book *A Faith that will Not Fail*, as well as all the ways that you can connect with her in the show notes. And don't forget to subscribe to our weekly newsletter which we'll also have a link in the show notes. Until next time you can come join us over on Instagram at Daily Grace Podcast. We'll see you