

## Pray More Healing Retreat - Transcript

### **Standing with Suffering: The Power of Normalcy**

**Ashley Stevens**

Hi. My name is Ashley Stevens from Mountains Unmoved, and today I'm excited to talk to you about how one of the best ways to stand with the suffering is to simply be normal. And I know that sounds elementary, but suffering is often a shock to our system, sometimes it's a shock to our identity. And, from my experience, I've found that one of the things I appreciated the most when I was walking through a hard season is being treated like I had before the suffering. So I'm excited to share more, but before I begin let's open in prayer.

*In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. God, I thank You for relationships, and I thank You for great friends, for family members that love us, for fun coworkers. And today I lift up anyone walking through a hard season, and I just pray that my words and my experiences would encourage anyone listening just the power in showing up and being normal. I ask this in Your name. Amen. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

I grew up in a family that loves to watch football. I was born right outside Philadelphia, and on Sundays we would always watch the Eagles. My mom loved the Dallas Cowboys, and my brother loved the Dolphins, Miami Dolphins, and I have fond memories of growing up and watching football with my family, cheering on our teams. Every year the Super Bowl was an event, and we had a big poster scorecard, where we would guess the scores at the end of each quarter and the game, and hand out prizes to whoever guessed right. But when my brother and I started college, our viewing day shifted from Sunday NFL games to Saturday College Football games. And my brother went to Clemson University, and I went to the University of Nebraska.

And I remember my first time going to the Huskers stadium and watching a game in person was thrilling. It was thrilling just to get the energy of the crowd, and to see the players up close. And I remember the first game I went to with my now husband was the Spring game, and it was when we were RAs together in the same building. And it was over our Spring Break, so not too many students were there, but as I met him outside our dorm, I saw he was decked out in Huskers gear. He was wearing a full on red suit, with red pants and a red blazer. He has Huskers suspenders and a big yellow corncob hat. And that day, when we went to the game together, it was an experience. He is a die-hard Huskers fan. He was raised in Lincoln, and he watched Huskers games with his family growing up. And he cheered on his team, that was honestly just scrimmaging each other, with

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everything he had. He lost his voice cheering for good plays, he stood on the bleacher and jumped. He was all in.

So when we found out that my team, the Huskers, was playing my brother's team, the Clemson Tigers, in a ballgame in 2009, we knew we had to go. It was shortly after we got engaged that that ballgame was announced, and for Christmas that year we got tickets with my parents and my brother and Brad to go down to the Gator Bowl. But instead of being able to go to the game that year, we watched it from my hospital room. And instead, on the Gator Bowl day, it was the same group - it was my parents, my brother, and Brad, but we watched it on the small television in my hospital room. But that day, Brad showed up decked out. That day, he showed up with the same red blazer, with the same corncob hat. And that day, he lost his voice cheering for his team in the same way that he had at the Spring game we went to together.

And it's a game I'll never forget, because it's the day that the Huskers beat the Clemson Tigers, who now, if you're not familiar, is the National Champions. But that day, he lost his voice, he jumped, he cheered them on just like he had before. And I had many other people support me in a similar way. I had friends come to visit that brought nail files and filed my nails and painted my nails, like we had in high school. I had a friend show up with a poster with a collage of pictures with some of our favorite memories from high school that felt normal.

My parents, who supported me from hospital to hospital and to therapy, once I was approved to leave my hospital room, they took me to movies, they took me to the mall to get new a wardrobe, since I was a different size, like I had with them growing up. And, from experience, when I was walking through a chapter when everything in my life felt so different, doing the things that I normally did reminded me that there was life outside of the suffering. That there was life outside of that hard season.

So whoever it is that you're thinking of today, whether it's a friend, coworker, family member, I want to challenge you to ask yourself this question: What did we do before? Before their suffering? And do those things. Maybe for you it's a friend that used to go out for coffee a lot, maybe it's a daughter or son that you used to go on walks with, or maybe it's a parent that you used to watch football games with. But doing the things that you did before is such a breath of fresh air when you're walking through a hard season.

I think another way to be normal is to remember that it's the same person. That their suffering or their hardship does not define them. And I know this is hard - I've visited friends in the past in the hospital and they were similarly covered with tubes. One was in a coma and unable to speak. And it's hard, it's hard to see the

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same fun-loving friend that you knew before. But showing up and treating them as the same daughter of God that they were before, showing up and seeing that person that you clicked with, or that person that you loved just like you had before is such a beautiful gift.

Brad, when he showed up at the hospital on the day of the accident, he was told that they didn't know if I would make it. He was told I had a serious head trauma, that I was fighting for my life, if my brain pressure spiked above a certain point I would be brain dead. He was told, if I did recover, they didn't know how much of me he would get back, and if I would ever be able to walk again or talk again. And that day, when he walked into the room, I was covered with bruises and blood. My engagement ring was removed. He said later I was unrecognizable.

And in that moment, he had a choice. He could either look at me and say "This is not the same girl." He could check out, he could understandably walk away. Or he could show up, he could show up and see his fiancé, he could show up and see the girl he loved, the girl that he had asked to marry him just a few weeks before. And that day, the doctor made a joke about giving me a cocktail of drugs to try to control my pain level, and Brad returned, very true-to-form, saying that he could use a cocktail himself.

And in that moment, he swears that I rolled my eyes at his corny joke. And whether that's true or not - I mean, I was highly medically sedated - whether it's true or not doesn't matter. What matters is that in that eye roll, he saw that I was still the sassy girl who clearly needs to take rolling my eyes to prayer, but I was still the sassy girl that he loved. He saw in that shell of suffering that I was still his fiancé. And that's another question I would pose to you today. What are the things that drew you to that person before? What are the things that you loved about them before the suffering that they're walking through right now? Being treated with normalcy, being treated as the person that you were before when everything else feels so different is a gift.

Ann Voskamp has a quote I love that says "You are where you are to help others where they are." And I don't know where you're at today, I don't know where that person that you're thinking of is at today, but I do know that God has you exactly where you're supposed to be. I do know that the relationships He called you today, He called you there for a reason. And so I want to leave you just with this parting note, this encouragement that that person is not defined by their suffering. That person is not defined by the hardship that they're walking through. And don't be afraid, just show up and do the things you did before. Don't be afraid to show up and be normal to that person.

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Let's close in prayer. *In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. God, I thank You for the gift of normalcy, and I thank You for all that being treated like the friend that we are or the spouse that we are before the suffering speaks life into us. And I just pray for anyone listening today that they would go out and find that person, do the things they did before, and love them and laugh with them like they had before. I ask this in Your name. Amen. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*