



God Hears Her Podcast

Episode 198 – Unexpected Grief with Dawn Mann Sanders

Elisa Morgan, Eryn Eddy-Adkins with Dawn Mann Sanders

[Music]

Dawn: But then when I went to bed to have that cry, I was so exhausted. I said, *You know what? I don't even have the energy right now, God.* I tried to go to sleep, had a fitful night, woke up the next morning going, *okay, I'm ready to box, have, you know, with God.* Right? And only two words came out. *What now?* You know, it's like my faith had weathered all of those miscarriages, like you said, and not that I don't believe. *I know you can heal me. I don't know who I'm gonna be on the other side of that healing.*

Vivian Mabuni: You're listening to *God Hears Her*, a podcast for women where we explore the stunning truth that God hears you. Join our community of encouraging one another and learning to lean on God through Scripture, story, and conversation at GodHearsHer.org. God hears her. Seek and she will find.

Eryn: Today we are talking to a woman who has faced a lot of heartache. Dawn Mann Sanders is the author of *When Your World Ends*, and the founder of a ministry focused on people rehabilitating after facing a devastating loss. Let's hear her testimony.

Elisa: Eryn, I know you have had moments in life where the unexpected has occurred.

Eryn: Yeah. Yeah. A few memories come to mind.

Elisa: Yeah. And I sure have too. And I'm... I'm positive everyone listening has. And, you know, most of the time the unexpected is not a happy thing. Most of the time it's like *bleh!* You know? Occasionally a surprise is nice, but one of the things we really love to do on *God Hears Her* is dive into the nitty gritty, you know, into the real deal, into the stuff that might be hard to talk about. But we feel like — you, me, and Viv — we feel like if we can go there in our conversations, then we really empower everybody listening to go there.

Eryn: Yeah. Yeah, that's true.



Elisa: So we're gonna have a conversation with a really cool woman that I've not met, but I've known her a little bit before. She's had a lot of unexpected, and she's written about it. And she has a book that she wrote her story in. She's a pastor in a cool church First Baptist Church of Glenarden. She's a woman who has encountered a couple... too many items in the unexpected list. So welcome Dawn Mann Sanders with me.

Eryn: Hi Dawn! We're so excited that you're here.

Dawn: That ... um... excitement is contagious. I am excited as well. Thank you for having me.

Elisa: Yeah, I think we need to have this conversation together, Dawn. I have a feeling this conversation is gonna help us as we move forward in our lives and unexpectedly face some things we didn't think we were gonna face. So... so tell us a little bit about yourself in terms of where were you raised, how'd you grow up, how'd you come to faith? And then we want to go into your story even more.

Dawn: I was born on Travis Air Force Base, so I'm a military brat...

Elisa: Cool.

Dawn: ... But I only spent three months there. In fact, while my mother was still carrying me, my father got orders to come east. And so Travis Air Force Base is, for those who don't know, is in California. And at 3 months old, I started living in, on the East coast at a military base there, Bolling Air Force Base. And my parents raised me in a Christian home. It was the kind of Christian home where faith was modeled, where we didn't sit down and have devotions per se. But when my mother would get up in the morning, you know, I'd see her reading her Bible. When crises hit, she'd ask us all to pray. At church, your father would hand you money so that you could give your money.

Eryn: Yeah.

Dawn: Right? To teach you about giving, and things like that. So faith was modeled more than taught didactically to me.

Eryn: Okay, so you witnessed it being modeled for you. At what point in your life did it become a faith of your own?



Dawn: Oh, wow! That's a powerful question right there. Right? So I went to college at 16, and after spending my whole life in military churches and kind of fell away from those practices. And through a eulogy... my girlfriend's father died, and I went to his funeral. At that funeral, Pastor Jenkins, who is the pastor at First Baptist Church of Glenarden International, preached the eulogy. And so God reached into that pew and said, *Hey*, right to me, and pulled me out. And so I didn't come forward at that moment, but that's when I really feel like God started moving me in that direction.

Elisa: So a little bit unexpected already threading in your life. Right?

Dawn: Yeah.

Elisa: Okay. You meet your husband, Reggie.

Dawn: Mm-hmm.

Elisa: How did that come about, and at what season of your life?

Dawn: Wow, now that's a good one too! [Laughter] How I met him was I was in church, and he saw me, unbeknownst to me, long before I saw him.

Eryn: Aw.

Dawn: Yeah. And I wish he were here to tell you the story because it just... it's one of those, you know, that tugs at your heart. Right?

Eryn: Aw.

Elisa: Yeah.

Dawn: So the way he would tell it was that I walked in to church. And he was in the lobby, on the other side of the lobby. And he watched me walk into the seminary, and that God spoke to him in that moment and told him that I was going to be his wife.

Elisa: Whoa!



Dawn: And so my husband, being the man he was, did a little reconnaissance. He had to go on an investigation and found out that I was seeing someone else. So you say, what season was I in?

Elisa: Yeah, yeah, yeah. A committed season.

Dawn: So I was in the season and... and it's... Elisa, you say “committed,” but it was a troublesome relationship almost from the beginning. And it was one of those relationships where you struggled to get out of it. And I really feel like the enemy sent a counterfeit because I met him at church. Initially, people at church were like, *oh, he's so nice and this, that, and the other*. And I was like, *yeah. He was nice in the beginning, but I'm now seeing that what you guys see as attentiveness, as controlling*.

Elisa: Ew! Eww!.

Dawn: Right? But because they were so positive, I struggled.

Elisa: So that's confusing. So how did Reggie worm his way in to your attention? [Laughing]

Dawn: I finally wrestled myself away from this young man after three years.

Elisa: Oof!

Eryn: Wow!

Dawn: And so Reggie found out when I was having a conversation, actually with someone else, where he walked up while I was talking to someone else. They asked me how were the wedding plans going? And I said, simply, the wedding was off. That's basically what God gave me to tell people. He said, *you don't have to explain past that*. The wedding is off. And so Reggie went off and prayed, and the very next time we saw each other, Reggie said, “Hey, I'd like to get to know you better, with a view towards marriage.” And I immediately went, “uh, no... um... I don't think so.” Right? He's like, “uh, I just got out of a bad marriage, a bad engagement.” And not that I did not see marriage at some point in my future, I just didn't see it then. And I even said that to him cause he said, “God has shown me you.” And I said, “well, He didn't show me you.”

Elisa: Mm-hmm. That's right. That's right.



Dawn: But gradually God did. In fact, other gentlemen were coming up to me wanting to spend time with me, and I was praying about them. And in response, God kept saying, *but what about Reggie?* And I kept going, *no, no!* But eventually God said, *trust Me*. Right? *Trust your heart to Me*. And so I said, *okay, God*. I call that the summer of the bubble. We just eventually wound up spending almost every moment that we could together that summer.

Elisa: So here comes the unexpected. I mean, it's a man you didn't expect. So you and Reggie get married, you know, what does your marriage look like? And how did God speak into your partnership together?

Dawn: Wow! God started speaking into our partnership early, before we even got married. And one of the ways was people would come up to us and they would ask us to counsel them in their marriages when we were still courting. We weren't even engaged yet.

Elisa: Whoa!

Dawn: And people were coming up to us, asking us... They saw something in our relationship from the very beginning. Also, too, we wanted to do it right.

Eryn: Yeah.

Dawn: Right. I was praying about him. He was praying about me before we ever met. We asked our families about each other, you know, individually. Then we introduced each other to our families and all of that, our friends, the people in our lives. And not one person disagreed. In fact, there were moments where he took us to his spiritual father's church and met some of the ministers there. And one of them, when she first saw us, she went, "now that's what I'm talking about." That was the first thing out of her mouth was, "That's what I'm talking about." And I'm like, "What is she talking about? I have no clue."

Eryn: Yeah. You're like, *what is that thing...*

Dawn: Right.

Eryn: ...you're talking about?



Dawn: I went to lunch with a sister, and I started telling her that I had met this guy and was telling her about him. And she gets a phone call, and she tells her friend, “Hey, I can’t talk right now. My sister met the one.” And I’m like...

Elisa: Oh gosh. Wow. How do you know these things? Yes.

Dawn: And in our relationship, we purposed, as part of our courting, to work it out that divorce was not an option for us, that we were going to have to work it out.

Elisa: That you weren’t even married, and you’re making that commitment, that’s amazing!

Dawn: So when you say, “how was our marriage?” It was much like that, to the point where people said to me, “I thought you guys were the perfect couple. You never fought.” And I was like, “Who told you that craziness?”

Elisa: I’m just gonna pop in here. So tell us what happened as you were married? And I’m just gonna be a little bit of a spoiler alert, but the unexpected entered your relationship very early in your marriage.

Dawn: Oh yeah.

Elisa: Very early. So what... what happened, Dawn?

Dawn: Well, you know, meeting him at 40 and spending two years courting, we didn’t get married until I was 42, on the verge of becoming 43. And I had given up on the chance of having my own kids. I did not have any kids at that point. My previous relationships and marriages did not result in children, and so I had let that go. I had given it to God and was just looking for marriage. But my husband was a youth pastor and very much wanted children, and so he had me hoping again for a family. But I asked him, I said, “you know, can we have this first year, just us, when we’re not trying to have kids? We won’t do anything to try to stop it, but God willing...” cause I know a lot of people who get pregnant right off the bat. And I was hoping to have more time with him where we weren’t even pregnant before we start. “I know I’m older, but can you give me that?” And he said, “yeah. I’ll give you that year.” And so we spent that year really focusing on our relationship and just being together and having a solid foundation for that family. And then on our anniversary, like clockwork, my husband went “okay, we’re gonna start now.” And I said, “okay, that was the agreement.” So here we go. Over that summer, I believe we had a pregnancy, and I had a miscarriage. And I say, “I believe” because I didn’t get a chance to take a test.



Elisa: mm-hmm.

Dawn: So it was never verified. And in September, lo and behold, I was pregnant. And then in October, seven weeks later, we lost that child.

Elisa: Oh!

Dawn: And I didn't have the normal reaction that a lot of people have. Don't get me wrong. I was heartbroken over the loss of the child. But I was also excited because at my age I was concerned I could even get pregnant. And so I saw the pregnancy as God showing me that He was faithful and that He was going to bring this to pass. And then in February we got pregnant again. Now the pregnancy in October, we didn't tell anyone about. Because, you know, like having that first year I was kind of like, "can we just keep it to ourselves for a minute so it's just ours? And so he honored that, but then we suffered alone because nobody knew. And so going into that third one, we purposed to tell people because we didn't want to operate in fear. So we did, we had people enter in, only 10 or 11 weeks later to not have this one. It was extremely painful. And my husband, who had been my strength through the previous ones, I found myself being his strength through this one because that was the one that broke him.

Eryn: We'll be right back after a message from our Daily Bread Ministries.

Elisa: Looking for a tell-it-like-it is Bible study to do with your friends? Well, *Unshakeable Moxie* might just be what you're looking for. Think of it more like a mini-retreat, cozy conversations where you can be completely honest about your hurts and hardships. Through this six-week study, you'll be comforted by countless Scripture passages that remind you how life's answers will always be found in the loving arms of Jesus. Get a copy for you and gift one to a friend with our special BOGO deal. You can find a link for that in our show notes.

Eryn: Now let's get back to our conversation with Dawn Mann Sanders to find out what happens next in her story.

Elisa: How do you just not get so furious at God?

Dawn: I didn't have a chance right then because I was busy being strong for him.

Elisa: Okay.



Dawn: During that one I was hurting, without a doubt. I hadn't gotten angry yet. My anger came with his passing.

Elisa: You've had three...

Eryn: Oh, okay.

Elisa: ...miscarriages. Take us into what happened to Reggie.

Dawn: Yeah, so 18 months before his passing, Reggie had gotten a diabetes diagnosis. And so he had started on a health binge that I wish he had started earlier, but he didn't feel the need cause it was only him. But now that it was me and possibly a family, he was like, "I have something to get healthy for." And part of him getting healthy was jogging every day at lunchtime. And he went out as he normally would to jog, on the hottest day of the year up until that point and had a massive coronary.

Elisa: How long have you been married when this happens?

Dawn: Two years, two months, and two weeks.

Elisa: And how far away was it from the last miscarriage?

Dawn: Six weeks.

Elisa: Oh, Dawn! So... so when you say he was angry at God, and you were strong to support him, it's only been six weeks and now you lose.

Eryn: Yeah,

Dawn: A big part of my anger was through these three miscarriages, I was holding onto faith that God would give us a child. Then my husband passes away, and I'm like *Okay, I don't get... I don't understand.* I'm com... Reggie didn't understand six weeks ago. I am now confused because I cannot have a baby without a husband. I didn't see it as part of my future, at least naturally born children...

Eryn: Yeah.



Dawn: ... that I had now started hoping for and believing in again after letting go of it before. And so that's the anger: *God, I had let go of this dream.*

Eryn: Yep. I mean, Dawn, your ability to be vulnerable with your hopes and desires with God is really beautiful. I hope anybody that's listening just sees the resilience in you. I mean, had gone through a divorce, being vulnerable to open yourself up to love again after breaking off an engagement, to then dreaming again with your husband about family and future plans, to lose what you thought the plans were going to be, and then to lose your husband. And you're smiling today even though you... behind it, there's so much grief that you've had to work through and consistently cause it's not linear. I'm just... I just wanna pause in that your faith is so beautiful because I know that there were probably like just weeping, angry cries.

Dawn: Yeah! The night Reggie died, in fact, I expected to have what I call an ugly prayer where you, you know, are just weeping, lamenting before the Lord and tears streaming down, snot, if I might say so, you know, just one of those ugly...

Elisa: Sure, yeah, ugly cry.

Eryn: It's real.

Dawn: ...prayers. And I didn't. But then when I went to bed to have that cry, I was so exhausted. I said, *You know what? I don't even have the energy right now, God.* I tried to go to sleep, had a fitful night, woke up the next morning going, *okay, I'm ready to box, have, you know, with God.* Right? And only two words came out. *What now?* You know, it's like my faith had weathered all of those miscarriages, like you said, and not that I don't believe. *I know You can heal me. I don't know who I'm gonna be on the other side of that healing.* Because the moment I got the phone call that Reggie died, I felt something in me changed. I was cooking cookies and I was so, you know, in denial immediately from that phone call to come to the hospital, that I didn't move immediately to go to the hospital. I finished the batter.

Elisa: One of the things that is popping out to me as you are sharing so straight up, honestly. Thank you. for that.

Eryn: Love it. Yeah.

Elisa: I think we all imagine what our grief would look like if we would lose somebody so intrinsic to our lives. And your description of completing the cookie batter is so powerful. We all have such different



personalities. I can really relate to that. I mean, I am a 3 on the Enneagram, and so I'm gonna finish something if I start it. And I think some of us might even judge you and go, *what's wrong with you?* But I want to just say, *mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. No!* There is no judgment in grief.

Dawn: Well, thank you. And that's part of my journey too. What I came to understand about grief is that, depending on how close the person is to you, is how far away you can get from it.

Eryn: Mmm.

Elisa: Whoa!

Dawn: When someone is really close, like Reggie was to me. Reggie and I prayed together every morning, and when I say we prayed together every morning, our routine was for Reggie to get up and pray, then wake me up. We prayed together, and then I would have my alone time after he left. But he would wake me up to pray, so my day started Monday through Friday with Reggie waking me up. And Reggie was now not there to wake me up, so my grief hit me every morning when I opened my eyes, immediately. I didn't have the *maybe he's in the shower*. I didn't have the *oh, he's at work*. I didn't have the *he's fixing me breakfast*. I had *he's gone* the moment I opened my eyes. And I speak about distance because that's how far Reggie was from me, waking. That's what I mean about connection for us.

Eryn: Yeah.

Dawn: But other people were not as close to him, and so it wasn't until they saw me. I was the catalyst that reminded people of their grief that Reggie was gone. Waking made me go *he's gone*. Seeing me, because unless I was doing women's ministry or he was doing men's ministry, we were together. And so people would pause. They'd see me, and you could see it on their face, that they would immediately connect with their grief. And I'm sitting here going, *thank you for the reminder*. But now they're falling apart. I had to pull myself together to go there. They're now falling apart, and so I'm finding myself now being strong for them.

Eryn: Yeah.

Elisa: Yeah. What did you learn about that, Dawn? I really hear you understanding your own grief and making it actionable, if you will. But then you run into other people's grief that's much more passive, and they put it on you. What did you learn for yourself in order to cope with that?



Dawn: That I needed to create space to breathe, where you separate yourself. That in the creation story, God separated light from dark. He separated the waters above from the waters below, and that there were things I needed to separate from. And so I had to create pockets in my life where I could grieve alone because what I realized quickly was that my grief was on display. And I refused to grieve on display all the time, you know? So those are some of the things I've learned. And I learned to forgive them. I've learned to forgive people who said, "I understand what you're going through."

Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Dawn: And I'm like, *yeah, no*. I thank God for a woman who actually sent me a card. She was one of my mentors who said, "I understand a little — right — but I *care* a lot."

Elisa: Oh, that's so good.

Eryn: We need to all borrow that! That is so good.

Elisa: Dawn, how many years has it been now that Reggie has been with Jesus?

Dawn: ...uh... We're coming up on 14. He passed away in 2011, June of 2011. And so, yeah, 14 years.

Eryn: What would you say, Dawn, to somebody that feels guilty about being angry? Or they feel that it's unholy? What would you say to that?

Dawn: I would tell them that that is nothing but an attack of the enemy. That's what I had to come to understand, because I at moments questioned my faith. I was like, *God, I'm so angry at You*. How can I be this angry and be Christian cause you know, the Bible says "even the demons believe," right? The demons know God exists. Right? So I'm sitting up here going, *God, how do I know that I'm Christian when I am this angry?* And He told me things like, *you know I'm gonna heal you. You're still in conversation with Me. You have not given up on Me. If you'd given up on Me, these conversations would be different if we were having them at all.*

Elisa: That's right.

Dawn: And that's what I would say to these people is that it's okay to be angry at God and with God. That's okay. God can handle it. Look at Job. God can handle our anger. Right? He can handle our pride. Cause that's what that is. Right?



Eryn: Mm-hmm.

Dawn: I also would say that I fought judgment. Right? Because I had people saying to me, “you're not grieving.” Right? Asking me, “why are you here?” Church! Asking me why am I at church?

Eryn: Because it's a hospital, and I need to be here, guys!

Dawn: I'm at church because right now I'm struggling to pray. At that moment, when Reggie first died, I struggled to have those conversations. Because, again, when I would wake up in the morning, first thing that hit me is... was that Reggie wasn't here. And the first thing Reggie and I did was pray. So I was struggling to pray, but I went to church because I couldn't pray for myself, but I could pray for other people. And that helped me stay connected to God praying for other people,

Elisa: You know, with that in mind, I wonder if you would bring our conversation to a close by doing just that. Dawn, would you pray for the other women who are listening who have faced the unexpected, the catastrophic unexpected? And their lives are upside down, and they're angry at God. Or they're just grief stricken. Would you pray for them as we close?

Dawn: It would be my honor and my privilege. *“Father God, you are an awesome and a mighty God and so worthy to be praised. And so we praise you right now in this moment, Lord. We praise You for the opportunity to come together as sisters in Christ and share with Your people the ministries that You have given us. And we thank You, Lord, for allowing our ministries to intersect today, allowing us to collaborate in the growing of Your kingdom. And, Lord, right now we want to lift up the members of Your kingdom. We ask You, Lord, to draw them close to You. We ask You to give them a fresh touch of You. Let them know in ways that are meaningful to them, that You are near, that You haven't left them alone. Psalm 18:11 says that You make darkness your secret place and that within the darkness that they may be feeling right now, Lord, You are present. They may not see You, but that You are present. And so help us to feel You, even when we can't see You. We ask You, Lord, to illuminate the visions that You have for our lives. In this darkness it's hard for us to see a path forward, but Lord, with You there is a path forward. I thank You for the ministry of showing people that there is a path forward to helping shine some light on that path. And I pray, Lord, that in this conversation that we've had today, that some light has been shown, that some cracks have let some light in to someone's day. I pray, Lord, that my witness would provide hope that there is healing, provide hope that you can come out on the other side, that there are still green pastures and still waters after walking along the path of righteousness that sometimes leads you into the shadow of the valley of death. That same Psalm 23 says that Your rod and Your staff will comfort. And so we ask for comfort in these moments. It says that You will set us down at a table, that You will sup with*



us, Lord, and we thank You for supping with us. That same Psalm says that goodness and mercy will follow us. We might not see goodness and mercy because they're behind us, Lord. And my pastor says that if God is blessing your neighbor, that's a reason to praise cause He's in the neighborhood. And so I ask You to shine that light so that they can see that, that there's value in them and in their lives, so that they can, at some point along their journey, take a step forward into Your light and operate in their purpose. In Jesus's name we pray and give thanks. Amen.

[Theme Music]

Elisa: This conversation was so tender and raw. Dawn's faith, boy, it's really inspired me. If you're struggling with a loss, we hope that you know that you're not alone, and God loves you deeply.

Eryn: Well, friends, be sure to check out our show notes where you can find a link for Dawn's book *When Your World Ends* and our new *God Loves Her* devotional. Check out all of that at GodhearsHer.org. That's God Hears Her dot o.r.g.

Elisa: And one more exciting announcement: Our 200th episode is coming up. As a part of the celebration and a thank you for all of your support, we're doing a giant giveaway full of goodies. Check out our website for entry rules and keep an eye out for our 200th episode.

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 and Mary Jo Clark. We also want to thank Rochelle and Kristi for all their help and support. Thanks everyone.

Eryn: Our Daily Bread Ministries is a donor-supported, non-profit ministry dedicated to making the life changing wisdom and stories of the Bible come alive for all people around the world.

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