

**A Conversation with Emily Belle Freeman,
Author of *Even This: Getting to the Place Where You Can Trust
God with Anything***

Q. First of all, congratulations on Even This. It's a beautiful book—personal but universal in the questions it asks and answers about God. Where did the idea come from?

A. Thank you so much. You know, the book began taking shape when I was walking on the beach. The ocean is my favorite place to pray, and that day, I was thinking about a specific question: *What do I need God to be?*

It came to me that I needed Him to be great, generous, and abundant. And I had such peace—I felt like He wanted me to remember the conversation we'd just had. I decided I'd like to find a sand dollar to take with me and put in the kitchen window sill, where I'd see it daily and be reminded of this experience. I asked Him to help me find one.

In the two hours or so that I had left on the beach, I found about 75 sand dollars. A message was whispered to my heart: *Remember, you asked for one.* I experienced the realness of God that day. He could be great, generous, and abundant—I just needed to ask.

After that, I started going back through and gathering other life experiences I'd had, then connecting them with scripture, and the book was born.

Q. You have such a distinct writing style—a lovely cadence. You're telling a lot of stories, but it's also meditative. Is this how you've always written?

A. I wrote that way in college, and I hadn't written that way as much recently because people just tend not to. When I do write on my own, for myself, it is my favorite way to write. Some people call it lyrical writing. This is the first book I've written completely in that style.

Q. When you kick off the book, there is a juxtaposition of getting ready for your children's weddings in an incredibly short amount of time—and it's joyful—and then your own wedding and early days of marriage, which were so tough. Why start here?

A. Originally, I started the book with two stories back-to-back: visiting the Holocaust site and then the early days of my marriage, when doctors discovered a tumor in my husband's throat.

I wanted to start there because those were the first two really intimate connections I had with God. I am 47 now. Those took place when I was in my late teens and early twenties.

They were the first times the God I'd learned about in church became real, and when I first started really questioning what He looked like.

But then, the trusted people who read early drafts of the book told me the beginning was just so heavy. So hard. And I wanted to invite people in—even though we will grapple with tough questions, it isn't all sadness here. So I decided to write instead about my real experience planning four weddings in seven months. A happy, crazy time. (laughs)

It lightened up the beginning a little but still allowed me to go to the place I needed to go.

Q. From the beginning, you are so honest and open. Did you ever think, You know, I could explore these hard questions about trusting God without having to give so much of myself?

A. That was one of the hard parts. (laughs) As I wrote, I realized that in order to be completely honest about what a relationship with God looks like, it would require total vulnerability. People would need to see where I've come from in order to see where I am now. The only way to really do that was to allow them to go to those really hard places.

Also, I feel like no matter what religion you belong to, more people are asking the tough questions that we haven't really engaged with before. It's becoming part of the culture of belief. I am watching people around me do it—my kids, their friends, people my own age. And I want to say, "I've been there. I've walked in that place and asked those questions you almost dare not ask. And I'm better because I did."

Rather than just shelving these concerns about God's power and presence, let's ask them. Do we believe He will hold up to these hard questions? The beauty for me was that He did.

Q. That's exactly how Even This reads. You don't shy away from tough questions or times. Your son's diabetes diagnosis at three years old comes to mind. A lot of parents will relate to this. Was it emotionally difficult for you to revisit?

A. Yes, it is interesting. I can never tell that story without getting teary. You know how there are some places you go that as soon as you re-enter them, it evokes all that emotion again? Brings it all back? That is one of those places for me.

I have five kids, and only two have read the book in its entirety so far. It will be fascinating to hear what they think when they read that part because I tend to be a strong mother—that is my mothering style. I tried to shield them from the fear and isolation I felt as I cared for Josh.

Q. Absolutely. We will talk about how you portray motherhood more in a moment—it is one of the most powerful aspects of the book. But for a second: let's go back to that

dark time when you picked up the phone and called someone to try to get some medical help. You spoke to a receptionist who told you that you just needed a massage. It is a little funny, but it's mostly heartbreaking. It felt like you were pointing to God here—as in, people can only help so much.

A. Right, yes. That was totally how that day was. It's true: when I tell that part of the story, it's so unexpected that often, people really do laugh. At the same time, it's so painful when you realize that we don't normally make that phone call, you know?

To be in a place where you would make that phone call is not a stable place. It is sad that the woman I spoke to offered up that fix. She had no idea where I was, what I was going through.

Q. It was devastating. If someone who is reading this book and struggling, what do you want to say to them?

A. I think it's important to realize that there will be people in our lives who God will lead to us to help us through those situations. I've had it happen a number of times. There will also be moments in our life that only we and God know about.

To better understand this, I think about Nathaniel, who was under the fig tree in *John*, chapter one, and everyone is meeting Jesus. Jesus sees Nathaniel and tells Him so much about him. Nathaniel says, "But how do you know me?"

Jesus says, "Because I saw you under the fig tree."

Reading that, our minds begin calculating, right? How many people were under that fig tree? How many fig trees were there? It seems like such a common situation—an everyday experience. But then, Nathaniel looks at Jesus and says, "My Lord, my God."

Then, as witnesses and readers, we think, *Wait a second. What exactly happened under that fig tree?* Obviously it was something only God and Nathaniel knew about. And I think we each have those God moments. The moment I write about in my bedroom, crying out in dark that night: that was my fig tree moment. That was when I knew God knew me, and I knew God.

Q. You write often about moments of intimate prayer throughout the book. For someone who is trying to pray but is unsure where to start: how would you suggest they begin talking to God?

A. That's a really good question. Everyone who knows me well will tell you that I pray differently than anyone else they know. They always say, "Pray over this! Your prayers always get answered for some reason."

Well, I have listened to others pray, and I don't hear a difference between their prayers and mine. The difference is when I pray, I expect an answer—and not always the answer I want. Sometimes the answers are unexpected. But I do enter into every conversation with God expecting that He will respond.

Perhaps it's taught me to be more aware of what's going on in my life, which I write about in the first section of the book—that awareness. Looking for moments when I see his hand, where I can trace his goodness. I have to live aware and in expectation that when I pray to him, if I keep my eyes open, I am going to see the realization of those prayers. That is the God I believe in.

Q. Back to motherhood. You capture the frequent loneliness of motherhood so vividly. What is it about being a mom that makes women so susceptible to feeling isolated, do you think?

A. I think some of that comes from the fact that we are raising these children that no one understands as well as we do. As you watch your child go through hard moments, we can't really verbalize what that's like. We carry it as mothers. We can't express what we're willing to sacrifice, what we understand. We just live it.

And sometimes what we are carrying for our children or with them is so heavy. It's lonely because we can't really explain it to anyone else.

Q. This is a tough question because you don't have all the answers, but what should a lonely mom do? Moms will look to you as someone who has walked this and understands.

A. One of the things that I have learned to work on that's really hard is leaning into those lonely, painful moments. Instead of thinking to myself, *Why don't I have someone here? Why isn't there someone who can take this away or help me shoulder it?* I've learned there is power in finding the quiet, in creating peace in lonely times. Because there is strength there that can come from spiritual stillness.

It isn't always about suffering the pain of loneliness in those times. They can also empower you. You can lean in and become spiritually strong.

Q. You present biblical texts so well—the way you retell stories is especially powerful. You make familiar parables like the prodigal feel immediate, personal, and relevant. How do you do it?

A. One of the things I love to do is find myself in stories. I do it in movies, too: when I walk out of a theater, I think to myself, *Who was I in that movie and what do I learn from that person's perspective?*

I also do that every time I read scripture. I write that often in the book: I am Moses. I am the older brother. I am the younger brother. If I was the father, what would the story tell me? Rather than just being a casual observer, I want to enter in, to be in the story and experience the teaching myself.

Q. You also write about the possible contentment that can be found in captivity. Can we talk about this idea that bondage can be a safe place and even where we are supposed to be?

A. It's such a dichotomy, isn't it? We go in waiting for the "come out." Every time we get into a trial, we want to say, well when is it going to end? What will the miracle be? What is the answer?

We don't do well when we're in the middle.

Think of Jeremiah's prophecy that the Jews would be in captivity for 70 years. That is a lifetime. This scripture is so profound. He tells them to build houses and plant gardens, and that children will get married. You begin to realize that there will be celebration and hard work. There is goodness here. There are lessons here. And you can't pass it all up.

What if your life is captivity? My friend is blind. That is her whole life. Captivity comes in different forms. And God is there—he is there, in the middle, the waiting. How do we embrace that?

Q. You write, "I feel safer when I am in charge of my life." So much of the book is about that struggle to trust God. We want to, but we want to be proactive too. How do you walk that line?

A. It really is so hard because on one hand, I don't believe in a God who says, "You just sit back and do nothing. I'll do all the work." I think the answer is in your willingness to be vulnerable and letting God do what he's going to do. That's scary—really scary.

In my own life, I have tried to realize when I am trying to control a situation. I remind myself that when I let God be God, things turn out better than I could have even imagined. I try to hold on to the successes I experience there, because remembering those successes helps me to be brave enough to enter that place—to let go of control—the next time.

I also think it's important to realize where we have made mistakes. In the book, I write about how I pray every night. I look back over my day and think, *Where are the times when I tried to be in charge, when I wanted things to work out my way? Where was I trying to limit God? What can I do differently tomorrow?*

That has been so telling for me personally. I expose places where I am not letting God in.

Q. Why do you think that God seems to use dark times—hard times—to help us discover who He is?

A. That's so true. If we didn't have those times that we couldn't tackle on our own, would we ever even need God? If we were capable of doing everything that needed to be done, we wouldn't need him.

Those moments remind us that He is bigger. His capacity is greater than this—whatever you're in. Those moments become invitations for us to realize what his capacity is. Otherwise, we wouldn't realize it.

I think about Mary Magdalene who knew Jesus Christ so well—perhaps better than anyone who ever walked the earth with him. And it's always intriguing to me that when He is resurrected, and she sees him, she doesn't recognize Him right off the bat. I always think to myself, *Why didn't she know? If she knew Him so well, why didn't she know it was him?*

I've come to realize that it's because she didn't know Him in that capacity—as the resurrected Lord. She had never experienced that moment. It's a relatable experience of not understanding God in a place. Imagine what happened in the moment when she did recognize him—when all of a sudden, she realized that He was even greater than what she had known about Him the day before.

Q. In the book, you push us to see how we are actually limiting God by not wanting to ask for too much. It's a brilliant observation, and it's pretty liberating too. Why do you think we're so afraid to ask for everything?

A. Right, isn't that so interesting? I'm actually really good at praying for other people, but in my own life, I have guilt. Maybe it's a self-worth thing. Maybe I question if I'm worth enough to have that effort expending on me. I also think, *Well, I can get by. There are people who need much more right now.*

There is something about coming to realize how well God loves us individually—how faithful He is. He is never going to run out of goodness. We live in such a scarcity mentality, we almost can't even comprehend it.

Q. You mentioned this when we first started talking: the sand dollar anecdote. Abundance. What did you learn most from that experience?

A. My main takeaway has been the way my prayers have changed. When I look at a situation, I always want to think about how it could be resolved. For example, if I'm struggling financially, I want to tell God what my business ventures are, and I want Him to help me have better ideas. I start trying to predict how God will move in my life.

What I learned that day on the beach is that instead of telling God how it is going to happen, I need to tell Him what I need Him to be. That is different. Then, I just let Him orchestrate my life the way He wants to.

What He had in mind for my life was almost incomprehensible. His ideas were so much greater than mine. They were also shocking. Things fell into place that I wouldn't have even known to ask for. There is something miraculous in letting God be God in your life—not constraining Him to a little place. Allowing Him to be as big as He is.

Q. How do you hope readers will use the space for journaling in the back of the book, along with the scripture and word prompts?

A. I have all the words in that list by my bed. When I am facing something hard—for me, one of my kids, or anyone I'm close to—and I find myself starting to give God solutions, that list reminds me to stop and think, *Hold on. I need to remember: what do I need to ask Him to be?*

That's what I write in the lines following those words. Sometimes I can't think of what I need Him to be. But as I start going through those words, I see on and think, *Yep. That's it! That's exactly what I need Him to be right now.*

The journal part: I like to write down those kinds of realizations. I also write down the names of people I'm praying for and situations to remind myself. The journal becomes a bit of a prayer room—a war room, if you will. It becomes that place where you look at those capacities of God and you're pleading for those things.

Q. There is so much here—so many important ideas to marinate in. If readers have just one main takeaway, what do you hope it is?

A. I hope this book helps give every single person who reads it permission to rediscover God—to redefine Him in a way that makes Him personal for them.

About Emily Belle Freeman

Emily Belle Freeman is a nationally-acclaimed speaker and bestselling author of six books, including the forthcoming, *Even This: Getting to the Place Where You Can Trust God with Anything*. A gifted communicator, Freeman is passionate about studying the teachings of Jesus Christ and finding applications in everyday life. As a wife to husband Greg for more than 25 years and mother to five adult children, Freeman finds her greatest joy in loving her family. Emily and Greg reside in Lehi, Utah. They are in the process of opening the “Buena Vida” orphanage in La Mision, Mexico. For more information, please visit EmilyBelleFreeman.com.