

Transcript for the podcast “Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women.”

Hosts: Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher

Episode 41 — Guest: Rachael Denhollander

Date Aired: November 9, 2020

Eric Schumacher 00:06

Welcome to Worthy, the Christian podcast that celebrates the value of women. Each week, we'll bring you conversations with women and men, on the value of women in the church, home, and society. We will not always agree on everything, but we do agree that God is glorious, the Bible is true, women are valuable, and respectful conversation on this topic is essential in our day. Thanks for joining us again, for part two of our conversation with Rachael Denhollander. Thinking back to your your abuse, what made you decide to speak about this publicly? How did you first report, what concerns did you have?

Rachael Denhollander 01:27

Yeah. So that's a question I get asked a lot. What What made you finally willing to speak up? And I think this is a really critical distinction. I didn't get to the point of being finally willing to speak up, I was always willing to speak up. There was no avenue for me to do so.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 01:42

Okay, stop right there, Rachael, and say that again, please.

Rachael Denhollander 01:46

I was always willing to speak up. There was no avenue for me to do so. There was no where to speak up and be believed.

Eric Schumacher 01:55

Unpack that. What does that, what does that mean?

Rachael Denhollander 01:59

There are, there is just an incredible amount that a sexual assault victim is fighting, when they choose to disclose. Everything from the police investigation to the prosecution to the way our justice system is set up to the community response that surrounds the abuser. When a victim discloses abuse, the very first thing they typically have to deal with is the community response. And the community response is very consistent. It doesn't matter if this is a church or a sports organization or a university. The community response is, you are trying to ruin a good man. We're not sure that could really be true. We can't entertain a charge like that. Where is your proof? Because we don't understand trauma, and we don't understand what evidence looks like in a sexual assault investigation. We often take the signs of trauma, and we use those as weapons against the victim. Well, if this was really true, you would have spoken up earlier. Well I didn't speak up earlier, because you wouldn't believe me, and you're doing it right now, you're proving right now why victims don't speak up earlier. And then you're using that as a weapon against me. You know, so you're fighting the community response. Oftentimes, the immediate response is, they just want money. I hear this even from the church over and over again, where they're bitter and angry. In the sports context, I was called a bitter and angry athlete who wanted to be an Olympian, and I didn't get to be an Olympian. And I'm just lashing out. In the church context, it's like

you're bitter and angry against the church. And so you're trying to ruin the church, or you're trying to ruin a good man. Victims are bitter and angry, they're money seeking, they're attention seeking. And then you take the signs of trauma, and you wield those against the victim, instead of understanding that most of the time, that's actually evidence of the trauma. So you have the community response to deal with first. And what that typically means for the victim is they lose everything. They lose what has defined security for them, they lose their church, they lose their family, they lose their physical community, oftentimes, they lose their friends, they lose everything. And so they are reeling from the incredible trauma of sexual assault, and then they have lost their entire support system, a significant portion of the time, or a huge chunk of their support system. So you have that community response to deal with. The next hurdle you have is the police investigations. And I know we all want to think of the police force as being what we see on TV. These Law and Order SVU detectives who are trauma informed and they're passionate and they're staying and they're just they're fighting as hard as they can to find the perpetrator. That is not what the vast, vast, vast majority of sexual assault victims actually have. Now, there are some phenomenal sexual assault investigators out there. The detective who did my case, was incredible. And was it this beautifully redemptive part of my story? My youngest daughter's middle is actually named after her. So there are phenomenal detectives out there but we need to understand that's not the norm. The normal response is to get a detective who's not trauma informed. Who is either doesn't care care very much or is overloaded. He can't care, even if he wants to. It is normal for victims to not even have their evidence pursued. We have a backlog of hundreds of thousands of rape kits in this country. We have victims who were sexually assaulted and they underwent a horrific hours long invasive rape kit exam where they had to give up their all their privacy, all their dignity, and then the police officers don't even bother to check the evidence. It's not that we don't have the evidence is that we don't even care enough to check it. Victims are asked questions like were you drinking? What were you wearing? What did you do first? Yeah, and the victim oftentimes winds up blamed by the officers that are supposed to be investigating that crime. If you manage to get a good police detective who is passionate about investigating that case, you're oftentimes typically looking at at least eight months to a year in the investigative process. Then it's got to go to the prosecutor. And that's another area where we typically break down. Very few prosecutors are really trained how to prosecute sexual assault cases, and they are difficult cases to prosecute. They're emotionally difficult cases to prosecute. You're often dealing with somebody who is a relative pillar in the community. They're very difficult cases, and prosecutors aren't trained to do them. So by the time you get to that process, if you actually get to criminal charges, you are in a statistical minority. Out of every 300 rapes reported to the police, only six result in criminal charges, six out of 300 reported to the police. Out of those six, only five on average are going to result in a conviction with jail time. And the average jail sentence for a convicted sex offender is less than the average jail sentence for possession of a controlled substance. If you, you can possess marijuana and go to jail for longer than a child rapist. And then most states on top of that, if you get through all of that, and you happen to be in the extreme statistical minority that winds up with your abuser in jail, in most states, they will be eligible for early parole. And they're going to get out within a period of a couple of years. When a victim reports they are signing up for losing complete and total control of the investigative process. You don't get to say no to the investigator, you don't get to say no to the prosecutor, whatever they say goes, you have no, no voice in that process. If you end up getting to court, you know, you have to go to court and you have to give them as graphic and horrific details you've ever experienced to the court in front of your abuser, knowing that they enjoyed every detail. And then to the 12 members of the jury, who are complete

strangers, and do whatever else ends up showing up in that courtroom, because it's a public courtroom. And you can end up with anybody showing up in that courtroom. And so the process of pursuing justice is incredibly traumatic. But you're also signing up for years long process of appeals, if you're lucky enough to get a conviction and then parole hearings and then eventual release. Usually within a couple of years. You're not even healed from the trauma of the court process. By the time your rapist is released from jail. And that's the statistics for rape. For non-rape, sexual assault, it's even harder. So when you talk about making it possible for victims to report, it's not that victims aren't willing to speak up. It's that there's nowhere safe for them to speak up. They know what they're fighting. They know the typical police investigation, the statistics, the prosecutorial, they know the whole justice system. Plus, you've got the community response added on top of it. Plus, you've got the reality that mental health services for survivors who have suffered trauma are so scarce. Now, sexual assault survivors are outpaced in severe PTSD only by combat veterans. And out of every survivor of a crime, sexual assault victims have by far the highest rates of PTSD. But those kinds, but treatment for PTSD, the medication for it, the psychiatric visits, mental health visits, inpatient care, you're talking hundreds of thousands of dollars of medical care. And that's just to get you stable enough to speak up to report. Very few survivors have those kinds of resources at their disposal. They can't get access to the help they need. Then they're fighting their community and they're fighting the justice system and the detectives and the prosecutors every step of the way. It can literally be a life and death issue. Survivors don't always survive the process of pursuing justice.

Eric Schumacher 09:47

So how did you persevere and make it through that process? What was, can you kind of encapsulate your story of reporting and going to trial, and what carried you through that?

Rachael Denhollander 10:03

Yeah. So I was waiting. Really, I was waiting for a chance to be heard. And as my mom and I started learning more and talking about it, my mom asked the question, and I'm 17 years old, she said, what do we do with this? We know, we didn't, we didn't understand the depth and the extent of Larry's abuse, but we knew I wasn't going to be the first. And we knew he wasn't going to stop. And so we had that conversation. And I said, look like, there is nothing I can do right now. One voice is never going to be enough. Because I was confident once I once I realized that he was abusing my perspective shifted from, there's no way somebody hasn't spoken up, and surely if someone spoke up, they'd do the right thing. Then I realized, oh, someone has spoken up. And this and because he walked in that exam room with me, that means whoever spoken up before I got there, they've been systematically silenced. And whoever spoken up in this time period that I figured it out, they've been systematically silence too. So one person's never going to be enough. And what we now know is that indeed, there were multiple botched police investigations, multiple cover ups, before I had even been abused, before I started to realize what had happened. And so I realized that like, there's, this what I said to my mom, so there's just there's just nothing I can do. One voice is never going to be enough. And my mom and I actually talked about going to the press at 17 years old, and giving them my story and seeing if they could do anything with it. But I really didn't know how to make that happen at 17. And back then reporting of sexual assault was wildly different than it is now. It wasn't, that the Boston Globe investigation had kind of just broken that barrier of sexual assault reporting. It was very new. So we didn't know how to do it. And frankly, most journalists didn't know how to do it either. And so I just felt like I had no avenue.

There's nothing I can do by myself. And at one point, when I was about 18-19 years old, I did report to a coach. I talked to a coach. Because I found out she was going to send a little gymnast that I coached to Larry. And I knew this coach loved her athletes. She was a wonderful, healthy coach. She was a close friend of our family. She was my sister's coach, I had learned a lot of my coaching from her. And I loved her and I love her still really, really neat family. And I knew she'd want to do the right thing. And she was also engaged to a police officer at the time who worked on campus. And I figured if anybody's going to understand, if anybody's going to be able to take what I'm saying and believe that I might know what I'm talking about to understand the dynamics of sexual assault. It's going to be this coach and this police officer. And I also knew that police officer was a mandatory reporter. So what I thought would happen was that I would disclose to her, and she would tell him, I knew she would tell him, and that he would have to report because he was a mandatory reporter. And I knew if he went and reported that, hey, there's this girl, I know, she's trustworthy, she's stable. This is what she's telling me, that would get farther at a police department than if I tried to do it myself. So that's what I thought was going to happen. And I talked to her I told her what Larry had done. And the end result was that she came back to me she talked, she talked to a doctor. And the doctor said, Well, yeah, pelvic floor therapy can be a thing. And she didn't comprehend the rest of what I had told her. And the presumption was, I must have been mistaken. Maybe there was a misunderstanding. They looked and saw that there was no official police, nobody, nobody had reported, Larry, to that point, [inaudible] two people actually had, and the departments had botched the investigation, that's why they didn't find a police file. But there was no police file they could find at that point in time. And so she came back to me and she said, You know, I told the girl's, she's already gone and seen him, I sent her, I told the girls parent's to be really careful and make sure they knew what was going on. And I don't think you should say anything anymore, because the gym owners are really good friends with Larry, which I knew. And this could really come back on you if they find out. And she was saying that for my protection, she was not being malicious. She was trying to protect me. But what I what I took from that what I understood from that was if I can't even get somebody who wants to do the right thing, who loves the children she coached and a police officer who has an understanding of sexual assault dynamics, if I can't even get them to really believe that I do know what I'm talking about. And when I say he's sexually assaulting people under medical exam, I mean it and I'm right, and I know what I'm talking about. If I can't get somebody who's close to me to believe that, there is no way I'm going to be successful walking into your random police department, trying to convince somebody that I know what I'm talking about. And so again, just confirmation one quiet voice is never going to be enough. And so I followed Larry's career, I watched you know, gymnastics, I occasionally would search online or to continue medical research. I would search message boards and things like that on occasion looking to see if anybody had ever said anything. And I just never saw anything. And so, you know, life just kind of went on. And I worked on healing from my trauma. I met Jacob. We got married. We had three kids. I talked to him about the abuse. We had processed it together. And then one day in 2016, I was cleaning my kitchen, we had three little kids, three little ones at that point, and I had the baby on my back, she was cutting her molars. And I opened up my computer to make a grocery list. And I had left Facebook up from the night before. So when I opened my computer, that was the window that popped up, and trending in the sidelines was a news article from the Indianapolis Star is that out of balance, how USA Gymnastics has been covering up sexual assault. And I clicked on that article, made sure my five-year-old wasn't close enough to read it because he was a prolific reader at that point in time. I clicked on the article, and I read it. And my first thought was, I was right. And my second thought was, this is it. Now is the time.

And there was, there was nothing in that article about Larry, it was all focused on coaches. But there were a few things I could tell from that article, you could tell that you had a journalism team who understood the dynamics of sexual assault, and they understood it in the context of gymnastics, they understood normal trauma responses, they had been able to put together the pieces well enough that the article was trending, it was picking up steam, and journalists hadn't been able to get that kind of traction before. And it meant that their editorial team had seen the importance of it enough to pour time and money and resources and a team of journalists into this investigation for a solid year. And USA Gymnastics was headquartered in Indianapolis, which meant this newspaper wasn't afraid to kick the beast. And those were all the dynamics I'd been looking for. And so I immediately wrote to the Indy Star. And I said, I have some information. I was not abused by a coach. I was abused by the Olympic team physician. I have the medical records to prove I was his patient. This is what I can tell you. And at that time, I thought the time period for filing a police report had expired. I said I will come forward as publicly as necessary, if you can just make the truth come out. And and I got a form letter, just a real quick form letter back from them a couple hours later. And then I didn't hear from them again, for almost two weeks. But about 11 o'clock at night, I heard back from one of the reporters, picked up an email. And it was very short. But it just said somebody else has come forward. They've said the same name. I think we might be able to do something with this. Can you talk to us. And that was an incredible moment for a lot of reasons. It was very painful. But it also gave me that little glimmer of hope. So I started, I started doing research on the statute of limitations in Michigan to see what that time frame was for first degree felony sexual assault, because my intent was, and I actually had the email mostly typed up, my intent was to write to the reporters, hey, if this girl is in Michigan, and she was abused in this timeframe to this timeframe, she can file the police report. And I knew by that point in time that I could be a witness. Michigan had pass legislation earlier on that would allow other victims whose crimes couldn't be charged to come in and be a witness in the criminal proceeding. And so I was going to tell her look, if you can tell her, tell her to file the police report. I will come forward publicly, I'll be the name of the face, I'll make myself the target, so she doesn't have to do that. I'll come to court, I'll be a witness for I'll do whatever I can, if she can just file that report because I can't do that anymore. But during my investigation, during during my research in the Michigan law, I found that the law had been changed and had been changed early enough to apply to me. And I could file a police report. And so I called called a friend of mine who is an attorney. And he was the first person I disclosed to outside of these reporters. This is what I'm getting ready to do. Can I talk to you about the case? Can I get your professional opinion as a prosecutor? Would you pick this up? Because I didn't want to be the one to file that report if it wasn't gonna go anywhere. I wanted to find somebody who had a really good anchor case. So Larry could just get pushed out the door, because that would kill our chances. I knew that would kill our chances. So I talked to him about the evidence. We went through the law together. He said, you know, it's a long shot, but I would try. And then he said something that was just incredible to me. He went a step further, and he said I will help you do it. I will write a letter on your behalf to the detectives and the prosecutors vouching for your character and your abilities and your integrity. And if you get to trial, I will come to court as a character witness for you. And that just meant the world to me, because he was the first person outside of my parents and Jacob that were willing to step into the mess with me, to use his gifts, his time, his abilities, his skills, the reputation that he had garnered. He was the Assistant DA for a neighboring community. He was very well respected. He was using willing to take all of those things and to use them on my behalf, when I couldn't give him anything in return. But he did it because it was right. And he said, Rachael, justice is God's work. And I'm going to pray you

see here on earth, and I'm going to do everything I can to help you do it. And that's what started the process.

Eric Schumacher 20:19

One of the things, one of the things I'm hearing in your story is, you know, you mentioned you could tell from the article that the journalists were informed about sexual assault and sexual assault reporting. You mentioned the trouble that you ran into, or that those who are reporting run into among people who don't understand the dynamics of trauma, they don't understand what evidence looks like in a sexual assault case. And one of the things that's really apparent is that there's a need to understand both trauma and the nature of sexual assault and reporting in a variety of places in the community, in attorneys, in journalists, parents, coaches, the medical field, pastors, to surround a victim and to understand them, advocate for them. What roadblocks did you run into, from the time that you made your report through his conviction that may have, you know, what kind of pushback did you get that stemmed from a lack of understanding of these things?

Rachael Denhollander 21:34

Everything you can imagine. Everything I knew I would be facing. I often get asked the question, what were you surprised by? Nothing? I wasn't surprised by anything. Yeah, and that's, victims are always watching. They are watching how you talk about abuse. They're watching what you say in person, they're watching what you say on social media, they're watching how you comment on the news articles, and they know that's what they really think. That's how much understanding they really have. And then the dynamic I lived with, constantly, even before I spoke up, was I'd watch what Christians would say about the latest sexual assault scandal, and how they would talk about those victims. And I knew that would be me, if I had been so unfortunate as to be abused by someone in the church, instead of by Larry, if my abuse had been covered up by a denomination, instead of by Michigan State University, the vast majority of you who are supporting me right now, you wouldn't be supporting me, you'd be praying against me. You would be condemning my character. You would be the forces that I would have to overcome. And that's how much you really care, that's how much you really understand. Your support's not real, because you don't understand it, you don't care. You're only supportive, because I don't threaten you, because my disclosure isn't inconvenient for the church. But you know, everything from I mean, we had, you know, there's the immediate community response, which was, she's in it for money. She's in it for fame. She's a washed up gymnast. She probably enjoyed it. I got it all. And usually very vulgar terms. I had, I had a really good friend, I stayed off of social media, and locked everything down as tight as I could. And I stayed off of the comments and news articles because I knew what they were going to look like. But I had a really good friend who came up to me at one point, like about a month after the disclosures. Have you read what people are saying about you online? I know. I'm staying as much away, and she goes, well, it's awful. Let me tell you, and she starts telling me everything everybody's saying. But it wasn't a surprise. It's what you always hear. In addition to that we had you know, I was incredibly blessed in the police detective that I had. But what I found out when I reported was that if I had reported just a couple of months earlier, I would have had a different police detective. And that police detective had botched the 2014 police investigation into Larry. In fact that botched 2014 investigation had only been closed out a couple of months before I reported. That former police detective had brought in the victim and the victim's abuse wasn't as clear as mine was. But she had brought in Larry and she had talked to him for over two hours, had been very congenial. And at the

end of that police interview, Larry walked away with a handshake and a promise that it was going to be cleaned up very soon, and that he seemed to be reliable. And she never saw outside medical experts. She failed to incorrectly note some of the very important things that the victim disclosed like that Larry appeared to have an erection while he was treating her. And then when the prosecutor came back, the prosecutor told the detective you need to seek outside medical expertise. I cannot charge this case. If you don't go talk to some outside medical experts. The police detective refused to do it. And she closed the case out. And Larry wasn't charged. And just a few months later, I walked into that exact same police department, but I had a different police detective. And the difference in her investigation and the investigations that had come before me, were night and day. What we also found out through that process was that Larry had also been reported in 2004, to a different police department. They had done the same thing. They had brought Larry in. Larry had given some excuses for why he had done what he had done. The police department and Larry brought the victim's parents in, and they told her your daughter is not a gymnast, she's not comfortable with her body, and that's why she thought that this was sexual. We also found out that Larry had been reported to the FBI 18 months, about 18 months before I came forward, and the FBI had three reports of graphic sexual assault, but they did not investigate those reports against three of our elite athletes. Instead, the head of the FBI division that was supposed to be investigating Larry, his name is Jay Abbott. Jay sat down with Steve Penny, the president of USAG. They wine and dined each other. They had drinks together, and Steve helped Jay apply for a cushy job offer at the USOPC. And while Jay and Larry we're not investigating the sexual assault cases, and instead scratching each other's backs and wine and dining each other. Larry was at Michigan State University assaulting little children as young as eight years old for 18 more months until I came forward. And then we also found out in addition to all of that, that when the Indy Star got prepared to release the report on Larry, that Steve Penny texted the head of the child sexual abuse division in Indianapolis, and asked him for help, "body slamming the sources" for this news story. And he was referring to the reporters that were reporting on all of the sexual assault in USAG. And that investigator, his name is Bruce, he was the head of the child sex abuse division. So his job was supposed to be investigating child sex crimes. He instead talked to the Indianapolis Star and told them they were barking up the wrong tree and sent out an email trying to redirect the Indy Star's investigation. So before I came forward, we had four different botched investigations into Larry. Four different cover ups by police departments. Until detective Andrea Mumford came. And she took my case, and she was passionate about doing what was right. And she investigated it like nobody ever had before. And that choice literally changed the world. But during the course of investigation, we also had an instance where the charges almost got dropped. The local prosecutor was going to allow Larry to plead guilty to possession of child porn in exchange for dropping all of the sexual abuse allegations. There were around 24 of us by the time this happened, I was the only one speaking publicly but there were 24 files on her desk. She was going to cut Larry a plea deal for the child porn that would drop all of the sex abuse charges. Larry would have walked under Michigan law with a slap on the wrist, little to no jail time, probably would have retained his medical license, and been out abusing kids within a year or two. The only reason those charges got brought, and by that point, I was an international headline at that point. I mean, I had done everything I could possibly do. It was it was a headline story in Canada and the UK. And even countries in South America. I had been contacted by reporters out in the Middle East. Everybody was talking about the amount of public pressure that I had been able to levy by pushing the story forward publicly was extreme. And the prosecutor was still going to let Larry walk. And I had and she hadn't even talked to me. She had not even talked to me. The only reason the

charges ended up getting filed was because the chief of police and Andrea picked up the phone and they call the Attorney General. They said hey, this case spans multiple jurisdictions, we need you to come take over. And the Attorney General said I will send my best. And he sent a prosecutor named Angela Povilaitis. And she took those police files, she took all 24 of them. And she said I am going to fight for every single one of them. That was a promise she made Andrea. And she did. She fought for every one of us from those initial 24 files, all the way up into when we had hundreds. She fought for every one of us. But at every point along the way, the train was almost derailed. In fact, before I came forward, the the former local chief prosecuting attorney who would have initially had review of the case, he himself was arrested on sex abuse related charges, prostitution related charges three weeks before I came forward. So he was out of the way because he was a predator himself and he had just gotten arrested. But at every point along the way, it was almost derailed over and over and over again. And the only reason it wasn't was because God put people in key places who did the right thing. But most victims don't have that. And during all of this, we were also, we also lost our church over my advocacy for sexual assault victims. And so our support system and our network was gone. Not over my own abuse, but over my advocacy for abuse victims. And that happened just a couple of weeks before we filed the police report. And so the unfortunate reality is, I fought everything I knew I was going to fight. And there were no surprises along the way.

Eric Schumacher 30:27

Well, one of the people that I've admired in this case was the judge that tried the case, and her willingness to allow all the victims that wanted to just speak and give a victim impact statement. Tell us about why that was so important, and how is your victim impact statement received in the Christian community?

Rachael Denhollander 31:00

I'm very grateful for this judge. We actually had two judges. We had a judge in Ingham County, Rosemarie Aquilina. And we had a judge in Eaton county also. And both of them allowed that. And actually, that really goes back to the prosecutor also. Angie was incredibly passionate about making sure everybody had a voice. And it was her routine practice to not allow any kind of plea deal unless anyone who was victimized had the right to speak in court. And so she made that a part of Larry's plea deal. And fortunately, we had two judges that accepted that as part of the plea. And so I'm deeply grateful for that. Yeah. And I think I think what that really helps us do is rethink what justice means and what it looks like. And part of Angie's motivation with that, and I think she's right, is that part of what's taken from you in a sexual assault case is your agency, your voice, your ability to, to speak up, to do anything. And so the ability to come into court, and to speak on your terms, to say what you feel like you need to say to the perpetrator can be a really powerful thing for a lot of survivors. I'm deeply grateful we had that. It wound up being a a real shifting cultural moment that we just we didn't expect, we didn't know that was what was going to happen. But that is what happened. And so I'm very grateful for that. I do think it's important to note that for a lot of victims, it isn't the healing thing that they want it to be. Sometimes, because prosecutors don't fight for them to have that opportunity, or judges don't allow it. And sometimes because the victim gives an incredible impact statement, and it's met with a sentence of six months, or a year or two years. And what that leaves the victim with is, I have I have just bared my soul. I have described for you in the most graphic terms what this cost me. And you told me, I'm worth six months. You told me I'm worth a year, you told me I'm worth an ankle monitor and

early parole. So I am I am deeply grateful for the time and the moment that we had. I think it's important to know that most victims don't ever get that. And when they do, that it often isn't what they think it's going to be. I would like to see that change. But that's going to take a monumental shift in our justice system for that to really change. For me personally, I honestly wasn't really sure what I was going to say, for a long time. Because by the time I got to the impact statement, I had already been saying all the things for 18 months now. Most of the world didn't really tune in until those last couple days of trial. But for me, this was an almost two year journey. I had already testified for almost three hours under oath, we had had motions and court hearings, I had been talking to reporters on an almost daily basis, literally across the world for 18 months, I had already gone into so much graphic detail. I wasn't sure what was left to say. So I really just had to think through what the last thing was that I felt like I needed to communicate to Larry and then what we needed to learn from it. And that those two things were really kind of the focus of my impact statement. What do we need to understand? How did we get here? And how do we try to make sure we don't wind up here again? And then what are the last things I need to say to Larry. And I felt like, there were a couple things. I wanted, I felt like I needed to extend forgiveness to him. Theologically, I don't think he has it yet. I think forgiveness is transactional and Larry has not repented. So forgiveness is available to him. I don't believe he's accepted it. But I did feel like it was important to extend that to him. And the reason I felt like that was important to extend to him was because I wanted him to understand justice. Larry is a very skilled manipulator. He often came into court carrying a Bible when he was sentenced for the child pornography and I had the opportunity to submit a letter to the judge, a victim impact statement to the judge in that in that sentencing also, which actually preceded the sentencing that everybody's familiar with. When he came into court and did that, and he spoke at a sentencing hearing, he talked about all the good things that he was doing. He talked about how he was pleading guilty, so that he could allow the community to move on. All the good things he was doing in jail the way he was contributing to society, how he prayed the rosary for us, and he prayed for our healing. And I wanted him to understand that there was no way he could talk his way out of this, that there was no amount of good deeds, he could do that we're going to erase what he had done, that he was going to face justice. And that forgiveness does not come from doing enough good deeds to outweigh the terrible things you've done. It comes from genuine repentance, which requires brokenness. And Larry had very clearly not demonstrated brokenness. And I felt like I needed to give him a very clear presentation of the gospel, so that he could not use my Redeemer, and the gospel of Jesus Christ as a tool for manipulation and as a tool for his own self deception. And so I wanted to really hone in on those things, and the concepts of justice, and forgiveness and God's heart for justice in the victim impact statement, because he was using those tools to manipulate. And I thought, I thought he needed to hear that. The response from the Christian community was really interesting and not surprising all at the same time. There was a very quick outpouring of support. The outpouring of support was focused solely on my forgiveness. It did not discuss my pursuit of justice, even though I was had dedicated so much incredible time and effort and energy and great personal sacrifice to the pursuit of justice. It was not mentioned by anybody who reported on it. In fact, a lot of outlets actually timestamp my 45 minute impact statement, and they time stamped it and cut it down to the couple sentences on forgiveness, completely bypassing justice as the foundation for forgiveness. And that really shows just again, the incredible theological imbalance we have in the church, we do not understand the character of God. We do not understand the gospel, we don't understand our own theology, because we act as though forgiveness and justice are dichotomous, when in fact, they are perfectly married in the person and work of Christ. And we do not act that way. And unfortunately, that

was that was what the church did, by and large with my statement again, the other thing that they did that some secular outlets and one Christian outlet, Christianity Today, picked up on was the statement I had in my victim impact statement about how I lost my ability to advocate for sexual assault victims because of what Larry had done. And what I meant by that was, I had been advocating for sexual assault victims at our church. The church we had been at was supporting a denomination that was rife with problems in handling both sexual and domestic violence. When I advocated for those victims, and I had to publicly disclose that I was a sexual assault survivor, the immediate response by the pastorality was, you're imposing your views on this denomination. And we do this to victims all the time, rather than considering that they might actually see something we don't see. Because they understand dynamics, we don't understand the immediate response is, you're a traumatized, angry, emotional female, and you're imposing that on this denomination or on this leader. And that was what my church did to me. And so I had, I had put a sentence in my impact statement about how Larry's abuse had cost me the ability to advocate. I couldn't enter into any kind of recent dialogue with anyone anymore, because the immediate presumptions were, you're just an angry sexual assault victim, and you're imposing your own experience on them. Christianity Today and a lot of secular outlets picked up on that one sentence, which I did not anticipate they would do. And they started digging into that a little bit more. And that was part of what helps kick off the kind of the reckoning in the church. With the sexual abuse that we have. It gave me the opportunity to speak into those dynamics. But the the reaction from the church, when they realized I was talking about them, was to very quickly pull support. And Christian outlets, very, very prominent Christian evangelical outlets that had asked me to do blog articles for them, that had asked to do interviews, as soon as they realized I was talking about Sovereign Grace churches, they immediately rescinded their offers. Mm hmm. It's the only offers for writing and publishing that I've ever had rescinded. And it came from Christian outlets.

Eric Schumacher 39:31

And that, that, to me is one of the saddest parts of your story as a pastor, I, I think I became aware of you when your victim impact statement was going viral. And so men that I went to seminary with and that were friends with and in pastoral networks with were applauding you and speaking about what a great witness to the gospel you were, posting videos to your statement. I went and watch the entire thing, was moved by it, thought it was fantastic. That's really where I began paying attention to the story with the gymnastics. When an article came out in Christianity Today, and I was reading it, so I was reading everything I could about you at that point, I really admired what you were doing. I read that, and I saw that you had lost your church in the midst of it. And of course, the first thing I did was start googling. What what's Rachael Denhollander's church, like what what's going on in this situation? And when I found out that you were you know, you had raised concerns with your elders about having CJ Mahaney speak at the church, and their support of him with Sovereign Grace Ministries, I knew immediately what had happened to you. And I was, I was sickened by it. And I went and read your material about the Sovereign Grace situation, which is still available on your Facebook page, and it was a moment where I was almost sick to my stomach, reading that because I had been very appreciative of CJ Mahaney and Sovereign Grace Ministries. He was a man that, and I'm not here saying that he's guilty of anything, I'm saying, I've read your, your evidence, and it warrants an independent, third party trained investigation, which which has never happened into these, these cover up allegations. And I was aware of some of that, because members of my church had a previous church had said to me, Eric, do you really want to be promoting his books and these things, because there's all this, this, you

know, these concerns being raised out there. And this was this was years earlier. And, and my mindset was, he's so clear on the gospel, and he is such a friendly, and humble man, and he gives people these gifts, you know, and he's good friends with all these other men that I admire. And if, if there was anything going on with Sovereign Grace Churches, Sovereign Grace Ministries, some somebody would have said something, and these men that I admire would not be affiliated with him. And then I was in a situation where it was explained to me by somebody close to him, what the real nature of the real nature in quotes of the situation was. And it was essentially that there was just an angry woman attorney who didn't like complementarians, and was seeking to tear tear him down. And when he was done, then there would be somebody else who'd be the next and when I read your material, I just felt like I had been completely lied to. And I felt horrific about it. And, and what, and I just want to say, as a pastor, what you've described in terms of the response of the church is 100%, believable, because I've had that response with me, even sort of advocating for you. Anyway, I just want to say to you publicly, as a pastor, that I'm so sorry that the church has responded to you like this. And I'm sorry that I didn't believe sexual abuse victims at first. Because of all the reasons people in the church don't believe it. And I'm thankful for your perseverance through all of this, because it's been key to opening my eyes to an aspect of the church that I don't think I would have seen if you hadn't persevered. So thank you for that.

Rachael Denhollander 44:05

Thank you, that's very meaningful. I think what breaks my heart the most over this is, I have, it's been incredibly painful. And it feels very isolating and like there's just no hope. Because the response has been so vitriolic on so many levels. But I have a healthy family. I have a supportive husband. God has been very gracious to lead us to a very supportive church here in Louisville, with godly shepherds. And we had a home church in Kalamazoo with godly shepherds that were very supportive during this process. Most victims don't have what I have. When most victims lose their church, they lose everything. There's nothing left to fall back on. And as long as we keep discussing truth, speaking the truth and accountability, and we keep categorizing off the women who do it as these angry, bitter women. As long as we can't hear those voices, we are keeping the gospel from being a refuge, we are misrepresenting the character and nature of God and Christ's work on the cross. And we're using the most beautiful concepts of Christianity like a weapon to hurt those who are the most wounded. You know, and I think that, you know, we really have to grapple with some of the concepts of Scripture that we don't want to grapple with even about what our leadership look like. You know, we are told that a leader, a pastor, should be well spoken of, that he should have a good reputation in the community. We need to start actually acting like that's important, as important as having the right genitalia. We are told that a pastor should be humble and kind, that he will not break a bruised reed, that you will know him by his fruits and that those fruits will be love. We need to start acting like that actually means something as much as being the right gender. Yeah, because we don't act like those things really matter. And when the Apostle Paul talks about speaking with the tongue of men and angels, but having not love and being like a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal, what do I think he means by that? He means you can say all the right things in the most beautiful way, but if the fruit of your ministry is not love, you are nothing. We need to start having very serious discussions about what it means to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. A wolf in sheep's clothing is not the clearly anti-gospel, person who is...

Eric Schumacher 46:44

He doesn't look like a wolf.

Rachael Denhollander 46:46

It doesn't look like a wolf. It looks like a sheep. We need to grapple with the reality that the only time Jesus used any form of physical violence was to overthrow the powerful religious leaders who were using scripture and weaponizing it and turning turning what was supposed to be salvation on its head? We don't grapple with those things. And we don't apply them to what we see in American Christianity today. Yeah.

Eric Schumacher 47:15

So many pastors, when they hear about a sexual assault or abuse allegation, or one comes to them, they think that they are practicing and honoring justice in how they respond such as well, there needs to be two or three witnesses before you, you know, permit a charge against an elder and there's no other witness to your, you know, your sexual abuse, or they try to investigate it themselves. Or they, you know, so you mentioned earlier, they don't we don't understand what trauma is, we don't understand the nature of trauma, and we don't understand what evidence looks like in a sexual abuse or assault situation. Could you walk us through both of those? What trauma, trauma and evidence? And then what should a pastor do? And what are some of the wrong responses pastors often have when these allegations come up?

Rachael Denhollander 48:20

So I think the first thing we really have to grapple with is that we just don't use good exegesis, when it comes to a lot of issues of justice in Scripture. Just as one very small example. You know, we always hear this first, except on the testimony of two or three witnesses. But we don't go back and see what scripture defines as a witness, we don't go back and look at the totality of how scripture talks about justice, and what the principles are behind that. And we don't even apply it consistently. You know, nobody comes in and says, we can't have a murder trial, because nobody saw, you know, perpetrator x shoot victim B, we understand that the principles behind that is, look, you gotta you got to weigh the evidence, you have to see what there is, you can't just pass judgment on someone without hearing the evidence. And that's, and that's the scriptural principle behind that. We see that repeatedly through the book of Proverbs. One man sounds right until another man comes along and tells his case. And so we don't use good exegesis. We don't even look at how scripture itself defines a witness in the Levitical law a witness is defined as someone who has seen something or who has come to know of it, who holds a piece of information. So in abuse cases, some of the most compelling pieces of evidence we often have are prior disclosures. Something prosecutors and detectives look for. Did you tell anybody about the views before you came and brought this charge, and how close to the time of the abuse did you tell someone? Prior disclosures fit even the biblical definition of two or three witnesses. Physical evidence fits that definition. And so we don't use good scriptural exegesis when we're looking at concepts of justice, when we're dealing with issues of abuse. And we don't apply the same kind of care that we use to other passages of Scripture. Another, I think another reality that pastors really have to grapple with is the limits to their own authority. God has given different jurisdictions, different spheres of authority, that includes the civil government. And he has given gifts and abilities within those spheres. But outside of those spheres, a pastor's authority is limited. And so to learn to rely on the God given spheres of authority, like the criminal justice system and the civil justice system, you know, the civil justice system

is something often, again, we don't use good exegesis for the civil justice system. But the civil justice system in our country actually functions like an arm of the government. It functions like within the Romans 13 context, because in America, we have bifurcated criminal justice from restorative justice. In the early systems, they weren't bifurcated that way. And so it we really are talking Romans 13, even when we're talking about the civil justice system from a historical and philosophical and biblical perspective. And so learning to rely on those outside, those other spheres of authority that God has given. And pastors also need to learn from other other experts, other spheres of authority and other sources of wisdom, recognizing the limits on their own authority. And that's kind of where we start crossing over into we don't understand trauma well. We don't understand, A: what normal trauma responses look like. We don't understand very simple things like that around half of victims freeze when they're abused, and they're physically incapable of fighting back or crying out. And so we very callously and incorrectly apply biblical principles about rape without understanding the dynamics of trauma behind it. And pastors often don't understand the physical realities of trauma and PTSD, this can lead to very devastating implications for their counseling approach. For example, you know, we typically think of trauma as more of a thought wound. If you would think the right things, if you truly trust God, if your faith is really in the right place, if you're following the biblical commands not to worry, if you're taking every thought captive, if you do all these things, then you stop having these trauma responses. But that's, but trauma's not a thought wound. And pastors often don't know that, because they have not studied the medical implications, the neurobiology, the chemistry of trauma. And there's a book I always recommend to anybody it's called "The Body Keeps the Score." And it goes through what we know about the science, about the neurobiology, the science of trauma. Very basic things. Like for example, when a survivor is experiencing a flashback, or has a memory of trauma triggered brain scans of the trauma survivor in that memory, actually looked like brain scans have a stroke survivor. Entire regions of the brain that should be lit up are shut off. And regions that should not be activated, are activated. There is a there's physical damage that happens to the neurobiology to our brain and to our bodies in trauma that has massive implications for our body chemistry, the hormones that are constantly released. Trauma victims often have extremely high levels of cortisone and adrenaline in their blood systems that keeps them in a hyper, like a heightened state of vigilance all the time that puts massive stress on their organs. So there are extreme physical realities to trauma that pastors don't understand, because they have not been trained to think of trauma as a as a biological, physical thing. Honestly, our approach, weirdly enough, in biblical counseling, is almost more of a gnostic approach. We try to separate the soul from the body, and act as if they're as two different things, and the trauma only affects the soul, and so we all we need is Bible verses. But in reality, trauma affects both body and soul. And so if you need, just the same way that you need someone who is skilled in handling physical wounds, you know, wounds for the heart, nurse, you need a surgeon for broken bones, in the same way you need someone who is specially trained to handle the physical wounds of trauma, the neurobiology, the chemical implications, the hormone implications, you need other experts who understand those things. And if you don't have that background, you can actually cause significantly more damage to the survivor, even when it's well intentioned, because you counsel it in a way that actually makes it worse, that misuses the gospel, or that is constantly triggering those traumatic memories and actually causing an additional cascade of trauma. When pastors understand the limits to their authority, they properly understand doctrines of the sufficiency of Scripture, and all of these beautiful truths that that we hold as Christians. It frees them to be able to learn the things that they need to learn, it frees them to be able to rely on the body of Christ and, and the common grace even

that God has given to all of us. And if we don't start grasping those things, we are going to continue harming the survivors in our midst, even when it's not intentionally done that way.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 55:23

Rachael, we love you. We respect you. We're so thankful for you. We're thankful that you were courageous enough, and that you were willing to walk into the fire that you knew you were going to have to walk into, for the sake of justice, and the gospel. We're thankful for you. We're continuing to pray for you. We want to thank you for being with us today. So please, I know that everybody who's listening here today would like to pray for you, would like to know how to pray for you, what you're doing now, what the future holds and, and tell us how we can help.

Rachael Denhollander 56:16

Parenting four young kids. [inaudible] Enough said, right?

Elyse Fitzpatrick 56:21

Yeah. All right.

Rachael Denhollander 56:23

No, truly just wisdom, you know, wisdom in parenting, patience in parenting. Jacob and I are immersed in just really heavy things all the time. We're at the receiving end of a lot of not very nice things all the time. So to be able to be patient and compassionate with our kids, when our own exhaustion levels are so high. That's always, prayer at that end is always appreciated. Wisdom in nurturing their souls and how we present the gospel to them and give them grace. wisdom in knowing what to say yes to, and in balancing, ministry. And, yeah, and family and work those are things, we're just in constant need of wisdom. That God will give us humility. We're going to make mistakes. We do make mistakes. My kids see my mistakes all the time, and I have to repent constantly to them. But we're gonna make mistakes. And I want to have the humility to see them and to publicly acknowledge them when that time comes. I think, wisdom, really, in every area is the foundation. In terms of what comes next, we're still figuring that out. I mean, our life took a big, a big turn, that we weren't expecting, obviously, three years ago, Jacob is finishing his PhD, well working to finish his PhD, at SBTS. He's about halfway through. He is really focusing, it's been kind of beautiful, honestly, to see how God has dovetailed our personal experiences with the passion and the and the theological interest he already had. He's done a fair bit of writing on concepts of justice, and forgiveness and how proper understanding of theology of the Trinity in particular, inform our understanding of justice and forgiveness and give us a foundation for approaching abuse and abusive dynamics. That's going to be a lot of his focus as he continues to work through his program. We're homeschooling the four kids. So that's that's definitely a big agenda item on our plate. I'm continuing to do education and advocacy, of course, it looks a little bit different right now, during COVID. Working on a boy's book, a little boy's book for Tyndale curriculum, for Tyndale. Yeah, I'm excited about that. And I am an attorney. So I do occasionally work with survivors in a legal capacity also, and help connect them primarily with attorneys that can help them pursue earthly justice. So just a wide variety of things and public policy. I do work on public policy also, with legislation that impacts sexual assault survivors. So wisdom in knowing how to balance all of that and wisdom in our approaches to all of that it's just always coveted.

Eric Schumacher 59:05

Well, we certainly pray, and will pray for you that God would bless you with, with and with the grace and wisdom that you need in all those situations. And like Elyse said, we are incredibly grateful for you and inspired by you, and thankful for your time to come on the podcast. We know this is this is going to bless a number of people and really our prayer is we hope that this will help prevent abuse and result in people responding in better and helpful ways to abuse because that is that is such a need. And I and I would encourage our listeners again, to go get Rachael's book, "What is a Girl Worth?: My Story of Breaking the Silence and Exposing the Truth About Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics," and then she has a children's book. "What is a Little Girl Worth?" Or "What's a Little Girl Worth." And that's a that's a great book. I've read that with my daughter. And so I'm excited to hear that you're writing a book for boys that that'll be great. But do do avail yourself of the resources that and the story that Rachael has so graciously given to us in the world. So Rachael, thank you.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 1:00:22

Bless you my sister, thank you.

Rachael Denhollander 1:00:24

Thank you very much.