Season 3 | Episode 30

How a Wheelchair Has Taken Me Places I Never Dared to Imagine

Jenny Smith

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts or find us at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Jenny Smith was a typical teenager—a gymnast, an athlete who loved hair and makeup, played in a band, and was active in her church youth group. Then one summer morning, a spinal cord injury left her paralyzed from the chest down and dependent on others for her most basic needs. Privacy and independence seemed like things of the past, but Jenny refused to give up or give in to her disability. And over time, she discovered that a wheelchair could take her places she never dared to imagine. And today in honor of National Spinal Cord Injury Awareness Month, Jenny Smith is joining us on the podcast. Welcome, Jenny.

Jenny Smith:

Thank you for having me on.

Crystal Keating:

Jenny, when you were just 16 years old, you sustained a C6-C7 spinal cord injury leaving you paralyzed from the chest down. How were you injured?

Jenny Smith:

I was actually outside tumbling. I had been a gymnast since I was three years old and grew up in competitive gymnastics. That morning I was outside tumbling on the grass, which was still wet with the morning's dew, and as I was doing a round off back handspring layout, my feet slipped out from underneath me. So I didn't have enough height or rotation to make it all the way around, and I landed face first in the grass.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So you're on the ground. What are you thinking at that point? Are you thinking, “Oh my goodness, I can't move” or what happened or?

Jenny Smith:

Well, I heard my friends run over to me and they asked, "Jenny, are you okay?" And I said, "Don't move me. I've broken my neck."

Crystal Keating:

Oh, so you knew at that point.

Jenny Smith:

I knew. I don't know how I knew that, but I did know. But honestly, the thing I was most scared of was not that I couldn't move my arms, or my legs and I didn't have any feeling, but my face was in the grass and I was afraid that bugs were going to crawl toward me.

Crystal Keating:

Ooh, my goodness.

Jenny Smith:

So I was a typical girly girl and I was afraid of bugs at that very moment.

Crystal Keating:

Well, talk about the transition then, Jenny, from that moment in the grass to, were you rushed to the hospital? Did you immediately go into rehabilitation? What was that transition like for you?

Jenny Smith:

I was moved to the hospital, and I was eventually transferred to a pediatric hospital that was in Louisville, and I spent two and a half weeks there. I was really fortunate and didn't have any other internal injuries, quote: just a spinal cord injury-

Crystal Keating:

No.

Jenny Smith:

... which is, enough in and of itself. But I was then transferred to rehabilitation, and that's where I was going to have to relearn how to do everything. How was I going to pick up a glass to drink by myself? How was I going to pick up a fork? Would I be able to learn how to put a shirt on or would I ever learn how to get in or out of a chair, a wheelchair from the bed by myself? So it was a long process. At that point, we're talking 32 years ago. I was fortunate to be able to spend about two and a half months in rehab, and the stays are so much shorter now. And so it did give me some time just to be able to maybe, I don't think you ever get used to a new normal, I don't really like that phrase, but it wasn't a four week stay and then being kicked out back to home.

Crystal Keating:

Well, take us back to your 16-year-old mind and emotions. What were you feeling during that time? What were some of the things that you were processing about your future, about your life, about your body, who you were?

Jenny Smith:

I think one thing that was really hard for me is, especially coming from a gymnastics background where I was used to shoving things down and you just push through and you just work through pain, you push through pain, I wasn't really good at expressing emotions. So I didn't really have a good grasp of what I was even feeling or thinking. And even with my best friend who was also a gymnast, we weren't the best of communicators and we really never talked about my injury.

So the first time I really remember someone asking me was actually in a television interview and she said, "Do you think you're going to get better?" And to be put on the spot like that was so intimidating because I suddenly had to come to grips with, gosh, I know thousands of people are praying for me and yet I'm still paralyzed. So is God going to heal me? And 10 days after an injury, that's a big question, and that's still a big question 32 years after my spinal cord injury.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, indeed. We hear from many people each day who live with disabling conditions and that is a question, and why is that a question? Because one day—when we're in Christ—we will be healed, and all of the things that we have lost will be restored, but until then, most of us like Joni, like you, have not been physically healed. How does your faith impact your response to your injury? After she asked you that question, did you begin to process your emotions and even your faith in a new way?

Jenny Smith:

I think I was processing my faith in a new way. Not yet my emotions. That took a lot longer, but my favorite verse at the time was Isaiah 40:31, which is really interesting because "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as Eagles. They shall walk and not be weary." And I wanted to cling to that truth and yet I knew that that may not be physically true in my case.

And so once again, balancing that, but I was really fortunate to have grown up in church, and my faith was the foundation of my life. And just as Hebrews 6:19 says, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure," and I had that faith and that anchor. When everything around me was changing, I knew that God wasn't going to change. And without that truth, I don't know where I would be today.

Crystal Keating:

Absolutely. And I think when the world is crumbling around us, when our world is crumbling around us, upon what rock do we stand? Where does our hope lie? You turn to the Lord, and just watching some of the videos on your YouTube channel, I saw that you had so many friends, so many people gathering around you while you were in the hospital and going through rehabilitation. And so Jenny, I'm curious, who are some of your biggest supporters as you went through time in the hospital, and what did they do that was especially meaningful and helpful to you?

Jenny Smith:

I had great friends and family that really stuck with me through, from the time of my injury up till today, really. And I think the biggest thing was being present. People were there, and they weren't just there for me, but they were supporting my parents as well. And I think that's really important to remember is that the parents and the siblings, don't forget the siblings, have been impacted just as equally. They may not be paralyzed, but their lives have been impacted as well. So be there for the person who sustained the injury, but also be present for the family.

And I also want to add for the friends. So my friends were incredible. I had a group of guys, I was in a Christian rock band and my hair had to be shaved because they put rods in my head. And in order to do that retraction, they shaved my head and I was mortified that they had to shave the sides of my head. Well, the guys all shaved their head in the same pattern that mine had been. And just that little act was really important to me at the time, and I think small things like that can be of big importance and can be the things that we remember.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, yeah. That sense of camaraderie is so big. And we often receive messages from those whose loved ones recently survived a spinal cord injury, and they're looking for advice on how to help their newly injured family member or friend. And you talk about presence, but some of them say, "I don't know what to say." If you could answer them, what advice might you give?

Jenny Smith:

I think that's such a tough question because I know I didn't even know what to say, and my best friend, the night before my injury, we were sitting in her swimming pool talking about a woman at our church. She ended up having a stroke, a brainstem stroke, and she was paralyzed. And we were talking about what would that be like? And the very next day I ended up having a spinal cord injury. And as she is sitting in ICU with me, those are the questions she wanted to ask, but she didn't feel like it was the right time. And we didn't have the right time for 27 years.

Crystal Keating:

Wow.

Jenny Smith:

I think that can put a barrier between a friendship only because it was out of fear. So even if you're afraid, bring up those questions, have those tough conversations, and neither one of you might not have answers and that's okay. But just being willing to have that conversation and knowing that you're there, I think is a big part.

Crystal Keating:

That's really helpful. I think many of us can feel paralyzed, if I can use that, by fear to not want to say the wrong thing, but when you come in a spirit of love and care, even if we preface it by saying, I can't imagine what you're going through, I don't even know what to say, but what's life been like for you? What are you experiencing? I think it just opens the door to further and deeper relationship.

Jenny Smith:

Yeah. So I think just opening up that door if they're ready, and they may not be ready at that point. So everyone's going to be on a different timeline, and that's the other difficulty in knowing when is someone ready. So if I go and visit someone at the hospital, I go in knowing that I was that person that was not going to talk, I was listening. And so just to be able to be willing to have that conversation and even if they're not ready yet, that's okay.

Crystal Keating:

That's good. Yeah. We talk about sometimes that timeline of grief when you're going through various emotions, anger, maybe some denial, maybe deep sadness and depression, and then coming to that acceptance. Do you remember going through sort of those ups and downs as you began to process through the weeks and months?

Jenny Smith:

I didn't go through a lot of the ups and downs, and part of that was because I was just shoving everything down. And it wasn't until almost eight years probably after my injury, I was getting my master's in counseling psychology and it was suggested that if we were getting a master's in counseling psychology, that we needed to go through counseling. And I did not like that idea very much because I didn't want to talk about it, but that really started a process for me. And another thing that was even more impactful was the peer mentors in my life. And I got to represent Kentucky at the Miss Wheelchair America pageant.

Crystal Keating:

Fun!

Jenny Smith:

Yes. It was incredible, and it sounds so cheesy to say, but it was life changing.

Crystal Keating:

Wow.

Jenny Smith:

And the reason it was life changing was because there were 26 other women there with disabilities. I had only had a handful of people with spinal cord injuries that I had ever met. And so to meet someone like Leslie, who was also a quadriplegic, who was married, whoa, that was something new for me. And she was independent. She was able to get dressed on her own, and I didn't even know that was possible. And I had the opportunity for the first time to talk with someone who is in a very similar position about bladder and bowel dysfunction and not be ashamed. Those were topics that were so not appropriate for friends or family-

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Jenny Smith:

...even. I was just ashamed. And so to be able to have those conversations with people who have been there and done that were really important for me.

Crystal Keating:

I'm so glad you bring that up because there is something about walking through life with someone who can completely relate. Without realizing it, we don't understand the privacy that's lost and the many things that we take for granted, the independence of dressing yourself, of using the bathroom alone or by yourself. And some of those things are really impactful in our lives. I know Joni's talked about that, just sort of the shame. And then it becomes sort of part of the routine and normal, but who do you have to share with, unless you have a mentor? So if someone would like to have a mentor, where might they find one?

Jenny Smith:

There're several places that you can reach out to. First of all, if you've got a local rehabilitation center, a lot of times they will have peer mentors that they have a list of people that they have vetted and that they will say, hey, this would be a great fit for you, but there's also some other organizations, More Than Walking is one of them, Backbones is another, and the Reeve Foundation also has a peer mentor program.

Crystal Keating:

That's great. Yeah. We have connected with a few of the peer mentors through the Reeve Foundation and they have several, and both men and women in different stages of their injury. So Jenny, what's a typical day in the life for you? What does it look like from the time you open your eyes in the morning till the time you go to bed?

Jenny Smith:

Oh my gosh. Well, life just takes longer with a spinal cord injury. You had talked about losses, and loss of time is a big loss. Life just takes longer. So when I wake up, I have help three mornings a week from a personal care attendant. So on those days I get up about 15 minutes before she comes and she helps me with the shower and just getting dressed and some stuff around the house. I'm now able to get dressed and transfer into my chair by myself, and those were-

Crystal Keating:

Wow. That's wonderful.

Jenny Smith:

It's incredible. It's not something that I take for granted. It's not always easy, but you know what? If I want to lay in bed for a couple extra minutes, I can. And once again, it's small things like that that people might take for granted, and I try not to, because I know as I age and if I lose function as I age, I might be back to having help seven days a week and being on someone else's schedule. But right now on those other four days, I get up and put my makeup on. I'm still that girly girl. A lot of things don't change after a spinal cord injury, and for me learning how to put on my makeup was one of the big things that I really wanted to accomplish.

Then pretty much once I'm up and going, it's a typical day. I'm able to drive. I go into the office several days a week and come home, cook dinner, or reheat dinner preferably. If I've been at the office just once again, life takes longer, and it takes more energy. Really do think it does. And then I start on my second passion, which is being able to write for my blog, which is Jenny Smith Rolls On, and speaking engagements and social media, and just really reaching out to others with spinal cord injuries.

Crystal Keating:

That's great. You live a full life. So when you say going into the office, what do you do?

Jenny Smith:

I work for an international nonprofit organization, and I support my coworkers who live and work overseas. So I make sure that they're doing okay emotionally, physically, and spiritually as they serve overseas in a cross-cultural context.

Crystal Keating:

Oh my goodness. That's amazing. How did you get connected with this organization?

Jenny Smith:

So I worked for about eight years with an organization where I was distributing wheelchairs overseas, and when I had transitioned out of that position, my roommate at the time was working for this organization. And with my master's being in counseling psychology, she said, "Jenny, I think you would really do a great job at Member Care." And I'm like, "I don't want to do counseling." I so fought it. And finally, one night, God just hit me over the head with a two by four and said, supporting people overseas is what this position is all about, and that's really what I wanted to do. And I just had to eat my words and yeah, sometimes we fight what God wants for us.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and I can imagine that, even the support that you've received has probably given you a tenderness and a compassion for that need no matter the situation, about the impact of community and the impact of someone showing up and just listening. Those things are so key.

Jenny Smith:

Exactly. And as I've looked at it and been able to look back on the process of those intangible and tangible losses that we experience with a spinal cord injury, our workers go through very similar things. They have left a position, they've left a job in the United States where they had a title and they're suddenly overseas, somewhere where they're having to learn a language. They don't know how to do anything. They're having to build a new identity. And there's so many similarities between the two, even though they don't look alike on paper, I do think there's similar emotional steps that one has to go through.

Crystal Keating:

Definitely. That is fascinating. That's a great connection that you've made. Jenny, I want to talk about some misconceptions that people have about you or others who live with spinal cord injury.

Jenny Smith:

I think the biggest misconception about spinal cord injuries is that the paralysis, being paralyzed and having to use a wheelchair is the most difficult part of a spinal cord injury. And I would argue that that's not necessarily the case. I believe that it's the secondary issues that we deal with such as the bladder and bowel dysfunction, recurrent urinary tract infections, spasticity, pain, chronic pain. I think these are really the things that impact our day-to-day life so much more than simply having to use a wheelchair.

I think another really big misconception is that people with disabilities are asexual, and that's probably something that we don't want to talk about in church very often, but we're all created in God's image and we were created male and female, and that doesn't change after a disability. So I still want to feel attractive and be desirable and I don't know, at my age, maybe marriage is still in the picture. I think a lot of people are afraid to go down that road. So women with spinal cord injuries can have sex; they can have children. Same thing with men. Men might have a little bit more physical difficulty with fathering a child, but I think that's a big misconception that's out there as well.

Crystal Keating:

Well, thank you for bringing that up because it is a real part of life and that desire for connection and intimacy and the good gifts that God has given don't change, and I think that's really good to identify. When I was at a big church in my early college years, I used to assist a girl who had quadriplegia and I would help her write notes in church and get her drink for her, and sometimes during church she would cry. And so it was like, oh my goodness, what's on her heart? So we would just quietly go out of the sanctuary and I'd say, "What's on your heart? And she would say, "I just feel so lonely. I so desire to be married and it doesn't seem like a possibility."

And I think that misconception like, these things can't happen, or you don't desire it is just totally wrong, and that desire is in our hearts. So I appreciate just the reality of it. I think the other thing that I've noticed is that misconception of like, if you're in a wheelchair, then you also have an intellectual disability. There's something wrong cognitively. Have you encountered that?

Jenny Smith:

Absolutely. One perfect example of this, unfortunately, is I had wanted to help our disabilities ministry. They were having a Vacation Bible School. This was a long time ago, but I showed up as a volunteer and people were talking down to me thinking I was a participant and it showed me two things. First of all, I want to make sure I never talk down to someone who may have an intellectual disability, that doesn't mean you talk down to someone. But it really did show me that, oh my goodness, just because I use a wheelchair... I was almost having to prove myself saying, well, I'm in graduate school, trying to drop hints that no, I think you've got something mixed up here. I do think that's a big misconception.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. That's good to treat everyone with dignity and respect. I'm sorry that's happened to you. It's all too common, but you know what? That's why we're having these conversations because we want to change the trajectory of it and change that culture in which we operate. Well, Jenny, throughout this conversation, we've focused on some of the hardships you've faced, but let's talk more about the tremendous good that has come through your injury. You've made a significant impact in the lives of people who live with paralyzing conditions. We'd love to hear more about that.

Jenny Smith:

Yeah. I think it's really interesting how something really horrible can happen to us and yet God can still take some stuff and just do really incredible things with it. The subtitle of my book is How a Wheelchair Has Taken Me Places I Never Dared to Imagine. And it really has, and I never would have... On that day when I was injured, when I was 16, never would have imagined that I would have the opportunity to speak into other people's lives, to distribute wheelchairs to people in Mexico, in Afghanistan, and other places in Latin America, and really change a person's life in that capacity. And be able to peer mentor others, especially in those first few years where I felt so incompetent, I didn't know anything, but coming to a point of where I'm at, and really, I was impacted so much by other people who had been willing to peer mentor me. And so I feel like I have a responsibility to pass the hope I received onto others. And 2 Corinthians 1 talks all about how God comforts us in all of our troubles so that we can comfort others. And I think we need to have that mindset of, all right, what have I received and what can I pass on to someone else?

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, that is so good. What have I received from the Lord that I can bless someone else with? Jenny Smith, You're the author of Live the Impossible: How a Wheelchair Has Taken Me Places I Never Dared to Imagine, which is available on Amazon. Thank you so much for your time on the podcast today. As we close our time, do you have any parting words of encouragement for our listeners today?

Jenny Smith:

I would just say, if you know someone with a spinal cord injury or you have a spinal cord injury, life isn't over. We can still have a fulfilling life and we don't have to do it in our own strength, and I think that's a really important lesson that I've have to learn over and over and over again, sometimes on a daily basis. I can't do this in my own strength, but I can do this with God by my side. And just always be focused on handing that control over to God and being willing to accept his help in the process.

Crystal Keating:

Those are some great parting words, Jenny. Thanks again for your time on the podcast today.

Jenny Smith:

Thank you so much.

Crystal Keating:

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