



# God Hears Her Podcast

## Episode 107 – Accepting the Diagnosis

### Elisa Morgan & Eryn Eddy with Ronda Barney

[Music]

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[Music]

**Voice:** You're listening to *God Hears Her*, a podcast for women where we explore the stunning truth that God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His. Find out how these realities free you today on *God Hears Her*.

**Elisa:** Welcome to *God Hears Her*. I'm Elisa Morgan.

**Eryn:** And I'm Eryn Eddy. Has there been a time in your life where you had unexplainable pain? Have you faced an unknown diagnosis, or seasons of illness?

**Elisa:** Well, today we're talking with Ronda Barney. Years ago, she had just given birth to her first child when she was diagnosed with a potentially fatal illness. Ronda wants to share the insights and truths that she's learned in the trenches of sickness and grief. This passion has led her to start the online community "A Dose of Hope," and write her book, *Dear Susan*, and create the beautiful life blueprint, and start the podcast *Awaken to Hope*. Her heart's desire is to walk with you through your suffering, to offer a safe place to process the pain, and help you find nuggets of hope that will give you the courage and strength to fully live.

**Eryn:** We can't wait to learn more about Ronda with you on this episode of *God Hears Her*.



**Ronda:** So, I am one of those PKs that lived in a lot of different places in the country.

**Elisa:** Oh, a pastor's kid.

**Ronda:** Yes, I am. I am. So, we landed in the Dallas area when I was going into the fifth grade, and Dallas has just become home. It was where a lot of those memories of middle school and high school happened. And then right after I graduated from high school, I worked a few years and then I went to Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. And so, I lived in Lynchburg for four years, and from there I ended up in the D.C. area working as a dietician at a few hospitals in the D.C. area. And loved doing nutrition and working with people that were healing. And I was always, you know, the caretaker, and I was the medical professional, and I was the one watching people who were going through medical trauma but had never experienced it myself. So, I was just always the caretaker trying to help, you know, them improve their life. And then I, after a few years, decided to back and get my... my master's in social work and so that I could become a therapist. And I had just seen where, you know, was able to offer physical comfort for people with nutrition, but I also was seeing the connection with the body, you know, to the spirit, and the mind, and the soul. So, I went back and got my degree, and then I worked as an outpatient therapist and nutritionist for about fourteen years in the northern Virginia area.

**Eryn:** Fourteen years. Wow.

**Ronda:** And... Yeah.

**Eryn:** What was it about your childhood that brought you to wanting to pursue learning how to do that? And be present for people?

**Ronda:** I love that question. I think growing up as a pastor's daughter, it was just very much modeled. We were there for other people. You know, they were there for other people. And we had... It was back in the olden days, too, where... olden days, I say, but the years where, you know, missionaries would come in and they would stay in our home, and I'd give my bedroom, that kind of thing. And I would actually hear stories from all over the world around our little dinner table about how they were pouring into people and the needs, the medical needs, the emotional needs, the spiritual needs, of people. So, I feel like from a... a little girl and... you know, that was growing up in that environment I just saw that there were needs everywhere. And then I have had physical needs that I saw that were with nutrition made a huge difference. And so, I began to make those connections that I can see how this has impacted me, and I really want to share these answers with other people.



**Elisa:** And how did you end up in Dallas, then, after all that time in Virginia? Back in Dallas, I should say.

**Ronda:** Well, what happened was I'd gone through my medical trauma, and I know we'll probably get to that in a few minutes, in the northern Virginia area. And then I was doing so much better, and my mom and dad were entering a phase of life where my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, and right around that time we also realized she had Alzheimer's. And then she was my dad's caregiver...

**Elisa:** Oh my.

**Ronda:** ... who had benign brain tumor that had really taken a lot of his mobility, and he had congestive heart failure, and... so, I moved to the Dallas area to be a caregiver for them, and yeah, I've been here eight years. And my dad passed away in 2016, and then unbeknownst to me, my brother, who was only three years older than myself, was diagnosed with a glioblastoma stage four brain cancer. And from diagnosis to death was four months.

**Elisa:** Oh, my goodness.

**Ronda:** And that happened in 2019. And then my mom, she does have Alzheimer's, and she still lives with me and I'm still her caregiver. So...

**Elisa:** Mercy. You have been through so much, and that's the backdrop. You have your own...

**Ronda:** Yeah.

**Elisa:** ... medical challenge. The way you...

**Eryn:** Trauma. Medical trauma.

**Elisa:** Medical trauma.

**Ronda:** My own medical trauma, yeah.

**Elisa:** Oh, thank you for telling us all of that. Wow.

**Eryn:** So, fourteen years in that space of dietician and therapist. And then what happens after the fourteen years?



**Ronda:** Yeah. So, actually what's interesting is we didn't, throughout that fourteen years was my own medical trauma.

**Eryn:** Okay.

**Ronda:** I started working in 2000 as an outpatient therapist, and it was 2008 when I became sick. And, you know, I'd had some other medical issues before then. To kind of jump back a little bit, 2001 my son was born and right after his birth I was given a diagnosis that, if it wasn't treated, would potentially be fatal. And I was thirty-four when he was born. And so, you know, when you wait til you're thirty-four to have your first child, or, you know, you think, *will I ever be a mom?* And, you know, faced with your own mortality, I was just laying on my bedroom floor just bawling and begging God for healing and so that I could raise this little boy. And I did go through treatment and the treatments worked and went into remission. I have a daughter, all the things, you know. And we were just, yay, you know, I made it through this... this time. And the way that I thought was, *that's my one check. I've checked that off...*

**Elisa:** Oh yeah, now I have a story, yeah.

**Ronda:** ... *Right? I made it through the... Yes.*

**Eryn:** My one big trauma that I've overcome and so life will be smooth after this...

**Ronda:** Yes.

**Eryn:** ... and I'm promised a smooth journey after this hardship and pain.

**Ronda:** Right. Almost I deserved it. Like I somehow, like, *okay, I've done my time.*

**Eryn:** Right.

**Ronda:** You know? And check. And... but what happened was the treatment, unfortunately, my immune system never completely recovered. And so, little by little I got sicker and sicker. And when we thought, *oh, she's no longer dealing with this diagnosis anymore*, other things started to happen. I... Autoimmune, and all these different things started to appear. And I just literally got sicker and sicker. And then finally by 2008, my treatment was in 2005, by 2008 I was literally bedridden. I was literally a... an infectious disease nightmare. I had bone infection, I had all kinds of viral loads that were just through the roof, I had Lyme disease with several co-infections. I lived in the northeast, so that was not an uncommon thing to...



**Elisa:** Wow.

**Ronda:** ... you know, to be diagnosed with. And, yeah, seven surgeries in seven years. It was truly a really difficult time. A lot of pain, chronic pain, a lot of chronic insomnia where I would go days and days without being able to sleep. My body was just in such a s- fight flight mode that I literally couldn't relax enough. That even though I was exhausted, my body wouldn't go into a sleep. And so, you know, and that affects your mental health over time as well. You know, you... when you're not sleeping and when you're... you're in pain and you're not feeling well, you just... it changes so much. And the things that I've done since then have been sort of a reflection that's... I think those are the d- some dark, dark days where I draw from. And when I'm talking with other women or trying to, again, get my story out there or help other women, it's... it's those days that I remember. There was so much that I learned in those dark times.

**Eryn:** Wow.

**Elisa:** It's been over a decade or... more, since that particularly horrible, horrific trauma. Are you okay today?

**Ronda:** Yeah. I do have some residual things that I just have to take really good care of myself, and I've learned more and more of what my body needs and the things that... you know, with all the surgeries and all the things that I went through, the things that I need to do in order to keep myself healthy. But yes, I'm doing really, really well.

**Elisa:** I'm glad to hear.

**Ronda:** There was a lot of beauty in it, as well. Some of... I call them my posse, but there was... just girlfriends that I had known for years, and they had watched my... gradual decline into this place where I, you know, was unable to do a whole lot. And, you guys, they really just stepped up...

**Elisa:** Wow.

**Ronda:** ... and, there wasn't just one person who did it all, either. It was just this group of women, and they did what they were good at. And there were some women who literally were just good about providing a space for me to cry, and just being there, then not needing to fix it. But I can't even tell you what that meant to me, to have somebody that would just hold a space, a non-judgmental space, when I just couldn't anymore. And then there were women who... had kids my kids age, and would just stop by



and say, *hey, can I take the kids, we're going to the park. We're already going, can I take your kids?* Or somebody would just... you know, cook an extra casserole, or whatever, and just drop it over. And there were different seasons that required different things, and God was so gracious in that I always feel like the right people showed up at the right times in the right spaces. And with that, me learning to also ask for help and for what I needed was important.

**Eryn:** And that's this beauty of community and being surrounded by people that you let in on what you guys are going through. That's so beautiful. And what a sweet gift that God gave you in that time. There's probably a few women at least that are listening, and that may experience some level of, whether it's a chronic illness or maybe there's something that's causing them to not feel like they are able to be the mom or the wife that they thought that they were going to be for whatever circumstances. And I would imagine that that was what you experienced. *Was like, I thought motherhood was going to be like this for me, and I thought being a wife was going to be like this for me, and it's not.* And grieving that reality. That's so real. What would you say that you've learned from that, and about your identity and a... as... just being a woman that's had to process that.

**Ronda:** You know, I think we all have a storyline in our head, right? How we want our life... or I did, to play out. And for me, the way that I had sort of ensured, is if I check all these boxes and if I do these things this certain way, I can guarantee... this, I can guarantee that, I can guarantee health. I mean, as a nutritionist, one of the reasons I went into the nutrition field was to guarantee that I knew how to take care of my body. And mental health field, you know, being able to understand how to be mentally and spiritually healthy. You know, I... not only did I want to give that gift to other people, but in some ways, it also gave me a little bit of assurance that I had some insight, and that I had resources. And so, like you beautifully just asked, to not see those things happen, but instead to see loss, to see a breaking, just unwinding, things I couldn't control, no matter what I knew. I couldn't make it better for myself.

**Elisa:** Yeah. There're small griefs over and over, yes.

**Ronda:** Yes. And in my book, I talk about grief a lot. And one of the... examples that I gave was actually, I was at the beach, and I had been at this beach several times and it was a gorgeous beach, one of my most favorite beaches in the world. And it has sustained a... a horrible hurricane, and so, when we returned the next year, I, finally, was able to take my kids with us to this beach. And when we returned it was not the same beach that I had experienced all those years, and that I wanted my kids to experience with me. And I remember sitting on that beach and just bawling because I felt loss. And all the sudden, you all, I mean just bubbling up inside of me was so much grief. It was almost like this word-picture, this visual that God gave me of... the beach that I had had of health all my life had been so... healthy. That is



what I had dreamed of giving to my kids. All the ski trips, all the... all the things, you know, the perfect Easter egg hunts, all of the things. And... when I got sick, a lot of that was revised, and changed. And so, not that we didn't have beautiful moments, but it was changed. And so, as I sat on that beach I began to just grieve and cry, that the beach that my kids were seeing was much different than what I had in my mind, and that what I had witnessed and experienced. And they were seeing beach that had stench, and seaweed, and things that had come up from the ocean, you know, from the storm, and half of the beach was gone. And I remember just sitting there crying, and I started writing and I realized that it was sort of like that picture of my life, but as I look back on it, there are treasures that had washed ashore that weren't there before. And it was about me finding the treasures on a beach that didn't look like what I thought it should look like. And I think as far as the grief, we do walk through this life with grief, and with pain, but there are still joys. There are still little treasures that can be found in the midst of it. And it's about finding them. It's about going on that treasure hunt, and... that was a huge lesson for me. It's not all or nothing. And it's so easy for our brains to go to this all or nothing and it's not. And then you just asked about identity, and I think I... I did find a lot of identity in this ideal mother, or this ideal wife, or this ideal clinician, whatever, that I had in my head. And, you know, when you're stripped down with grief to nothing and you can find this place of just being, that's when you're loved. That's when you know who you are, and that's when you know you're seen and loved. It's not all those things that we sometimes present to the world, it's just us. That was one of those unexpected gifts, maybe, [Background Music] that came through, that I could just be Ronda. And all these ideals, no, they aren't there. But I was still Ronda. And I found her, and I saw her, and I knew God saw her. And forgiving her for not being all of those things, and letting her just be, and giving myself that grace to let go of things I couldn't control, and letting God see me, and love me. You know, I couldn't sing in the choir, I couldn't do all the Bible studies, I couldn't do all the things. But God was nearer than ever.

[Music]

**Elisa:** When we come back, Ronda will share how surrendering our expectations can bring us closer to God, especially in the midst of grief. That's coming up right after the break.

[Music]

**Eryn:** Hey, y'all. *God Hears Her* recently celebrated it's hundredth episode. If you haven't checked out the episode, you can find it on our website or anywhere you listen to your podcasts. As part of the celebration, we also want to offer you a special, limited-edition *God Hears Her* tote, filled with things that you'll love, including the three devotional books, *God Hears Her*, *God Sees Her*, and *God Loves Her*, with pens, and stickers, and a notebook, and other great goodies, too. You'll want to get your hands on this



ASAP. Check it out on our *God Hears Her* website. That's [godhearsher.org/shop](http://godhearsher.org/shop). Again, that's [godhearsher.org/shop](http://godhearsher.org/shop). Now back to the show.

**Elisa:** What you're talking about is the resilience of life that remains, and it's a life that's rooted in God's deep love for us.

**Ronda:** Yes.

**Elisa:** There are other byproducts. I mean, your whole work, what you do right now, what God's led you to create that you wouldn't be doing if your life had been on that other beach, if you will. Can you take us into your work now? What it is, what it's about.

**Ronda:** Yeah. One day I... was standing in a Christian bookstore and I overheard this conversation. And I was trying not to be nosy, but this woman was just really upset. And I could just hear the tone in her voice, and she is talking to the clerk, she's, you know, customer talking to the clerk and she's asking for a book that she can give her best friend because her best friend is going into the hospital for a bone marrow transplant and she's going to be in isolation for thirty days. And so, she said, *I can't go sit with her, I can't go be with her, and I want to send something with her.* And the clerk, you know, was, *A Bible?* Like, just couldn't... could not think of anything that would speak to the loss and the fear that this woman might be facing. And as I stood there, I thought, *okay, I've been through my own healing journey, I'm a therapist, I, you know, and I honestly, you know, there's some devotionals but I couldn't think of something that would literally speak to this woman.* And the clerk said, you know, *I can't think of anything,* and I... I just saw this woman's face just drop. And so, she left the store with... emptyhanded. And I made my purchase and left. And as I was driving home, I... I was really upset. And I just said out loud in the car, *there should be a book, there just should be a book.* And I felt like God said, *well, then why don't you write it?* And I, just, felt like that was out of my wheelhouse, and so, I... I said, *well, I don't know about that, there's somebody else that could do that.* And so, for a year I couldn't get that question out of my mind, and so, that was the summer 2017, and so, the summer of 2018 I thought, *I have to do this, whether it's in my wheelhouse or not, like, this is something that I strongly feel that I'm supposed to do.* And so, I just... I journal every morning, it's part of my prayer time, and so, I thought, *I know how to journal.* And so, I picked up my journal and I just started writing to this woman, like, if I had gotten her phone number, the woman that went to the bone marrow transplant, what would I have said to her. And so, I guess being a therapist, what I thought of was what she was feeling, what her emotions were, and so, I began to pen letters. And each letter deals with a different emotion that this woman might be feeling. And my goal was thirty letters because she was going to be in the transplant for thirty days, and I ended up writing more than that. There's thirty-nine letters, and it was very cathartic. I have to tell you, each





letter was tearstained. It's also just diving in the deep of my own emotions, and as I was thinking about her, and the name Susan just kept coming to me. And so, I started writing these letters to Susan...

**Elisa:** Whoever she was, yeah.

[inaudible]

**Ronda:** ... and it became... right, yeah. And it just became my *Dear Susan* journal. And my family would laugh because I would be in the back yard just writing to Susan. And so, by the end of the summer I had completed my task and I put the journal away and said, *okay, God, the book is there, but I, you know, and just asking for next steps. And... it was two years later that that became obvious what the next steps were. It was right as the world was shutting down from COVID, and you know, we were all staying in our homes, and I was supposed to have coffee with a friend and we were texting to... to basically cancel our coffee date, and then she said to me something interesting, she said, or really sad, she said, I am staying in quarantine because one of my dear friends from college was just sent home with a stage four terminal diagnosis, and she's in hospice. So, I would like to be able to go and relieve her husband, and them not have concerns. And I remember saying to her, you have no idea the gift you are giving her. And I said, I would love to pray for her. I wish there was more that I could do right now, or what can I do, but I would love to pray. And she said, that would be fantastic. Her name is Susan.*

**Eryn:** Wow.

**Elisa:** Goodness. Goodness.

**Ronda:** Yeah. I seriously remember where I was standing when I read that, and I literally almost dropped my phone. And I just said to her, *you're going to think I'm crazy, cause she didn't even know about the journal, and I said, I have this journal full of letters to a Susan. And I said to her, I've never been, you know, sent home on hospice, I would not even pretend to know what your friend is experiencing and the level of grief that she might be going through. But if for any reason she wants to read... it was really sheepish, like, if she really wants to read the letters... you know, like, I'd be happy to share them. And so, my friend Autumn was like, absolutely, let me ask her. Within days she introduced us over email and Susan is saying, Ronda, I need the letters. I want to read them. So, one by one I would take them out of my journal and edit them, you know, my chicken scratch, the best I could, and I would send them to her. And she would immediately email back and say things like, wow, that's exactly how I feel, thank you for giving me language. Thank you for, yes, for explaining your story. And then she would go into her story and tell me more about what that had been like for her to experience those emotions. And she said, you*



know, there were days that she couldn't necessarily put it into words, and so she could just hand the book to someone and say, *read the letter*.

**Eryn:** Wow.

**Elisa:** What a gift.

**Ronda:** And it would... or, not the book, but at the time the email, yes. And just, this is what it is. And so, it would open up conversations that otherwise may never have occurred. And by the end of the summer, Susan had been an ICU nurse, and she'd seen a lot of death and dying, and so she emailed me, and she said, *Ronda, this has been an amazing summer*, and incidentally, Autumn was on each, CC'd on everything, so Autumn was reading these letters as well. And so, as Autumn would go sit with her, it brought up conversations that the two of them could have to process some of her grief and her emotions, and so, by the end of the summer, yeah, Susan just said to me, *I've seen a lot of death and dying as an ICU nurse, and nothing prepared me for my journey. And you have to publish this*. And so, I remember sitting and reading that email and thinking, *okay, alright, I'll do it*. And so, I returned the email and said, *it's a deal if you'll write my foreword*. And so, she began writing the foreword and, in fact, the book has been published, and the first words that you read are Susan's words. And she then passed in November of 2020. So, I had this summer with her before... yeah, her last weeks, over email. That has launched me into working with women that are dealing with any kind of illness, that... when their lives, when they can't show up in the world as a wife, a mother, in their career, or the way that they used to show up, there's an emotional experience that they're having that, often, they don't know how to put language to. They don't know how to verbalize. And yet, like you all said earlier, they need the community. They need to know that they're not alone. They need to know that other people have experienced this. And language is so important to be able to explain and to connect, that's one of the avenues for our hearts to connect, correct? And so, yeah, that's now my mission, is to provide a space for... for that language, and to provide a space for women to connect in their pain. And we also know that connection brings comfort, which helps to process the emotions. And that also helps the body. It takes stress and a burden off of the body, and then a body has a better chance of healing.

**Eryn:** Wow. What a gift that is. I'm, like, speechless to hear just how everything was orchestrated. Especially from your journey of coming out of such darkness, and uncertainty, and pain, and to then sit in these letters with a woman that's in pain and... experiencing uncertainty, and you... and you don't know who she is. And to learn... and then to be in relationship with a woman that is named the... that's just so divine.



**Ronda:** Yes! Right.

**Eryn:** That's just so beautiful.

**Elisa:** And maybe all of us don't have the opportunity for such a radical demonstration of God's guidance and presence. But you know, even in sharing this story, we can go, *well, I don't get that, God didn't give me that*, or we can go, *but God can give that. And can I risk living in relationship with a God who can do that and draw strength from Ronda as she shares her Dear Susan letters. You know, can I... can I believe that God does love me that much.*

**Ronda:** Absolutely. Absolutely. And, you know, I think for me, it allowed me to say, *God sees me, He sees all of those letters I wrote, He sees my pain. And He sees Susan, and He sees her pain.* And it's just this loving Father that we have that brought two sisters together to affirm each other's journey, and to, I wal- I helped walk her home. I, obviously, wasn't the only one, but, you know, there were things that I could do help walk her home. And then she also gave me the gift of direction, of purpose, of affirmation of what I had experienced emotionally. It's incredible. What I took out of this really was, He sees me, and He sees her. He sees all of us and He knows how to connect us.

**Eryn:** I would love for you to speak to the woman that is listening that has been... maybe she's received some news, whether it's... an illness, a chronic illness, a fatal illness... What words of comfort, or maybe belief, or encouragement would you speak over her?

**Ronda:** You know, there's so much I could say, but what comes to mind in this moment is, *there is so much unknown for you right now. There's so many answers that you want, and of course you want them. And there's so much that you wish you knew and that you could predict. And the way that I was able to get from where I am now, with a little more predictability in my life, from those moments, was to take it one moment at a time. And to let go of the unknown future, but to literally live right now, in this second. And my question for you would be, can you do this moment? Can you do this very second? You don't have to do the chemo down the road right now. You don't have to do the surgery that's scheduled for a few weeks out right now. Can you do this moment? And what is this moment about? Live in this moment and know that God is holding all of those moments that you're going to have to walk through that are uncertainty right now, God is holding them so lovingly. [Background Music] And His love is with you now, and it has already prepared the way. And He will be with you in those moments of uncertainty, that you have no idea how you're going to get through. You don't have to get through them yet. Just can you do this very second, and just breathe. Because in the second is where we find grace, and we find His*



*presence, and we find love, and that's where that comfort that you just long for, that's where you're going to find it, is literally in the breath at this moment.*

[Music.]

**Eryn:** Thank you so much for that advice, Ronda.

**Elisa:** Well, before we close out today's episode of *God Hears Her*, we want to remind you that the show notes are available in the podcast description. You can also find a link to learn more about Ronda Barney and her book, *Dear Susan*. Plus, you can connect with Eryn and me on social. You can find these links when you visit our website at [godhearsher.org](http://godhearsher.org). That's [godhearsher.org](http://godhearsher.org).

**Eryn:** Thank you for joining us. And don't forget, God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His.

[Music.]

**Elisa:** Today's episode was engineered by Anne Stevens and produced by Jade Gustman, Mary Jo Clark, and Daniel Ryan Day. We also want to recognize Brian and Barry for all their help and support. Thanks everyone.

[Music.]

**Eryn:** *God Hears Her* is a production of Our Daily Bread Ministries.