



God Hears Her Podcast

Episode 129 – Feeling Not Fixing

Elisa Morgan & Eryn Eddy-Adkins with Ryan Clevenger

Ryan: My job as a father is like any parent, to try to show our children what it means to look like Jesus and to point them to Christ. That is my first and foremost responsibility to them as...as a father.

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-Adkins.

Elisa: And I'm Elisa Morgan. Father's Day is a day celebrated by many and dreaded by others. Those of us who grew up in a home without stable dads or who have rocky relationships with our fathers may feel a bit alone on this day.

Eryn: But today, we want to encourage you with personal stories and wisdom from Ryan Clevenger, a podcast producer at Our Daily Bread Ministries who works on *Where Ya From?* Ryan is the father of four daughters despite many ups and downs.

Elisa: Eryn, let's have Ryan share his story of how his family came to be in this conversation on *God Hears Her*.

Ryan: How I got four daughters, that is a very interesting and complicated story.

Elisa: Okay, take us. Take us. We like complicated.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ryan: So I actually, I am married. And my wife, Jennie, was actually on *God Hears Her* before.

Elisa: Had a great conversation.

Ryan: And I...I will do my best not to talk about her. Because, as my friends know, I often would prefer to talk about her and the things that she has done; because I think she is an amazing woman who's done



amazing things and whose life is much more exciting than mine. But when we were married for about four years, we had our first daughter whose name is Eleanor. And she actually came two months early.

Elisa: Two months.

Ryan: So she was a preemie.

Eryn: Wow.

Elisa: So that's around...

Ryan: Yeah, two months.

Elisa: ...32 weeks. Is that right?

Ryan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so I was actually on the phone with her, my wife, coming home from work. And she had to call the ambulance.

Eryn: Oh wow.

Ryan: And I got home. She was inside the ambulance, you know.

Eryn: Oh gosh. That had to be terrifying for you.

Ryan: I was actually stuck on a bridge in the middle of traffic, and I could not...

Eryn: What?

Ryan: ...do anything. And end up getting to the hospital. And they don't know if it's a...a...what's called a placenta previa or a vasa previa. So my wife is a nurse, and she hates when I try to explain medical things. So I will...I will avoid...people can look up what those are. But in the case of a vasa previa, there is a high chance that the baby would die.

Elisa: Oh goodness.

Ryan: And so they did an emergency C-section, and that's why she came two months early.



Elisa: And was she in the NICU for a...a good while?

Ryan: Yeah.

Elisa: And uh huh.

Ryan: She was in the NICU for 33 days.

Eryn: Wow.

Ryan: And it really didn't hit me until about six months later, because we actually moved shortly after that to another state away from really friends and family. And we moved for school. So I was sitting in our house. I was doing some schoolwork. And I remember having this feeling of, it was just a sudden awareness that I could have lost both of them in that one moment. Now in the moment, I felt, you know I'm...I'm...I'm pumping myself up. I'm...I'm preparing myself. I'm telling myself I need to be brave and strong. I need to be there for my wife. And I'm not thinking about steps down the road. I am thinking of just in the moment.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ryan: And it really took me about six months before I...I grasped the significance of what could have happened.

Elisa: You know, that right there, Ryan, is so helpful and normalizing. You know, when we go through a trauma, we often, many of us, our defense mechanisms go full steam ahead. And we're able to cope and survive, because that's what we need to do. And we think well, okay, you know, I'm done. And then we're stunned at the emotional tidal wave that comes, you know, back at us like a tsunami. It's like everything's been pulled out to sea, but then it comes back at us.

Ryan: Yes.

Elisa: And...and that really normalizes that we might not be surprised when we have an emotion like that.

Ryan: Yeah.

Eryn: Well, and your body is in this fight...flight or freeze mode. So you were probably fighting.



Ryan: Yeah.

Eryn: The adrenaline had finally worn off, and you were safe in that. And once you became safe...

Elisa: That's good.

Eryn: ...it...all the emotions came...

Ryan: Yeah, yeah.

Eryn: ...through you after, six months later. You know I'm backtracking just a little bit, because I want to know...and I feel like it's still relevant to, you know, after the six months. But before the six months when you were on your way home, I feel like so many people can relate to this whether this is an analogy or not but to what's going on in their life and what's gone on in my life. But when you're in the car and you're in traffic, and you literally have no control over what's happening at the house and within what's going on with your wife and the baby, what did you tell yourself while you're sitting in traffic? How did you gain peace when you were completely out of control?

Ryan: It's interesting. To look back and think about what was going through my mind at that time, and there's a lot...a lot of that time feels like a blur. Because like you said, the fight/flight were...or freeze, I often tend to freeze. The adrenaline is pumping. And you just...it's hard to put back the pieces from what you're feeling in that moment. There is this sense of...of the unknown of what's next. Whereas the day before, I'm going along, our predictable, this is life. Do this one day, do this the next day. And suddenly, all of that predictability is just absolutely gone.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ryan: And I know all you can do is just pray. And I know it's easy. People often say, you know, thoughts and prayers...thoughts and prayers. And sometimes it's cheap. Sometimes people just throw that out. But I have learned actually recently that sometimes you say I will pray because you finally realize there is nothing else that you can do.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ryan: And so you have to trust in God who can do something, because you have no control over what happens next. That just took me nine years to figure out.



Elisa: Yeah, you have great perspective looking back. And you know, sometimes that's the only way we can actually see in that moment. You know I'm sure you were panicked. I...I'm sure you were trying to trust.

Ryan: Yeah.

Elisa: It's a tug of war, you know, and trying to stay present. So, this precious little Eleanor, take us forward then, Ryan, in terms of you have three other daughters. Were they also from a similar birthing situation? Or how did you become a father to three other girls?

Ryan: Yeah, so that is a very different story but no less exciting.

Elisa: Oh boy.

Ryan: When Jennie and I were first married, you know, you have those conversations about what's your next steps in life. What do we do? Do you want to have kids? Yeah, I want to have kids. What do you think about adoption? Yeah, yeah I'm sure.

Eryn: Yeah, sure. Yeah, that sounds romantic, you know, the idea of it.

Ryan: I never was the type of person who like, no I only want to have biological children. Some people, that...that feeling is really strong. The idea of adoption, it's like to me, seemed...it seemed like a great idea. It was just an idea at that point, right? So, when I was in school after Eleanor was born, in the state we were living in, we actually had some friends who did foster to adopt.

Elisa: And some people don't understand what that is. So maybe just unpack that a little.

Ryan: Doing foster care but with the intention...with the hope that you are able to adopt the child that you are...are fostering. And they did three boys, three brothers. And I remember talking with Jennie and after engaging with them thinking, remembering that conversation we had about adopting. For me, it was remembering. Jennie, it was always on her mind. She was always thinking about it. And so we started looking in at that possibility. We started filling out paperwork, do the process, and then realize, when I'm doing with school, we're gonna be moving to a different state. And you have to fill the paperwork out all over again, right?

Eryn: Oh, right.



Ryan: So we kind of put that on pause, and we just were praying about what the next steps were. In the meantime, we had gone overseas for a missions trip. And while we were there, this was actually the country where Jenny grew up as a missionary kid. For her, it's going back home. And while we're there, we ended up visiting an orphanage. And we'd actually talked to the director, or the person who was...who was running this particular orphanage. And there were no kids that could be adopted.

Elisa: Oh, okay.

Ryan: Because it was also a safe house.

Elisa: Okay.

Ryan: So we thought, oh okay. And only recently had...had the country opened up to international, non-familial adoptions.

Eryn: Right, okay.

Ryan: So we had that conversation, no options there. So, we go oh, okay. We go back home. Shortly after that, it was actually on if I remember correctly, January 7th, 2017, my mother-in-law who's a missionary down there calls me and says she was talking to this director, the person who operated the orphanage. And she told her there were three sisters that were adoptable, and she really wanted to keep them together. She wanted to make sure that they weren't separated. And she remembered that we had talked about the possibility of adopting. And so she wanted to know would we be interested. And as I was saying earlier, this corresponds to a time where we had just said all right, God, what's the next steps?

Eryn: He's so funny, isn't He?

Ryan: Yeah.

Elisa: That's one word.

Ryan: Like we...I mean we...we had no idea. We're doing our thing.

Elisa: Yeah, you think you're just following along, yeah.

Ryan: Like I said with, yeah, going day by day. This is our routine. This is what we do.



Eryn: Yeah.

Ryan: And unbeknownst to us, God was preparing the way for us to adopt them. It was actually interesting that, when we talked about how many kids we wanted to have, she said, not two. Because I'm the youngest of two. And she says, I'm spoiled. And she was in a family of three. She was the middle child. And she did not want to do that to anyone else to be the middle child.

Eryn: Okay.

Ryan: So we had, early on in our marriage, said, well what about four? And lo and behold...

Eryn: Awww.

Ryan: ...when we were able to adopt our three daughters, we ended up getting back to the number four.

Elisa: Wow.

Ryan: Just kind of took a different route than when we originally had planned. It was about a year and a half later that we were able to bring them home.

Eryn: How old are your daughters now?

Ryan: Seventeen, 13, 11, and my youngest will be 10.

Eryn: So you have a lot of experience in this pre-teen space and...

Elisa: Eryn would like an appointment with you, yeah.

Ryan: Yes.

Eryn: Yes. What have you learned being a dad of four girls during the pre-teen stage?

Ryan: Oh wow. There are two things I think I want to say. One is more general, not so much to do with the age range. But it's something that comes up a lot. And that is, whenever we walk into a restaurant or we tell anyone we have four daughters, almost every time I get the same response. Oh, poor you.

Elisa: Oh my goodness.



Ryan: You're all alone. How do you do it? And I really...it confuses me. Because I don't know how I would be a different dad to my daughters.

Eryn: I love that.

Ryan: Like if I were into sports ball like my parents...my family big into sports. If I were, I would still play basketball, football, soccer, whatever. If I were into fixing cars, I would show them how to fix cars. It would ev...I don't know what I would really do differently. Because my job as a father is like any parent, to try to show our children what it means to look like Jesus and to point them to Christ. And that doesn't matter whether it's a boy or a girl. That is my first and foremost responsibility to them as a father. So I have learned how to be kind to people who...who think that having a house full of women is somehow a disadvantage to me, because it is not.

Elisa: I relate to that, Ryan. I have all grandsons. I just never feel outnumbered or weird either. I mean...

Ryan: Yeah.

Elisa: ...I'd be fine with a grand-girl. That's...that's fine. But I...I really love what you're saying is that you don't know any other experience. And your goal would be the same regardless of gender. I think...

Ryan: Yeah.

Elisa: ...it just beautifully embraces your father heart. Thanks for sharing that.

Ryan: Thank you. And let me just say, we just spent a week at...well we went down to the American Girl doll store in Chicago. And...

Eryn: Oh how fun.

Ryan: ...it's not bad. It's not bad.

Eryn: I used to love American Girls.

Elisa: It's not bad.



Eryn: I had all of them...their little clothes and their little lockers and their little bunk beds. I mean I h...I loved American Girls.

Elisa: I love it.

Ryan: So to get back on track.

Eryn: Yes, we...yes, yes, yes...pre-teen stage you were saying [inaudible].

Ryan: Pre-teen stage, teen stage. There's a temptation I think, even for me, it still comes up, to view girls as maybe more emotional during that time...

Elisa: Or any time.

Ryan: ...than boys. I've consulted my parents, and I was just as emotional. It just looked a little different. Broody teenage boys, I was there. I did it. But just as a young person, I was very sensitive. I would cry pretty much at anything, frustrated, cry, confused, cry, angry, cry. My parents never said, you know, boys don't cry. It was never like that. But I felt like the way to deal with that was basically to cut off all emotions, right? That's just...that's the way that I learned to manage it. So, after the adoption, I was taking a pastoral class. In the middle of it, I was working second shift. I was drinking way too much coffee. I was a youth pastor-intern at our church working second shift, doing this class. And so I would, like one night I'd get just a couple hours of sleep before I have to get up and...and go do the next day. And I started to develop this pain in my chest. And then I found out those were called feelings and emotions. And I didn't know...I didn't know I had them. I forgot that I had had them. The class I took was very beneficial for me, because it grounded me in a sense of relating to people at the emotional level, which, like I said, boys or girls, everyone relates to each other at some sort of emotional level whether it's a neutral, a peaceful, a happy, a sad, angry, bitter, whatever the emotion may be. We have lots of different names for them. But when you start dealing with just some of the crazy stuff that our daughters have experienced in their short life, if you're unable to relate to people at the emotional level, you're missing a key component. You are hitting your head against the wall trying to over-communicate. And I...I was trained to be a teacher. So I think if I explain things, then we're good. You're gonna understand. I said it, now you know it. Now we move on with our life. But that's not how we work at the emotional level. And so I'm very grateful for that class. Because you know I jumped right into teendom. I jumped right into that stage when, for all of us, there's a lot of ups and downs that are going on at that time. And I had to figure out how not to try to...to fix. Issues come up. We work together to address them. But I can't fix it for them.

Eryn: And you want to.



Ryan: I want to.

Eryn: Cause you're the protector, right? And you...you can see how to fix it. And I'm sure they're like Dad, I want you to feel it with me. I don't want you to fix it.

Ryan: Yeah, my...my dad was someone who he would go out of his way to help you. He was a helper. He would plow on a win...winter morning, he would plow the driveway, scrape off my car and shovel a path in the snow so that I could walk into my car and never had to do it. Never asked, never...never expected a thank you. It was just that's what he does. And that's...I'm very similar in that regard, and I want to just...I want to do. I want to help you. You need help. I want to...I want to give it. I want to fix your problem, because I don't want you to go through this hard time. And giving up that sense of needing to control and instead to learn to be with them was and is still one of the hardest lessons that I have had to learn and am learning. Because what I trained myself to do, to think through all my problems, there's no amount of thinking. You...you can't fix every problem. Sometimes we just need to wait it out and to be there for them.

Elisa: You know this is so rich, Ryan. And I'm sure everybody listening is going wow, I wish I had a dad like that. Or wow, I wish my husband was fathering that way. But there's also some of us going, wait a minute. I'd love for my dad to go plow a path to my car and cl...clean off my...my windshield for me. Cause that would mean so much to me that he would protect me that way. So I know you're saying there's a both and here.

Ryan: Yeah.

Elisa: But maybe that typically, and we don't really want to stereotype. But typically, your pattern would have been to think your way through something or to help your way...

Ryan: Yes.

Elisa: ...and so you've...you've blended it more with being present and emotionally there.

Ryan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I should be clear I'm learning that you can't do it. There are four. So I have four ways to mess up.

Eryn: Okay.



Elisa: You have four daughters, four ways to mess up.

Ryan: So I have plenty of chances...plenty of chances to learn.

Eryn: That's right.

Ryan: You can't do it the same with every single one.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ryan: And that requires first learning who they are. Because when you finally get to just spend time with them and see their personality start to come out, you realize how unique each of them is and that to relate to them requires different things at different times in different circumstances and not to try and force them all into one single mold.

Eryn: There's not like a template, right?

Ryan: Yes.

Eryn: It's not like copy and paste.

Ryan: That would be nice.

Eryn: I know, wouldn't it?

Ryan: Can we just...

Eryn: I hear that. And I...I see in the way that our girls are wired so differently. And they receive help so differently. And they feel so differently. And that's just beautiful, cause that's...that's how God made them, and of course to learn how to address conflict, like how to address issues, to how to fix the issues, to...or feel the issues.

Ryan: Yeah, yeah.

Eryn: Cause sometimes they just...our therapist would say feel it, don't fix it. Feel it, don't fix it.

Ryan: Yeah.

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Eryn: And that is...it's hard. I mean I...and it's hard even, I will say that's hard for anybody, man or a female.

Elisa: You bet.

Ryan: Yeah.

Eryn: Cause you know you...you...

Elisa: It's a comfortable.

Eryn: Yeah, cause if you...especially if you see your daughter or your son making a choice that...

Ryan: Yeah.

Eryn: ...that you know the solution to that you could actually fix for them if they would only, you know.

Elisa: Yes.

Eryn: And then I just...I parallel it to my relationship with the Lord and how He could fix so many things in my life. And He could do things...do so many things in my life. But I'm so grateful He gives me free will to choose and to feel and...and sometimes He fixes. And sometimes He feels with me.

Ryan: Yeah.

Eryn: And I think that's what's so beautiful about the daddy-daughter relationship. I just...I parallel it to my...so I'm, you know, grew up with all girls. I'm one of three. And then I now am in a blended family where there are three girls. And so I'm seeing this father-daughter relationship. And it almost convicts me when I watch Matt love his girls. It convicts me of how I talked to my dad. Or I will call him and I'm like Dad, I'm so sorry. You know I had blind spots. Cause the front part of our brain's not developed yet, you know and...

Ryan: Oh my goodness. We say that all the time. We just have to remind under-developed prefrontal cortex, under-developed pre...they're not. They literally cannot see. And so...and so as a father, I am there to try to minimize damage, not to remove it. The temptation is to remove all risk and all potential danger. We do what we can to keep them safe to a certain extent. Because they have to...the thing about *godhearsher.org*



humans is we just...we have to explore. We have to...some people have to learn by failure and letting them. Because I was terrified of failure. And so this is...I know it's very common I think to try to...

Elisa: Yourself.

Ryan: ...to impose yourself, yes, to impose yourself.

Elisa: Yes, we try to reparent ourselves the way we parent our children. And our children don't need necessarily what we needed.

Ryan: Yes, yeah. And I was anx...anxious about making mistakes, never wanted to make mistakes. And so I have the risk of doing that to them, to making them anxious even if that's not the type of person that they are. And so learning to respect them, especially in an adoption situation to respect where they have come from.

Eryn: Yeah.

Ryan: Instead of assuming that, you know, they're gonna relate to me like a biological father, you know, someone that you've had maybe since an...an infant.

Elisa: That's wise.

Ryan: But giving them the time and the space...

Eryn: That's good.

Ryan: ...and just being there waiting and ready for them when they are open to coming and having that relationship.

Elisa: You know, we've got a lot of women listening. We've...I'm sure we have men listening to us today And just...just what kind of advice or wish or passion would you offer for fathers of daughters in terms of how they can show up, no matter what the age is. I mean they may think oh it's too late, you know. My daughter's 40. Or they may think oh it doesn't matter. She's six months old, you know. Or sh...oh my gosh, she's a teenager. You know what...what kind of words would you say?

Ryan: The thing that God has taken me through in the last five years or so, before the adoption but also through and...and since the adoption, has been just how divided my attention is. And to realize that my
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attention is a finite limited resource. And so for me, what that became was the use of social media for when I was in school trying to network, trying to make contacts. God showed me that I was giving all of my time, my emotions, my presence to people I've never even met in real life and that the more I gave to them, the less I actually had for my wife and for my daughters. And so I would encourage fathers to, when you are present, to be fully, fully present and to enjoy just being with your daughter, to enjoy them as the gifts of God that they are and to turn off the phone, put it away. People have lived for thousands of years without phones. You will survive. And just be. Because it is those relationships. It is that presence that helps ground people in knowing that they are loved and that they are safe, that they are accepted by you. And...and it is in those moments that they then have the courage to go out and do the hard things, that they can grow and become the strong, amazing people that God has made them to be. But first, you have to just be fully present when you are with them.

Elisa: That is really practical. Can you take it now one step further, and how, as a dad, can you also help your daughters, your children, feel seen and heard by God? I mean He is there present, but we don't often recognize His presence. So how can...how can you as a parent help your kids feel seen and heard?

Ryan: I don't do it well. I don't...I don't always model it. But I think one thing that I have been trying to do lately is, when my daughters come to me for whatever reason...oldest daughter is applying for summer jobs. Help her go through the process. She gets the job. How do I respond to her? Do I rejoice when she rejoices? Do I say, that's amazing. You...what an accomplishment. I am...I am proud of you. You are doing to do a great job. Or do I just jump to the...the don't forget to do this, don't forget to do this. You gotta do that. When you go there...

Eryn: What are you gonna wear?

Ryan: ...don't mess up. What are you gonna...yeah. That's what I want to go to. But instead, just when they are proud of something they accomplished, to genuinely and sincerely be there and say that was amazing. That's great. You did a great job. Praising them when they do something well. When they are struggling, being there with them, not running away when they are yelling and screaming at you to go away. I mean give them space.

Eryn: Sure.

Ryan: But to not be afraid of those big emotions.

Eryn: Yes.



Ryan: Cause we have a lot of those.

Elisa: Goes back to Psalm 88.

Ryan: Yeah, yeah.

Elisa: To be able to be that way.

Ryan: So those are the types of things that I try to do. I try to have them feel actually heard when they are going through, even if I think it's something that is not a big deal. Big picture, I know this is not a big deal. I'm sorry that that happened—not trying to explain it, not trying to minimize it but just to acknowledge what they are going through whether it's happy or sad and to continue to just be there with them. And one thing, and I don't know if this will exactly get to the question. But one thing we do try to do is...is as a family, just to do things together as a family. We've started now doing more games together. And what an opportunity to simulate different emotions, right? Joy when they win, disappointment when they lose. And it's...it's practice. Those types of events are practice for when they get into...into the world.

Elisa: You bet. You bet.

Ryan: And I can be there with them. Because our whole childhood life is an opportunity to fail in the best possible way, because we know that our...our parents are there for us; and we know it's not the end of the world. We know that we are safe and that we are loved.

[musical interlude]

Eryn: I appreciate how Ryan leans into the uncomfortable feelings. That's exactly what God does with us. Showing up for people through a hard moment models the fatherly love that God has for all of us.

Elisa: Yeah, Eryn, that was such a beautiful close. Well, before we go, we would love for you to check out Ryan's wife, Jennie Clevenger, on *God Hears Her* episode 92. And we had Ryan on *Discover the Word* a little while ago in series called "Testing" to talk about the early Christian writers often labeled the church fathers.

Eryn: Be sure to check those out. You can find a link for those, and more, on our website at godhearsher.org. That's 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.

[musical interlude]

Eryn: Today's episode was engineered by Anne Stevens and produced by Jade Gustman and Mary Jo Clark. We also want to thank the amazing contact center at Our Daily Bread for all their help and support.

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