



God Hears Her Podcast

Episode 111 – Christmas Expectations

Elisa Morgan & Eryn Eddy with Ruth Chou Simons

[Music]

Ruth: The Gospel changes everything, and that the redemptive story of Jesus Christ will actually impact our lives every day and, actually, in the most mundane of our lives.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ruth: So, it was natural for us to prepare Him room at Christmas, but ultimately to think about what His name means, Emmanuel. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel. Emmanuel means *God With Us*, and that we forget somehow that it's not that He's just with us for the 25 days...

Elisa: Yeah, right.

Ruth: ... in the month of December, leading up to Christmas. That the point is that we are celebrating in this time of year, so that we might be changed December 26.

[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. During the Christmas season, do you feel excited and joyful? Or do you find yourself overwhelmed by making everything perfect, and wanting to have the best holiday you possibly can?

Elisa: Well, today we have an honest conversation with Ruth Chou Simons about how we can get caught up in perfecting Christmas and forget about the peace and the joy provided by the real reason behind the season.



Eryn: Ruth Chou Simons is a Wall Street Journal best-selling and award-winning author of several books. Through her online shop at gracelaced.com and her social media community, Ruth shares her journey of God's grace intersecting daily life with word and art. Ruth and her husband, Troy, are grateful parents to six boys.

Elisa: Ah. Let's get to know Ruth in this conversation on *God Hears Her*.

Eryn: Would you share a little bit about, like, where are you from, where did you grow up...

Ruth: Sure.

Eryn: ... Just take us back to little Ruth. Yeah.

Elisa: The family. [inaudible]

Ruth: Yeah. Absolutely. I was born in Taipei, Taiwan, and came to the United States when I was about four years old. And I... I was really raised in the cross section between two cultures: my Western culture and my Asian-American upbringing, both of which really give me a little bit of a crisis of trying to understand where it is that I find worth, where it is that I find belonging, how do I know that I have purpose here when I either don't look like I belong, or feel like I belong, or feel like I'm doing the right things to belong. And so, that's been the journey that God's put me on, and how His grace intersected my life. I am the founder of gracelaced.com, and so it's my namesake as well, but in my everyday life I'm a mama to six boys, and... my husband, Troy, and I live in western Colorado, where I'm surrounded by a lot of nature. So, that's constantly inspiring and humbling me in my work as an artist and an author. So, that's a little bit about me.

Elisa: I can feel... the twisting of you, you know, as a very young child... You know, if anybody doesn't know the history of Taiwan and China and etcetera, even that, even your roots there in... in a place that's kind of like a sanctuary, if... if you will. And then adding into it a western culture. I'm intrigued by how these forces and cultures have shaped you.

Ruth: Well, gratefully I, finally after forty-some years, had an opportunity to tell that story. Because when I shared it in *When Strivings Cease* that wasn't my first book, but... it was kind of the right time to finally say okay, I want my readers to understand, and the people who see the pretty pictures online, or access the beautiful artwork that they can purchase, that they know that the journey hasn't been one of just *Wow, God's grace is beautiful, let's just excitedly make products about it*, but that God's grace has changed me



and it... it's brought me from a place of striving where I constantly try to make my life good enough, or worthy enough, or suitable for belonging enough, and to allow God's grace to be the measure by which I... really feel that, and find that Jesus is enough when I'm not. And so, that's really my passion. And ultimately, through every book that I write or anything... any work that I create that I'm always... hoping that I can be a conduit of grace for women, where I just say *hey sister*, for those who are not necessarily feeling like they belong, or they know how to find this rest in their lives, that they're constantly in this hustle of how do I... find my purpose, and how do I make myself enough in this world, that there's this respite and rest for us to say, and know, that the Gospel was meant for us to lay down our strivings and to receive the gift from God instead.

Eryn: Was there a moment, Ruth, in your life that brought all of that forward, for you to surrender?

Elisa: Yes.

Eryn: Or was it a slow surrender?

Ruth: You know, I... I certainly don't think that there's any giant, amazing, you know, banner across the sky. It was a slow burn for sure, in my life. But I will say in college, after having gone through a lot of different opportunities to hear the Word and hear the Gospel, I think in college I finally had a moment where I really recognized what Jesus was saying on the Sermon on the Mount. Like, when I finally started seeing Matthew 5 in a new way, and saying *okay, when Jesus says that even the slightest bit of not adhering to the law, you're already condemned*, well, rather than stopping there and going, *oh, no, then I'm in, really in trouble...*

Elisa: Yeah.

Ruth: ... to start going, *well, then, why is He saying that in the light of hopefulness*. Because His point was, you can stop trying to jump so high, stop trying to make your life so perfect. It'll never be perfect, you will never be enough just striving on your own, just trying to perfect yourself, and trying to do all the right things. I think that moment for me to recognize that when Jesus says, "You've heard it said not to lust, but if you even look wrongly," like that's that part of the Sermon on the Mount that really causes us to stop, and possibly make us feel... discouraged? But it's meant to encourage us. It's meant to encourage the listener, for, ultimately for the pharisees, for anyone who's listening to go, *I feel discouraged that I can't be perfect, but I'm encouraged that there's hope in Christ. That He says He's the way, and the truth, and the life. That I don't have to be the way myself, I don't have to be the perfect myself*. And so, I think in college was that time where all that tension was really pent up and bound up in this idea of, like, *I have to keep*



the perfect course in order to do something meaningful in my life. But I think part of the story that I always want to tell is that God does really amazing things in our lives when we're finally willing to surrender our perfect plan for what to do with what He's given us. When we start surrendering this idea that it has to go my way, it has to be under these certain kind of circumstances, then God really says, *okay, now you're ready to see what I have in store for you.* And so, that's part of my story, and I don't think that moment in college was some big lightning-bolt moment, it wasn't a night I'll always remember, but it was just the clarity that was starting to come moment by moment as I was hearing the preaching of God's Word. And then ultimately, when I finally spent some time actually reading Romans, not just picking out verses here and there, but really understanding the Epistles, and especially the testimony of the Apostle Paul, recognizing, *oh, here's a person who thought he was perfect, too, and God had to get ahold of him and transform his life through his surrender of all that he thought he was offering that was so much better than anyone else.* And so, that's a bit of my story.

Elisa: It's so unexpected, I think, Ruth, is the word that's coming into my mind, how God's realities crash into our understanding... sometimes it's a dramatic moment, sometimes it's more of a slow burn...

Ruth: Absolutely.

Elisa: ... the way you're describing it. But these paradigm shifts, these worldview changes, that come from something as simple as, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for their's..."

Ruth: Right.

Elisa: ... "is the kingdom of God." It's so unexpected, it's so unintuitive. You know, it's... it's cray, cray, cray, to us, but what you're really saying is when God's reality of the upside-down values of the kingdom, so to speak, become your reality, you know, everything shifts. Everything shifts. And it's, like, realizing we have needs is the first step to Him meeting them, right?

Ruth: Absolutely.

Elisa: You know, so... thank you. That is just beautifully rich. I'm intrigued by where your passion for art and your ability to express these unexpected realities, if you will, through art, where did that come from? Tell us about how you view art, how it was born in you, what your favorite mediums are, etcetera.

Ruth: I can't remember a day that I wasn't artsy. You know, that I started drawing as soon as I could... write, and I remember being in elementary school, taking breaks from doing my worksheets, or taking



notes, and actually drawing my left hand that was sitting there on the desk. And so, it was kind of always a thing. I was always drawing. But, you know, I really grew up thinking, and it wasn't necessarily that somebody told me this, but just me observing the world around me, I somehow had a narrative in my mind that drawing and painting and artistic skills couldn't necessarily be used by God or for God, that it wasn't a special gifting that could be... of service. That was after I became a believer. But prior to that, it didn't even seem like a valid option for... in an overachieving world. So, I started off as a bio-chem major, because that seemed like the right thing to do. And so... so it wasn't that I always pursued art confidently as an artist, I just always knew that I had giftings there. And so, when I had a real crash of paradigms, and a collision in my soul of, like, what I thought was giving me life, and then what God was showing me was actually life, in that moment I laid down a lot of my expectations about going into science. And there's nothing wrong with going into science, I just didn't happen to really love it...

Eryn: Yeah.

Ruth: ... I was just doing it for the wrong reasons, and so, I laid it down and pursued a degree in art.

Eryn: That is a bold move! To decide, I'm going to put down this, what sounds like a promised career, to pursue an art degree.

Ruth: Well, just in all fairness, Eryn, I will say I wish I could say that I was doing that out of courage, and purpose, and tenacity, but honestly, God ultimately brought me to that point. But the initial laying down and picking up something different was actually more out of rebellion and out of burn out.

Elisa: Okay.

Ruth: So, I just will be really honest and say...

Eryn: I love it, I love the honesty. Yeah, that's good.

Ruth: ... you know, pea... please don't... please don't give me too much credit, it wasn't like I was having this glorious moment of, like, *I know my purpose*. No, I was really just burnt out, and really sick and tired of doing what wasn't giving me life. And so, while I was at college, I actually was doing my emphasis in print making. And so, I was creating little books long before I thought I was going to be published. I was doing a lot of lithographs, and wood carvings, and linoleum carvings, and so, I have some background there. But really, large format oils and acrylics was always where I was at. And so, what you see now publicly, and through gracelaced, are mostly watercolors. And the reason for that is because about nine



years ago or so, my littles were very little, and I was a part-time homeschooling mama, who juggled a school schedule as well as a at-home day schedule, it was a hybrid model, and I loved to paint. But if you know anything about oils and acrylics, acrylics dry a little bit faster, but oils don't dry fast at all, and both take up a lot of space and they can be messy. So, watercolor was something I could do quickly, that would dry quickly, and I could quickly put it away into a drawer and get ready for dinner. And so, I actually taught myself watercolor in the trenches of young, little motherhood, little children years, the early years of motherhood, the years where I thought *oh, I can't use my giftings, I'm so busy just picking up cheerios*. And so, that's how I pivoted and said, *you know what? Just during nap times, just in the little margins of my day, I'm going to paint a little bit*, with the medium that didn't come naturally to me, but I learned because it suited my season of life right then and there. Who knew all these years later that watercolor would become the medium in which I'd be able to serve the Lord by bringing lots of beautiful prints and lifestyle products to believer's lives, and to lives where they might just need to see the Scriptures and see the truths of God in a more beautiful way in their everyday life. And so, that's really how that journey came about.

Elisa: What a great principle of just... it, you said it wasn't your strength, it wasn't the spot where you were trained, you trained yourself because it allowed you to express your gifting in a season when other things didn't work. And I... I love how...

Ruth: Exactly.

Elisa: ... flexible you were. And that's risky even right there, so that's a great principle. Thanks.

Eryn: I think about Matthew 11:28, I'm going to paraphrase, but the verse starts with, you know, *are you burned out*, and then it ends with, *learn to live freely and lightly, learning to embrace the unforced rhythms of God's grace*. You started out with burn out, and now you are empowering women to learn how to receive God's grace and to live freely and lightly. I just think that that's... it's just beautiful. And I love your honesty. And it's just cool how God creates art even out of burn out and rebellion, and He has... literally, physically done that... through your journey.

Elisa: One of your most recent topics is a seasonal one on Christmas, and your immersion into the word *Emmanuel*. Talk to us about how this concept came to you and... and what your passion is for it in the Advent season and the season of...

Ruth: Yeah.



Elisa: ... expecting Jesus' birth.

Ruth: Well, I can tell through this conversation that you ladies appreciate a little honesty, so, we're just gonna...

Eryn: Yes, please. Yeah.

Ruth: We're just gonna... peel back the layers here. My most honest answer is that I'm not a terribly good Christmas celebrater. It actually... gives me... I mean, I feel like I have high blood pressure when I start walking into Target and I see all the décor. I mean, I love beauty. So, ladies, I love beauty. I want beauty in my life. I get excited at the idea, but I'm also a perfectionist and I'm also an ex... recovering striver. So, what happens in holiday seasons, is that it actually brings up and revs up in me the sense of I'm not doing it right, I'm going to miss out on the best, oh my goodness, what if my kids don't get all the best in the season, what if they have no traditions and no memories, what if because we work in retail even though it's online, this is the busiest season for our family, so we don't have these slow, methodical, beautiful lighting of the candle every single night, and are we ruining all beautiful moments in our home. So, this is an honest start for me to just say if we've got a friend here listening right now saying, *oh my goodness, that's me. I literally don't even know where to start, and sometimes I just give up.* I just want to say I'm with you. Just because I love beauty, just because I create a brand that allows for a lot of beautiful products to enter the world, does not mean it comes naturally to me. What comes naturally to me is to control, and freak out, and want... and want everything to be pretty...

Elisa: Yeah.

Ruth: ... and perfect, and to yell across my home, and yell at anyone who doesn't perfectly lay the pillows out the way I want them to...

Eryn: Oooo, yes.

Ruth: Let's just be really honest, like...

Eryn: So real.

Ruth: ... that's the struggle for me. Which means it's not always life-giving for me when all the messaging comes in that this is how you can have a perfect Christmas, this is what your children need, this is what it looks like to have a beautiful Advent season. And my struggle with it has always been the way it feels to a



consumer sometimes is it's all about Christmas, it's all about the celebration. We might say as believers Jesus is the reason for the season, but we're just trying to somehow, like, stuff Him in there. You know, because we've put so much emphasis...

Eryn: So true.

Ruth: ... we've put so much emphasis on the atmosphere, the ambiance, the making sure that these 25 days of December before Christmas are just magical. And I say those words not condemning this feeling of this whimsical, magical sense that we love. I'm not condemning that. I'm just simply saying, we make an idol out of that feeling and that expectation. And so, then, if you have a heart diagnosis prior to the Christmas... If you've lost a loved one, if you're going through a big, traumatic family struggle, if you're children are wayward, if you're going through any of these things, or you're having a hard financial year, then somehow all those circumstances now threaten to rob you of a perfect Christmas. Do you see how that can happen? And so, when I started thinking about what kind of offering would I want to bring to my audience if I were to create something for Christmas, I knew it had to reflect my heart. And my heart is always that the Gospel changes everything, and that the redemptive story of Jesus Christ will actually impact our lives every day, and, actually, in the most mundane of our lives.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ruth: So, it was natural for us to prepare Him room at Christmas, but ultimately to think about what His name means, Emmanuel. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel. Emmanuel means *God With Us*, and that we forget somehow that it's not that He's just with us for the 25 days...

Elisa: Yeah, right.

Ruth: ... in the month of December, leading up to Christmas. That the point is that we are celebrating in this time of year, so that we might be changed December 26, January 1, in the dead of winter when nothing exciting is happening, somewhere around January 29, when we're like, *uh, can something fun happen again?* You know, and so, we don't need to fear that we don't have a perfect, magical Christmas when we start engaging with how do we prepare room [Background Music] in our hearts for Jesus? And how do we ultimately embrace the arch of the entire story of why He came to be with us in the first place? Because what we rehearse at Christmas time will continue on and change us the rest of the year. That's the truth. What we will recall and continually speak to ourselves, and what we celebrate during Christmas time, doesn't end when we put away the lights and the trees.



[Music]

Eryn: When we come back, Ruth will share how we can remember the real reason for Christmas, in the midst of Christmas shopping, decorating, cooking, and everything else that may bring us anything but joy. But first, let's hear a quick message from Elisa.

[Music]

Elisa: Hey there! *God Hears Her* recently celebrated its one hundredth episode! If you missed it, you can find our conversation on our *God Hears Her* website or anywhere you listen to podcasts. For the one hundredth episode, we created a fun *God Hears Her* package just for you. Check out our website for a limited-edition *God Hears Her* tote bag, filled with our three devotional books, a notebook, stickers, and a lot of other stuff. You can order this set on our website, godhearsher.org/shop. That's godhearsher.org/shop. Now back to the show.

Eryn: I'm brought back to a memory of last year, and I am in the space of bonus-mom mentor to three little girls, and I'm wrapping presents with my boyfriend for Christmas. And I got so anxious that these presents had to be beautiful. I mean, the way that I wrapped it, packaged it, stacked it, way the tree looked, the experience, when they come over what they see in his home, and we gotta create warmth and joy, and while I'm trying to create warmth and joy and make room, I have so much anxiety, and what you just shared of like, I'm a seven on the enneagram, we've talked about this a bunch so, one, I go to one, perfectionist, in my stress, and I am one-ing it up all over the place. And... and I'm just... I'm brought back to that memory. And I look back on it now with so much more grace and compassion for myself, cause there were many other things that I was processing during that time. But I want to know, like, what would you have said to me in that moment, to allow my heart to move towards the posture of making room for what really matters...

Ruth: Yeah.

Eryn: ... about Christmas and this time, and how to carry that forward.

Ruth: So, I picture being at your boyfriend's home, and you guys are setting everything up, and I'm invited over... for a cup of hot chocolate, and I would be like, *Eryn, okay. Before you freak out, let me ask you something. What do you think is the thing that these three girls need more than anything?* I would ask you that first.



Elisa: Yeah.

Ruth: Okay, so what is the... the thing that you think they need more than anything? And maybe at the top of the list you would start thinking things like, *they need to know that they're loved, they need to know that they have family.* Okay, but then I'd say, *Eryn, is that the most important thing that they could ever have from this moment?* And you would probably tell me, *Ruth, that's really important, but the most important thing, the most important thing that I would want to gift them is the knowledge that Jesus loves them. Is the knowledge that ultimately is the experience that Christ came for them.* Okay, so, if that's your answer, and I'm not putting words... words in your mouth, but I'm just trying to save some time, and I'm saying if that was what you are saying, then remember that number one, Jesus came without all the frills, right? He didn't come...

Eryn: Right.

Ruth: ... with the perfect setting, and the... the perfect packaging, and the wrap... You know, He was born in a manger, right? In a humble stable. But the thing that I would remind you is, if that's your ultimate goal... Now, if your ultimate goal is that you think that the number one thing that they need is to have all the stuff, well then, your next actions will determine whether that happens. But if you truly believe that the most important thing that those bonus children could have, and for anyone listening right now, if you're genuine desire is for anyone in your home is to know that Christ came for them, then what you want them to remember more than anything isn't the décor. Isn't necessarily the packaging. What you want them to remember more than anything is the conversation, is the message, is the hope. And who is going to communicate that? It's not the present, it's not the... packaging is beautiful, and we should always bring our best, but that packaging itself will not tell them what your mouth can. And so, I just back up and say, I'm not saying don't wrap those presents, I'm saying...

Eryn: Right.

Ruth: ... the conversation that you can have with them, holding their hands, and saying, *do you girls know how loved you are? But you know what, as much as I love you, and that we love you, and that we want you to have this beautiful, magical experience, but do you know that this evening together will end, but God's presence in your life doesn't have to. It doesn't have to end because He desires to dwell with you. And this is how.* And I think that is such a powerful reminder, that conversation long... twenty years from now, when they look back, they'll be like, *I remember that time that Eryn looked me in the eye and told me exactly what makes her get up in the morning, what gives her hope, what causes her to want to live another day.* They may remember the little stuff that you put on there to make the decoration really



pretty on the... on the present. But they may not even have the thing that you purchased for them twenty years from now. But they will always remember the conversation.

Elisa: That's right. Yeah.

Ruth: So, I just... I'm not...

Eryn: Good. So good.

Ruth: ... playing down how lovely it is, and how that... how some of our sisters in Christ have giftings with hospitality and making homes beautiful. Please don't hear me say that that's not important. I'm simply saying at the end of the day if the greatest gift somebody could truly unwrap is to unwrap the gift of Christ, then you have lots of options to be the conduit of grace in somebody's life. And the pressure's off. You don't have to run around screaming at perfectly chopped, karate chopped pillows. You don't have to be [laughter], you know, overwhelmed...

Elisa: Right.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ruth: ... that you had just the right decorations. The pressure's off. Because you know what? Jesus is beautiful. Emmanuel is beautiful. Without our help, even. We just need to present the truth to that.

Elisa: There is a rumbling through me a... as you're talking, Ruth. I'm doing kind of a soul work for myself, because I can inhabit the anxiety Eryn is describing, and the messiness you're describing, in ten seconds. And what... what's coming to my mind as you're speaking, Ruth, about remembering the love, about remembering the intangible that doesn't go away about Christmases, I'm going back to painful Christmas moments, cause I'm old, okay so, I go back to painful Christmas moments and I'm re-understanding them with the presence of Emmanuel, and that message that you're just highlighting, Ruth, of, you know, this is the lasting part of the holiday, Jesus with me in this moment. When my mom told me she'd been diagnosed with cancer, when my daughter decided to leave home, when my son couldn't be with us, when we had a brand new baby who was in the NICU, I'm... go back to these... these memories, and... and that's really helping me, Ruth, as... so, it's interesting at this season of my life, rather than going forward so much, I'm looking at the moments God has allowed in my life, and I am seeing the Emmanuel presence there. And it's a beautiful soul work, thank you, for... for giving me this... this gift to apply... in such a way.



Ruth: As I was hearing you share, Elisa, I was thinking about the fact that I think a lot of times we want stuff to do the work for us. You talked about soul work. And even though in Christ there is every bit rest, but the rest is propelled by the fact that He's given us a good work to do, the work of actually presenting ourselves before Christ, and digging into His word, and hearing what it is that He truly offers, the work of actually, like, saying I'm going to lay down all the stuff that doesn't satisfy. Nobody else can do that for you. You have to do that yourself. But I think sometimes we want all that peace, and all that joy, and all that rest, and we think that if I could just play the right album at Christmas time, or light the right candles, that'll do it for me. And we're so disappointed when that feeling goes away. And so, my challenge is, to myself honestly, it's just, it's to myself and anyone else through this twenty-five-day devotional, I really see these twenty-five devotions as really just me starting the conversation of the very work that you're describing, Elisa. And so, that work has to be done, and it's soul work, but I'm going to start the conversation for you, so that you can actually talk to God about it, you can talk to one another in your home about it, you can kind of do the investigative work in yourself... How are you putting all your expectations in the wrong thing? What is it that's causing you to feel completely empty when it's over. And let's think through how it is that... when Jesus came, the point was that He... He calls Himself Emmanuel, God with us, not because it was just for one moment, or for one little period of time, or when all the conditions were right, but forevermore. For all of eternity. And that's the true gift, right? The true gift is that sometimes you have really hard things happen. Sometimes you're really walking in the valley. Sometimes your family is separated across the miles [Background Music] for wonderful reasons and not so wonderful reasons. And those are the moments where we have to remember that we're not just at peace and brought together when there can be a great family reunion, but that because God is with us, that that with-ness and that presence makes it possible for us to have the rest, and the peace, and the joy we so long for, and look for, at Christmas time, and we can have that all the time.

[Music]

Eryn: Jesus is the Prince of Peace. We can find comfort in Him no matter what time of year it is.

Elisa: Yes. 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 for Ruth's website where you can purchase her new Advent book, *Emmanuel*. Find all of this and more when you visit our website at godhearsher.org. That's 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 Kevin and Kristi for all of their help and support. Thanks everyone.

[Music.]

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