



# God Hears Her Podcast

## Episode 120 – Let's Talk About Spiritual Formation

### Elisa Morgan & Eryn Eddy with Shalini Bennett

**Shalini:** We know that babies need to be rightly attached in order to be rightly formed. We know that from birth, if you are not rightly attached to your mother, everything is gonna go wrong for you. And we're told we have to be born again, because we need to be rightly attached to our Father. And right attachment is not an intellectual activity. Right attachment is not about my thinking the right things. So when my son was born, he was screaming his head off. He's a baby. He's a newborn. And they lay him in my arms, and I speak to him; and he stops crying. Why? Because he knows my voice.

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*.

**Eryn:** Welcome to *God Hears Her*. I'm Eryn Eddy.

**Elisa:** And I'm Elisa Morgan.

**Eryn:** Have you ever heard of spiritual formation? Do you know what it means? Have you ever practiced it? You may feel overwhelmed or stressed when you hear the term thinking, oh no, something else I have to do. Or great, something else I've never heard of. But what if we told you it was simply practicing being close to God?

**Elisa:** Today's guest is going to share with us about spiritual formation and how we can practice it in our walks of faith.

**Eryn:** Let's start off our conversation about spiritual formation with Shalini's inspiring explanation of her heritage on this episode of *God Hears Her*.

**Shalini:** I was born in India, and I was born to a family that's been Christian for generations.

**Elisa:** Oh my goodness.

**Shalini:** So conversion 1850s.



**Eryn:** Wow.

**Shalini:** In our family, people get educated abroad and go back and serve and love their country. So just a very Jesus-loving, passionate family.

**Elisa:** Gosh. And can I interrupt you and just say, I don't think that's super common in the United States. The way you just expressed it to be this Jesusy family for 200 years or something. That's crazy. That's amazing.

**Shalini:** It is. And you know I...I love how you put that, cause there's just a powerful conversion story in my family which is my grandmother's grandfather's from a very wealthy family. And they were also very religious Hindus.

**Elisa:** Okay.

**Shalini:** They lived in a village, and they moved to this village apparently to be near a temple that was to the god of light. The god for whom there is no idol.

**Elisa:** Wow.

**Shalini:** And to go back even a hundred years before that, there were people in India, missionaries, Lutheran missionaries, who came to India to translate the Bible. And they spent a long time making it as beautiful as possible. They just finish, and then they get put in prison, kicked out of the country. So it feels like just a mess, like they had failed. But the gospel gets printed by the British. It's in Tamil. And my grandmother's grandfather, his brother was on a business trip and came back and said I know you're interested in religious stuff. I got this thing for you, and it's the gospel of Mark.

**Elisa:** Oh.

**Shalini:** And then he goes on another business trip, and he comes back with the gospel of John. And my grandmother's grandfather read it out loud to his father who was dying. And at the end of it, he's like, so what do you think? What do you think? Like you haven't said a word. And he said, my son, this is the light we've been waiting for.

**Elisa:** Oh.



**Shalini:** I'm old and I'm dying, but you have to tell everybody. And long story short, he ended up having to leave. They tried to kill him.

**Elisa:** Wow.

**Shalini:** And you know at this point, he has not met another believer. It's just the gospel. But I always think about those missionaries who thought they failed.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Shalini:** Who thought that what they set out to do bore no fruit, but God's Word always bears fruit. And so I feel like I am the inheritor of just a family treasure that the gospel is worth everything. But it's not dependent on my getting it right. So there's my heritage story. But in that, I am 14 months older than my sister. When she was three months old, she contracted polio. Polio had been eradicated in, well obviously not eradicated, but in India, they vaccinated at six months. She was three months old. They misdiagnosed her. So doctor's mistake.

**Elisa:** Oh wow.

**Shalini:** And she ends up paralyzed from the neck down.

**Eryn:** Oh wow.

**Shalini:** So my parents who were set to come, my father was going to do his PhD in the US and return to India, they go to England in search of medical care for Vinitha. Because the Indian doctors didn't feel that there was anything they could do for her. So we went from India to England to Montreal to Toronto to Boston to North Carolina. And so a lot of my early story was just aching for my sister and all that she had to suffer but feeling like the thing I could do for everybody was to not need anything.

**Elisa:** Yeah. Nobody needed one more thing added on their plate to carry. So I bet you became extremely like, I call it, "antennaed". You know I'm putting two fingers up on top of my head.

**Shalini:** Yes.



**Elisa:** It's like you can just read a room before you even walk in it. Who needs something? How do I help them? How do I keep my needs out of sight?

**Shalini:** Yes, and actually, that was well-phrased. My sister had periods where she was in the hospital like for nine months at a time. And the hospital she was at in Montreal was a Shriner's Hospital that surgeons from all over the world came to. So my family did not economically qualify, but they agreed to treat my sister. In those hospitals, there were visitors allowed only for three hours on Saturday and three hours on Sunday, six hours a weekend. And children weren't allowed up. And my parents are new to the country. You know they have friends who can take me, but there were many, many times I spent the weekend for hours at a time sitting in that waiting room. And so in some way, what I translate, and I felt so pained for my sister that she wasn't with our family. So there was no resentment in that.

**Eryn:** Sure.

**Shalini:** But there was this somehow sense that what I contribute is not only not needing anything but also not being me. I am a curious...an inconveniently curious person. And I was a very inconveniently curious child. So the stories of me as a three-year old are putting garbage on the lawn and jumping on it to see what it sounded like.

**Elisa:** Well you had to entertain yourself too.

**Shalini:** Yeah, you know and that was so interesting. And bubble bath down the toilet and flushing cause you know, why not? And so to be left alone as a six-year-old in a waiting room...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Shalini:** ...with books, I had to not be me. And that's what I thought was my contribution to the well-being of the world...

**Elisa:** Wow.

**Shalini:** ...and what loving Jesus meant.

**Elisa:** Oh, that's so crippling, Shalini. My heart hurts. It feels lonely.

**Shalini:** Yeah.



**Elisa:** It feels unseen. It feels unvalued.

**Shalini:** Yes, and you know, my parents are just fabulous. I was loved so richly and so well. But underneath it all, there's this story going that Jesus loves me most when I'm not me and when I don't need anything. And I, you know, so I have this beautiful story of, you know, so met my husband in college. He did his MDiv. He...this was in North Carolina. We went to Toronto for his PhD. I had a career that I...it was the accidental career, but I loved it. We moved back to the US to Grand Rapids. And I also went from being wow, she's this regional vice-president; and she's a mom. And a lot of the mom details were actually, we were able to afford a nanny. So like our nanny kept the house going. And I looked good. But now when I'm keeping the house going, I'm the mom who doesn't remember when the soccer game is. Did I sign up to bring snacks? What, your shoes don't fit? What, your soccer socks aren't washed? Just I'm the mom who, the only mom who didn't realize it was gonna snow early. And so I don't know where your snowpants are, and they don't fit. Like I'm just that mom.

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Eryn:** You know what? I just want to pause, cause that is so relatable to anybody listening.

**Elisa:** Yes, yes.

**Eryn:** I mean we put this pressure, whether you are a mom, a bonus mom, a mentor of kiddos, you put this pressure on yourself that you have to perform and be and do and appear a certain way. And then that makes you more noble and...and...and a better person if you do these things. And what I'm hearing in your story is you have been on this learning that performance does not matter the love that you receive from the Lord.

**Shalini:** Yes. And in fact, that when I focus on my performance, I am not looking at God; but I am looking at myself. So I can't receive the love of God if I'm not looking at God.

**Eryn:** That's a good way to say that.

**Elisa:** So Shalini, take us through how you began to realize that I just treasure your vulnerability as Eryn has underlined here. Because you know behind every closed garage door and apartment door is the same kind of, I'm not as good as her feeling. You know, what...what's your process from going from an insurance job and then the head of a financial office to mom at home and then your discovery of there's a thread here. There's a thread about how I thought I had to behave as a child, how I was conditioned, what I believed God wanted versus what has crashed through to another view for you?



**Shalini:** I think...I think the Lord meets us just constantly. So I feel like I am learning this every day, every minute of every day. So there's...there's no oh I learned it and I got it.

**Elisa:** Yeah, okay.

**Shalini:** It was like I am growing into being who I am, and I am constantly finding another layer of my believing this lie that God needed me to not be me. But just the humbling of being home and seeing what other people were seeing which is the mom who didn't sign up for everything, cause she didn't even know there was a signup. You know so...so in some ways, there's less virtue to that than might seem. Because if you really are just not competent, you just really are not competent. But you know I remember this one point where I'm washing the floors. And I'm just...I'm feeling very proud that I'm washing the floors. And I'm thinking, oh Lord, look at me. Just last year I was making million dollars deals. And here I am washing the floor. And I hear the Lord going, yeah, isn't it nice to do something real for a change?

**Elisa:** Oh wow.

**Shalini:** Like actually, you know it is a privilege to be on your knees in the middle of the dirt. The biggest turning point happened before we moved. I had been longing for the Lord in profound ways. And I had an experience of God that's crazy and I guess I don't often talk about. In this time of prayer after church, this woman said to me, and she was laughing. The Lord says, open your mouth; and I will fill it. And so we're praying and laughing.

**Elisa:** Oh my.

**Shalini:** And then that Monday, I meet our nanny who is a pastor's wife from Nigeria. And she's telling us a story in Nigeria about a pastor who had moved to the US. He's a young man with his wife. The finances haven't come through. They have a new baby. And they don't know where the money...they have no money because something's happened with their bank accounts.

**Elisa:** Scary.

**Shalini:** And he hears the Lord say, open your mouth wide; and I will fill it. Sit at the table and pray. And then someone knocks on the door, and they say they're a neighbor. And they notice the new baby, and they've got food and diapers and all this stuff. And he's never seen them before, and he never sees them again.



**Eryn:** Wow.

**Shalini:** So then that Wednesday, which was my day off, I'm reading the biography of George Müller who had a faith mission. And then his life verse that sent him on this is from Psalm 81. "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." And I'm just weeping like, Lord, I've been opening my mouth wide, but I've been tasting of some pretty sweet stuff from the world. I haven't been waiting for you. I've achieved a lot of things, because I know how to make people do what I want them to do. And I use my powers only for good, you know. You talked about that antenna you have when you have this kind of upbringing where you're serving all the time. Well I can read a room, and I know what people need. And I know what they want. And I could use what they need and want to get what I need and want. And there was just real conviction in how the Lord was meeting me.

**Eryn:** That's a very transactional experience.

**Shalini:** Yes, and God just inviting me to let go of all kinds of things and stop making things happen and wait for Him. It's...I would feed you with honey from a rock. You know the psalm is so beautiful. But it's, you went off and tried to do things for yourself.

**Elisa:** It's like when you're stuffing your mouth filled with other delicacies. You know you can't receive what God has in mind.

**Shalini:** Yeah.

**Elisa:** God led you to really focus on formation, your own...your own for sure. And you have done a deep work, because the stuff you're talking about is not...I mean it's all super important. But you're talking about this intangible, very difficult to define element in your personality for how you were formed to relate. And God interacted with you in such a way to begin to reform, transform, spiritually form who you are. And now you give your...your work in many ways in that area. Can you talk to us about that process?

**Shalini:** Yes. We know that babies need to be rightly attached in order to be rightly formed. We know that from birth, if you are not rightly attached to your mother, everything is gonna go wrong for you. And we're told we have to be born again, because we need to be rightly attached to our Father. And right attachment is not an intellectual activity. Right attachment is not about my thinking the right things. So when my son was born, he was screaming his head off. He's a baby. He's a newborn. And they lay him in my arms, and I speak to him; and he stops crying. Why? Because he knows my voice. And he learned my voice in the dark and in the quiet when he did not know what words mean. So the knowing of my voice and the hearing of my voice and the feeling of my arms precede knowledge. And we are invited to this [godhearsher.org](http://godhearsher.org)



love that what? Surpasses knowledge. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, how? By the Lord who loves us. And formation is not the intellectual exercise. Because we know that knowledge puffs up.

**Eryn:** That's right.

**Shalini:** But love builds up.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Shalini:** But what we don't know because we are so formed in the world to value our intellect, to value our performance, to believe that we are what other people see, that we need the practice. We...we don't even know how to bring ourselves fully to the Lord. Because we've actually somehow believed the lie that that's not what He wants.

**Eryn:** Right.

**Shalini:** He doesn't want me as I am. Nobody wants me as I am. I have to be fit to be seen.

**Elisa:** I've got to clean up before He cleans me, yeah.

**Shalini:** Yeah.

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Shalini:** Yeah, like we find it unbearable to even imagine like Peter, Jesus kneeling at my filthy feet. I'm about to crawl out of my skin. Let me wash them first. I mean that's just a small picture. The thought of bringing ourselves fully to the Lord, oh that's terrifying. And when I started teaching spiritual formation, it's prayer and Scripture, actually just bringing yourself to the Lord as you are. There's nothing odd or mystical or weird about this. This is actually believing Scripture means everything it says and living out of truth. It's just that we have learned truth very selectively.

**Eryn:** Yeah.





**Shalini:** And believe the lie of the garden. Did God really say? Did God really say? You better grab it for yourself. As a spiritual practice of prayer, breathe deeply and imagine Jesus sitting right beside you. And I had students who said they could never get past that, because they felt such shame that that made them want to crawl out of their skins. And they trembled. And so I went back and said, okay. The Lord is a safe place. He is closer to you than you are to yourself. You don't know as much about you as He knows about you. And He chose you in Him before the foundation of the world. And there is nothing about the weight and nature of your sin that He does not know, because He has already born it on the cross. So you are in the safest place in the world. Breathe. And so the first spiritual formation practice that I teach people is to breathe and be safe and know that they are loved. And I find we live in a world where what we're hearing is run harder, run faster, run better, run, run, run, run, run. Jesus wants you to be a running sunbeam for Him. Even if life is a wreck, stick a happy face on it and Jesus will be happy with you. So this is just so counter-cultural that I can do nothing apart from God. And if I am not in relationship with Him, what is it I'm offering anybody? My own what, idolatry? Fake cardboard cutout of a girl that's got badges on her? You know, look at her, look. She's got a business card. She's got a degree. She's got a what? Best room mom, best what? But it's just a place to hide. And so reimagining yourself with the Lord as safe and loved and known and known more than you know yourself. My own journey has just got so many layers and so many places as does everybody. Everyone of us has this journey that's so beautiful and rich. But a woman said to me she processed how I had felt as a 17-month-old when my three-month-old sister was paralyzed. And she told me to process it without words and without talking. And I don't know how to do anything without journaling or talking. So I didn't know what she meant. So I ended up sitting silently, and I ended up doodling. And I was in a rocking chair, and I ended up just doodling, doodling and doodling and doodling. And I kept rocking, and then I felt like Jesus was rocking me saying I see you. I love you, and it was so visceral. And I just wept and wept and wept. And I was at a training session, and I sat through every session hearing things but just cry...like tears were just running down my face. And something in that restored to me the idea that I was made specifically by God with a purpose for Him. And every inconvenient curious mess that I am is His mess. That I'm not made like anybody else, and no one else is made like me. And everyone else is a gift to me, and I am a gift to them as I am, not as I am not. And I don't need to look at anybody else and want to be them. And I don't want anybody to look at me and want to be me. I want them to look at me and want my God. And that doesn't mean my life is together. If it's together, what does it create? What, envy to have what I have? Covetousness to look away from the Lord and look at me so you can imitate or mimic me? What is that? What have I offered the world but idolatry? To just to know that what I am before God is who I am, no more, no less. And to feel freedom and be loved in that, there's nothing better. And it is in the silence and the silence of the small when the world is just push...we live in such a noisy world that says look at me, listen to me, do this. And I find so many Christian women think the way to battle the world is to play Christian music louder, listen to louder sermons like make louder voices when God is closer to you than you are to yourself. Turn off all the noise and let Him love you, and we don't know how. We don't know how to let ourselves be loved. So



it might just be light a candle to remind you the light of the world is with you and for you. and sit, and maybe you can just do one minute. What I do is I picture myself as a child just sitting in my father's lap just looking out at the world. We have all seen those triumphant toddlers on their fathers' shoulders grabbing their fathers' hair feeling like I am all that and a bag of chips. I am everything. Look at me, I'm 10 feet tall. I'm drooling. I can't do anything. I can't walk. I can't change my own diaper, but here I am. And to just recapture I am the one who Jesus loves. And if I can only hold the picture of that child I have seen or maybe that child who has sat in my arms, however you have known that love and to picture myself loved like that beyond language, beyond time, beyond space, and a minute, two minutes, five minutes.

**Elisa:** Shalini, you've just walked us through one of the most important practices in spiritual formation. And...and you've just given us a taste. And I'm tempted to go, now what's step three, four, five? No, you know what let's do? I just want to challenge each of us as we're listening to turn off this podcast, wait just a second till we're done. But turn off this podcast and sit for a minute in this first step Shalini's walked us through, the first step of breathe and be safe with Jesus. And let Him bring to your mind whatever He wants to, to woo you closer to His heart. I love that statement that He knows us better than we know ourselves.

**Eryn:** I know that there is a woman listening right now that's hearing this and deeply desires to have the courage to sit in silence. And they may feel intimidated by that. And so I would love for you as...as somebody is listening and really fighting to have the courage to be in silence. What would you say to that woman that is also fighting that tension?

**Shalini:** It's our human love that gives us a little taste of God...how God loves us. So if you have a pet or if you have a baby, if you have any smaller person or being or living one who you lavish love on because you delight in them and just for the sheer delight of them, I would encourage you to sit and delight in them. And as you delight, just embrace every bit of that delight. And if it's your elderly dog just draped across your chest while you were lying in the sun, and he's drooling and you just delight that he trusts you and loves you. Or if it's your newborn who...or somebody else's newborn where this...they're nuzzling into your neck; and they're just so happy to be held, stop and think about how it would break your heart if that elderly dog or that baby said, oh, but I poop or I throw up or I cry. I'm not good enough for you. You would just want to weep that they felt they had to be qualified for your love when their very existence delights you. God made us in delight. He delights in us and our human loves. He says if...if a father would not give his child a stone when he asked for bread, what do you think I would do for you? And God uses these mother images of a mother could forget a nursing child before I could forget you. So just treasure up those you delight in and learn delight from the delight the Lord has given you for others. And if you haven't delighted, go somewhere and find a kitten and delight.



**Elisa:** I love that.

**Shalini:** Or a baby to rock or a child to sit with in the playground. Or watch children playing, and just delight. And...and that will give you a little taste of God's heart towards us instead of all the things the evil one keeps throwing at us.

**Elisa:** God delights in you. Don't forget to spend some time with Him. Just sit in silence and imagine that Jesus is sitting next to you. And don't forget how much you are loved by Him.

**Eryn:** Well before we go, we want to remind you that the show notes are available in the podcast description. Be sure to check out the *God Hears Her* blog for more insightful encouragement when you visit [godhearsher.org](http://godhearsher.org). That's [godhearsher.org](http://godhearsher.org).

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

**Eryn:** Today's episode was engineered by Anne Stevens and produced by Jade Gustman and Mary Jo Clark. We also want to thank Melissa and Luanne for all their help and support. Thanks everyone.

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