

For Broadcast: 3rd January 2021

FEAR TO HOPE – RACHEL'S STORY

Interview with Rachel

“I was just completely cut off. My marriage ended. My friends didn't want anything to do with me. I'd lost my job. I had to start again with nothing. It's unknown and the unknown is what fear lives from.”

Celia: You're listening to Messages of Hope and I'm Celia Fielke. With all the unknowns surrounding the corona virus, it's easy to let anxiety and fear take over. My guest today, Rachel, has experienced plenty of unknowns, isolation and lost connections with family and friends. Something many of us relate to right now. For Rachel though it climaxed a few years ago when she was sentenced to almost 2 years in prison.

Rachel: I was put into solitary confinement for five days. I was sedated the first night because I just sobbed constantly. It's just such an emotional ride because part of you is just devastated, guilt and shame and you feel terrible. How the hell have you gotten yourself into this? Why didn't you stop? But then the other part of you thinks, well, I did the wrong thing and this is where I should be, and I deserve to have that punishment.

Celia: I know you were afraid of going into prison. Can you describe the fear you felt?

Rachel: Yeah. It was just complete terror. I thought it was going to be like what was in the movies. I was going to get beaten up all the time. It was going to be full of really bad people.

Celia: Once you were out of solitary your fears did come true and you were beaten up! Tell us about that.

Rachel: Oh my gosh. On the fifth or sixth day, I saw a book underneath a lounge area, and when I pulled it out, it was a torn up and ripped Bible. Cigarette burns through it and it was all ripped, but I just didn't care. I was sitting at a lounge area reading it, and I got knocked out. When I kind of came to I was bleeding and the guards all came running down. I just said, “I fell over” because I didn't want to be looking like I was gonna dob anyone in.

Celia: So how did you manage your fears after that?

Rachel: I tried to keep away from everybody for as long as I could. But the next morning, the top dog of the section that I was in, called me over and told me to sit down in front of her. I was just thinking, “Oh my gosh, she's going to kill me.”

I immediately went defensive and said, “I'm so sorry. You know, I didn't mean to offend anyone. I'll never read the Bible again.” She told me to shut up and sit down and to read the Bible to her because she couldn't read. We started doing that every day. Eventually more and more people started coming and then you know, we were praying for each other!

Celia: That sounds so surprising to me, why do you think that happened?

Rachel: I think it became safe because it stripped back all the negativity and shame, or our judgment of everybody, and we all knew everything as to why we were there. Giving that to God and asking for the Holy spirit to be in us and change us and to take away our regrets or our fears or our judgment, it was a peaceful place where we just knew that God was with us and we were all experiencing what he was doing with that group of women. It's interesting, the area that I was in, all the fighting stopped.

Celia: Rachel, has been describing her time in prison and the surprising turnaround that happened there when the top dog prisoner confronted and then befriended her. We'll come back to what that led to - but right now we're going to explore how Rachel ended up in prison in the first place. While Rachel was waiting for her court appearance to be scheduled, the fear of going to prison was so great, that she attempted to take her own life. That put her into hospital for several months. And that's where Rachel's private, secret life, suddenly became a public one.

Rachel: After my suicide attempt and when I was in hospital, everybody in my life, discovered that my life was pretty much a lie. They found out that I had a severe gambling issue. I've been gambling since I was 16.

Celia: How did they react to finding this out?

Rachel: My marriage ended. I'd lost my job because I'd stolen from my job. Everybody that, well I thought, were my friends just isolated themselves from me. My family found it really hard to kind of wrap their head around the fact that I had stolen from people. I was just completely cut off.

Celia: A lot of people would say "Why didn't you just stop?"

Rachel: You can't stop. And I think that's what an addiction is. Many people found that really, really hard because they didn't understand, well, why don't you just stop yourself from going? And there were so many times, every day I'd go, "I'm never going here again." And an hour later I had money and I was there because I just couldn't help myself.

It took months and months and months of working with professional people to overcome all of those urges. And then, Who am I? Because all I've done is sit in front of a pokie machine all day, every day.

Celia: Something else happened during your time in hospital that totally changed how you saw life?

Rachel: When I was in hospital, there was lots of things that kept pointing me in the direction that there was a God. There was a lady that would read her Bible all the time. I had one close friend that did support me, and she said to me, you need to give yourself to God. I thought, well, what I had been doing my whole life hadn't worked, and I have nothing to lose, so I thought, well, I'll read the Bible.

And when I opened it, I opened it up to Job and I read it over and over. Just reading that over and over and hearing this story about this man that just continually kept losing things, but he still loved this God of his. I just couldn't understand that. And, as my journey went on, obviously, that story became more and more apparent to what was happening in my life. I held onto that to get through all these, you know, situations

Celia: Coming up you'll hear how Rachel found a new purpose for her life, in the face of isolation and fear. Something she wouldn't have discovered if she hadn't gone to prison.

Celia: I was really interested in that when you were in jail, where did you see hope?

Rachel: I saw hope in the changes that were happening to the other women. I saw hope in knowing that I wasn't going to be there forever and whilst all this was happening, I was getting letters from my church, from people I didn't even know, just saying that they were praying for me

and that they were there and I was thought of. That was just so encouraging. I actually made a promise to the women in there that when I came out, I would make a difference.

Celia: Tell me about that, what did you do?

Rachel: I had come out and was on home detention and I was on parole, so I wasn't allowed to have any contact with any other prisoners. After probably four or five months, I just kept thinking about the reaction of the women that had seen me get letters. And I prayed on it and just felt like that was the direction that God was taking me.

So if it was going to work, it was going to be other people doing this for me. So I met with a lady from my church and said my vision of what I thought God wanted. We started off a small group and we wrote to the 33 people that had been in Bible studies when I had left the prison. We have over 300 names now and we have three different churches involved with ladies that write. We write letters to predominantly women in prison, but we actually write to people that have come out on good behavior or just want some support if they're on home detention.

Celia: So what is it you think these letters are doing for the women?

Rachel: I think it's giving them hope that you're not a person in prison and that's all you're ever going to be. That there is someone that loves us. There's other people that care about you regardless of what situation you're in.

Celia: Do any of the women write back?

Rachel: Seeing the letters that come from these women, you know, just different examples. One lady has written to say, "I actually had court today and I didn't think I was going to get this sentence. I've come back feeling really down. And then I've read this card from someone that doesn't even know me about how much someone loves me and how this God loves me. And I just feel like, you know, so at peace, even though I've just got this big sentence." It's just encouraging for all of us to get them.

Celia: With the restrictions that we now face with self-isolating, has that been confronting for you considering your prison time and solitary confinement while there?

Rachel: For me, it's bringing up a whole heap of trauma of this is how it felt when I was on home detention. The isolation in that period was probably worse than when I first went into prison. You know, I couldn't leave my house for periods of time. I was always looking at my watch. There's a lot of anxiety, I wasn't allowed to go out unless it was to go see my home detention officer, or half an hour to the shop. Much like probably I think people are feeling right now. I prayed a lot and I couldn't hear God and I dunno, I kinda felt, you know, dumped. God isn't here with me and I actually really struggled with home detention because I had seen so many amazing things when I was in prison, in God in action. And all of a sudden I was confined to my four walls. I just tried to keep really busy to distract myself when that anxiety and loneliness came. It's like this time now with the virus. We don't know what's going to happen and our fear is the unknown, but we have to try and hold onto the fact that we know this is gonna pass and it's not going to be forever. I don't know. I don't know what the answer is, but I do know that we have a God that loves us and that we're not alone if we talk to him.

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