

Unfavorable Odds

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Season 1, Episode 4: Healing Well and Living Free From an Abusive Relationship

Guest: Dr. Ramona Probasco

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Kim: Did your parents know the way he was treating you before the marriage?

Ramona: In the dating years?

Kim: In the dating years?

Ramona: Oh, no. No. I mean, again, I was getting the red roses. Ben was taking me to military balls, fine dining. Often, we went on dates. He would include my brothers and say, "Why don't you guys come along? Go to the movies together." So, signs that were there, now, they are very glaring to me; but—

Kim: Okay.

Ramona: —then, it didn't seem like it. It wasn't until—one time, my mother did come out to visit; and Ben had gotten upset with me. We were, at that, involved in ministry. We'd gotten out of the military. We'd gotten involved in the ministry, and we fought a lot about money. He was more of a spender, and I was more of a saver. He was just going through money fast, and we would argue a lot about it.

He was using money to pay for ministry-related items, and we needed to pay our rent. We had sold the house. We'd, literally, gone through savings, sold the house, just to try to free up cash. And I took some of the money, and I went, and I paid the landlord without saying anything to him because they gave us an eviction notice.

Kim: Oh my.

Ramona: When Ben found out I did that, he destroyed our home office. By destroy, I mean busted office chairs, punched file cabinets, broke computers. I walked into that mess. Mom was there, and she left shortly thereafter that. It was just so too intense for her.

Kim: From the FamilyLife podcast network, this is *Unfavorable Odds*. I'm Kim Anthony.

Unfavorable Odds—well, it's all about finding hope and help in those seasons of life when things get pretty difficult. You know Jesus has promised us that whenever we

walk through those dark valleys, He's always going to be with us. We'll never have to do it alone. So, on each episode of this podcast, we'll be talking with people who have learned how, in the dark places of life, to draw their strength from Jesus.

When we say our vows before God on our wedding day, for better or for worse, I don't know if many brides actually give those words serious thought. I don't think I did. So, what happens when your worse becomes your reality, and you find yourself experiencing physical abuse on a regular basis? That's what Dr. Ramona Probasco experienced for almost 20 years of her marriage.

Dr. Probasco is a marriage and family therapist, and she's certified as a Domestic Violence Counselor. She has written a book called *Healing Well and Living Free From an Abusive Relationship*. Actually, I have friends who have this as their reality. So, it was very good for me to sit down with Dr. Ramona to discuss these things so I could better walk with my friends through their abuse.

Ramona: I did not grow up in a home where I witnessed domestic violence. As a matter of fact, I grew up in a situation where I'm the oldest of three. I have two younger brothers. We were, for the most part, sheltered. Our folks had us go to private school. For me, it was coed up until high school. As soon as I started to hit those adolescent years, Mom and Dad were like—"Quickly, remove the boys." So, I went to an all-girl academy. Like I said, I didn't witness what I would later experience in my own marriage.

My parents were very traditional. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. To this day, I always say she was and is the backbone of our family. I really believe that my strength—a lot of that I got from her and her example. My dad was a very hard worker. He escaped from a communist country when he was a young boy. So, he brought with him an attitude of—never say die / never quit; if it's going to be, it's up to me. Which in some situations can be excellent; but in an abusive context, it can be misapplied.

So, with my father, he was a very hard worker; and honestly, I could say workaholic. He would agree with that as well. So, he was gone a lot, and that, looking back, I can see created a hunger in me for male attention to be the priority, I guess you could say; but yes, my growing up years very sheltered.

As a matter of fact, my dad was the one who introduced me to Ben down the road.

Kim: Tell me how that happened.

Ramona: Sure; sure. So, my folks were looking to move their company to the West Coast, and it was the summer of '83. Dad would spend the days doing different business meetings and what-have-you when we were on vacation. We were there all summer.

One particular day, we were at the beach. It was Mom, my two younger brothers, and myself. My dad had come, and Ben—whose name has been changed for the book—my former spouse—he was playing soccer with some of his friends on the beach. Well, he wasn't—I shouldn't say that. He wasn't playing soccer, but he enjoyed soccer. We happened to have a soccer ball that was lying on the blanket.

So, while I was gone—I was enjoying a walk on the beach with a friend—Ben came up and approached my younger brothers and asked if he could kick it around with them. Of course, they were like—they were much younger than him. They thought, "Oh, how cool—this college guy"—

Kim: Right.

Ramona: So, anyhow, I come back from my walk, and my dad is talking to Ben. I walk up to him, and Ben and a couple other people were just standing around. My dad said, "Ramona, I'd like for you to meet Ben. Ben, this is my daughter." I was—I thought, "Wow, he's really handsome. He's an athlete." I was a young teenage girl. So, it wasn't love at first sight, but I was definitely enamored with him.

Kim: Do you think that your dad had in mind a relationship with you and—

Ramona: Absolutely not.

Kim: No; okay.

Ramona: Absolutely not.

Kim: I was thinking most dads are like—"You know what? Stay away from my daughter."

Ramona: No. Remember, I was at an all-girls school.

Kim: Okay.

Ramona: At that time, we did not know—well, the kids didn't know anyhow that we were going to be moving the following month to the West Coast.

Kim: So, it was okay that he introduced you to Ben because—

Ramona: Right.

Kim: —you wouldn't see him again.

Ramona: Well, I wouldn't see him for a while. Plus, I think my dad thought, "Well, he's in college"—a freshman in college—and I was going into my junior year of high school.

Kim: Okay.

Ramona: So, he thought it was enough of a spread, but—

Kim: To not have an interest.

Ramona: Apparently not.

Kim: So, what was it like when you and Ben started dating?

Ramona: It was very, boy—well, that summer romance—and that's the best way I can describe it. It was—it was a summer romance. All the things that you equate with that and you associate with that—the walks on the beach; you know?

Kim: Did he sweep you off your feet?

Ramona: In some ways, yes; in some ways, no—because, again, I just didn't see it coming; you know? I was really focused on my schooling.

Again, at the time, I didn't know we were going to be moving. So, in my mind, I didn't think there was any chance of any sort of future down the road with him; but he did—I remember before we left at the end of that vacation, he asked if he could take me out. My parents agreed to it, and he—they let us use their vehicle, which was a very nice car compared to what Ben was driving around at the time.

He showed up with a dozen, long-stemmed, beautiful red roses; took me to this beautiful restaurant right on the ocean where you could see the ocean. He was funny. He was witty. He seemed to be really easy-going; you know? So, that, I would imagine, would be attractive to most people.

Kim: I'm thinking about you. You're a junior in high school, and this college student—athletic, handsome—

Ramona: Right.

Kim: —is bringing you roses, taking you to wonderful restaurant. I can imagine that you may have been smitten.

Ramona: Right, I was. When we ended up moving out that early part of September, my folks put me back into an all-girls school. Ben and one of his college buddies would come pick me up in this fancy—I don't know the type of car it was, but it looked like a Porsche. It was a fancy vehicle with a surf board on it. I mean, you know, what young girl is not going to think, "Wow."

Kim: So, Ben—during his sophomore year in college, he left school and joined the military.

Ramona: That's true.

Kim: You described how he slowly began to transform before your eyes. Tell me some of the things you began to notice about Ben that was out of character from that Ben you first met.

Ramona: Right. Ben—after about six months of us dating, that's when he told me—he said, “Oh, by the way,”—I remember he and I were walking one night. He said, “Oh, by the way, I joined the Army today.”

Kim: “Oh, by the way...?”

Ramona: Not understanding, what I write about in the book, the term super-traits—my super-traits kicked in, and I said to him—now, here I'm just a teenage girl—starry eyed. I said, “Well, I will wait for you forever.”

Kim: Oh, wow.

Ramona: So, that loyalty was already in operation. When I look back now, I didn't know what the red flags were. If I did, I think I—I don't know—I, probably, being young and naïve, would have flown right passed them; but there definitely were signs of—even early on, Kim—signs of disrespect, not keeping promises, breaking his word, even name calling in our dating years. So, there definitely were signs. It did not become physical until a little over three years into the marriage; but there definitely were things, now, that I see were clearly red flags.

Kim: Right. Well, during your freshman year in college, Ben proposed.

Ramona: Yes, he did.

Kim: And you described how he was, at one point, your knight in shining armor and how he put you first. I believe he even missed a soccer game so that he could be with you through a tough time. And you talked about how you and your friends would gather together to read those love letters—

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: —that he would send you. Yet, you said you were put back by his proposal. Why is that?

Ramona: It seemed too fast, and that is very common—not always but common—in relationship where abuse is looming, if you will, down the road. These relationships tend

to be intense and move quickly. Now, we dated three and a half years; but most of that time was long-distance.

Kim: Okay.

Ramona: But yes, when he proposed to me, it wasn't the most romantic response; but I think it was my logic part of my brain kicking in where I said, "Well, if you promise to support me through my highest degree, I'll get married now." He agreed to it, I think, not realizing eventually it would be a PhD.

Kim: It would be a long road ahead.

Ramona: Exactly.

Kim: So, you agreed to marry Ben.

Ramona: I did—although there were times in the engagement—he proposed to me in October, and we married July the following year. There were times where I was really—I could—my gut was saying, "Don't do it. Don't do it." There was just—I was feeling uncomfortable—like this wasn't the best thing to do. When I would explain to him that I was a little nervous and I felt we were moving too fast, his common response was—"Well, then, it's over. Just give me the ring."

So, I would panic, thinking, "Well, no, I don't want it to be over"—that seems a little dramatic.

Kim: Right.

Ramona: So, then I would back off from my concern and just regard myself.

Kim: Wow. So many women do that.

Ramona: I know.

Kim: We disregard ourselves.

Ramona: I know.

Kim: But you were talking about what you were feeling in your gut. You knew there was something wrong. Were there other red flags that began to manifest themselves as you were journeying toward that wedding day?

Ramona: There was one particular—well, there were lots, but I'll share one particular story. It was that freshman year of college I was in and had a group of friends—like all of us do. You know you meet people. I'm far from home, and he happened to see a

picture of a group of us together. At the time—I don't really go into this in the book very much—but I was really hurting from a herniated disk. So, I was in a lot of pain—sciatic pain. I did not have other proper insurance to get what I needed—like a—I literally needed a wheelchair.

Kim: Oh, my goodness.

Ramona: I couldn't walk, and my friends would—we found a dolly. I said, “You guys, let's use this dolly.” This is a true story.

Kim: Oh, my goodness.

Ramona: I said, “Let's put some pillows down on the dolly so that you can push me to class.”

Kim: Oh wow.

Ramona: So, basically, Ben saw a picture of us, and my friends pushing me on this dolly. There was a guy pushing me because, frankly, I mean, well, there is weight here. You've got to have some muscle to push.

So, one day, my phone rang in the dorm room. I was in an all-girls dorm room, and it was Ben. He's like—“Hey, Ramona.” I'm like—“Hi.” He sounded close. Back in the days of landlines, you could kind of tell. I was like—“Where are you?” He was like—“I'm down in the lobby of your dorm room.” He had driven all night, several states away; and he had come—and I am quoting him—to kick this friend of mine's back-end because he was upset about seeing a young man pushing me in this dolly. So, he said he was going to “blow up his car.”

Kim: Oh my.

Ramona: Of course, I go into high gear of trying to calm him down and explain. So, I ran down to the lobby, and I'm like—“It's not what you think.” Eventually, he sat with this friend of mine and realized he was just a very nice person; and Ben said, “Will you please forgive me?”—to this friend of mine—which, looking back, is odd—to go from I'm going to blow up someone's car to “Will you please forgive me,” that quickly, again, red flag that I blew past.

Kim: Take me to your Christian faith. How did that happen? When did you enter into a relationship with the Lord?

Ramona: I grew up attending a Catholic school, but it wasn't until I was 17 years old. Here's the kicker. It was, actually, Ben who first talked to me about what it means to have personal relationship with Christ. It was through Athletes in Action who had shared Christ with him. So, yes, Ben was the first one to share Christ with me. Then the Lord

used my best friend—Chelsea is her name in the book. We've been friends for 34 years now, and she was very instrumental in sharing her faith with me.

So, when I accepted the Lord, October of my senior year, my parents—and really my father, not so much my mom—but my dad's from traditional old country and, at the time, very, very religiously oriented, I guess is the best way I can put it. He met me at the door one day when I had come home from school. He said to me, "You need to stop what you're doing." What he meant by that is I was attending—it's called Student Venture—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —on campus Bible study for teens. I just loved it. I was going all the time making great friends. Chelsea was a part of student venture. He said, "You either stop doing this, or you have to leave." I remember standing at the door, and I was like—"Well, I'm 17"—not really ready to leave; but yet, I knew in my heart, Kim, that I could not—what felt like—leave my commitment to Christ. So, I said to my dad—I said, "Well, I guess I have to leave."

Kim: So, even as a 17-year-old, when given the choice between your family and Christ—

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: —you chose Christ.

Ramona: He's had my back ever since; yes. So, I left, and I spent a short bit living in my B-210 Datsun. I'm really dating myself now. Then thank God that wasn't for very long. Then I started staying with different friends. Then I lived most of my senior year with two gals that I had met at a restaurant where I was a waitress, and they were the cooks—strong believers. They really disciplined me. I slept on a mattress in their dining room, and I don't say that for pity or whatever. I'm just giving you background right now.

Kim: But I think it's phenomenal because a lot of young women that were your age—17—around that age who leave the home don't end up in the home with a couple of Christian women who disciple them.

Ramona: I know.

Kim: They end up in places—oh, my goodness—that are unspeakable.

Ramona: I know.

Kim: Yet, God—you said He had your back; right?

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: He was with you.

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: I can't help but think that He guided you to those women.

Ramona: He did. There's no doubt about it. Yes, eventually, the good part of this portion of the story is that my mom, then, came to accept the Lord.

Kim: How did that happen?

Ramona: Well, while I was living with the two sisters, I heard about this Women's Aglow Breakfast; and I said, "Well, that would be a neat thing to bring Mom to." So, I went to their house, and only my mother was home at the time. My brothers were in school. I was supposed to be in school, but—and I said, "Mom, I'd really like to bring you to this breakfast. It's going to be fun. I want you to meet some people that are really, you know, special to me." I think she missed me too, and she's like—"Okay."

Well, as we were leaving, my dad came home; and he said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm taking Mom to a breakfast." He said, "No, you're not." I remember us being toe-to-toe in the hallway. I was always respectful of my parents; you know?—at least tried to be. I'm sure I gave them fits. If they were here on the mic, they'd probably be saying something different; but I just said, "Dad, I need to do this. I'm going to take her." He just stepped aside, and we walked out. I took her.

Eventually, my mother became close friends with one of the leaders of the Women's Aglow in that area, and that lady led her to Christ. Then my two brothers eventually came to know the Lord. Then, several years later, my dad did. Now, my dad would share Christ with this microphone. [Laughter]

Kim: As you were describing the encounter with your father toe-to-toe, I saw that, perhaps, there was a sample of the strength that you would need in your relationship with Ben later in life.

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: Now, let's go back to this situation. You're college. Ben is there to blow up the guy's car. This is the same young man who introduced you to Jesus.

Ramona: That's right. Did you see his actions as being jealous and controlling, or did you see it as—"Oh, wow, he is just madly in love with me?"

Ramona: Both. His reaction bothered me because it just didn't fit; you know? That wouldn't fit anything unless you are in war where you're told you're supposed to; you know?

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: But it was interesting—and that's interesting—I use the term war because what I later realized is that Ben started to see me or other people as his enemy; and I don't know how much of that had to do with the military influence—because one of the things that he would say is: “Kill, kill, kill.” That was like his mantra, “Kill, kill, kill.” Again, that's not normal; you know?

That's—I found out later down the road—because I always wondered, you know, was there something wrong with me that he—especially after that first physical assault—but any of the verbal / physical / emotional—whatever / however it expresses itself—I wondered, “What am I doing wrong?”

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: “Am I causing this?” “What's the problem here?”

Down the road after both of Ben's folks passed away, we had to go through his parents' belongings and decide, “What are you going to keep? What are you going to give away?”—that type of thing. His folks were somewhat—especially his dad—somewhat of a little pack rat. So, it was quite the project.

As we were going through the house, I remember being in the guest bedroom, and I opened up the nightstand and pulled the drawer open. I saw this, like, leather sort of—like a brown book in there. I'm not a snooper, but we're going through their stuff, and we had to decide what to give away and what to keep.

I opened up this book, and I looked down, Kim, and I saw—it was his mother's handwriting. I recognized her handwriting immediately, and it said—apparently was like a journal or a diary that she had kept. It said that Ben asked to go out with his girlfriend—it wasn't me at the time. It was someone he had dated in high school—and I said, “No”—meaning his mother said no—and the next line said, “And then Ben choked me.” Then after that, it said, “Then I cried and cried.”

Kim: Oh!

Ramona: Yes; yes.

Kim: Dr. Ramona.

Ramona: So, I knew it started before me; and I think as much as that scared me—

Kim: Where were you in your marriage with Ben?

Ramona: Let me think.

Kim: Had you already been experiencing—

Ramona: Yes—physical abuse.

Kim: Oh my gosh.

Ramona: Yes; yes. There was just so much confusion around that. Of course, abusers—which I was not calling Ben that at the time—but people who choose to abuse—they always blame the partner; you know? So, I think God, in His infinite wisdom and grace—and I know that sound kind of strange to some people—but I do believe that that was His grace that He allowed me to see that.

Kim: Yes. As you were saying how you were wondering, “What did I do wrong? How can I change so that this doesn’t happen anymore?” it brought back floods of memories of my mom with my dad. For years, she wondered, “What am I doing wrong?” Walking on egg shells, you mention in the book, I walked on egg shells; and I wondered as a child, “What I was doing wrong?”

I had the opportunity to sit across from my father in my adult years and ask him that question. I wanted to find out why—why did he hurt my mother and me so badly. I wanted to know was it us: “Did we do something wrong?”

Ramona: Right.

Kim: He admitted, “No, it wasn’t you.” The relief that I felt in that moment was priceless. Now, I still don’t have the answers as to why he would do such things; but to know—I just think so many victims / so many women who are being abused, think it’s them. They think it’s their fault. So, they stay in the relationship thinking that can fix the situation by changing how they act, who they are, what they do.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: You mention in your book: “Only 1-percent of abusers actually change.”

Ramona: That’s right.

Kim: So, we take that responsibility on ourselves.

Ramona: Yes. You know there is an answer to that question that you asked your dad. There’s a gentleman by the—an author—by the name of Lundy Bancroft who is—I have

such incredible and deep respect for this man. He actually started the nation's very first abusive men's group over 30 years ago called Emerge; and Lundy worked with several thousand men before he wrote his book, *Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*.

And I had the privilege of interviewing Lundy when I was doing my doctoral research where I study specifically domestic violence and faith-based relationships. At the end of my interview with Lundy—I'll never forget it, Kim. We were sitting on his mother's back porch in New England on a fall day. It was just gorgeous, and it was about an hour long interview. At the very end, I said, "Lundy"—I said, "I have one more question for you." I said, "Why do some men abuse"—and I know women can too—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —but in research, I had to pick one gender. So, I said, "Why do some men abuse?" I thought he was going to give me this big, long answer. He said, "Because they can."

Kim: Because they can.

Ramona: "Because they can."

Kim: How did that sit with you?

Ramona: It made sense to me. I wished there was more of an answer. You know just like when you asked your dad—"Why Dad?" The answer, "Because I could," still hurts.

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: But something in that answer—there's truth and wisdom in that. It makes sense. Regardless of how the abuse expresses itself, abusers do it because they can. Why do they continue to do it? Because they can. The only way to stop abuse is to leave abuse because only 1-percent changes. Only 1-percent does the hard work of changing—repenting.

Kim: So, they abuse, in essence, because we allow that abuse because we're not walking away?

Ramona: Well, there are a lot of reasons. In faith-based circles and definitely in my own story and women I work with today, it's the same type of thing that I hear—is that—"For me, there was even more confusion because of my faith."

Again, I came to know the Lord personally when I was 17. So, I was still a young Christian, and Ben was too, frankly. He had just come to know the Lord, himself; but I really—I thought—I took God at His word, and I still do. He's not failed me. He just

answered my prayers in a way that—in a sense, I didn't initially want Him to. You know I wanted for the marriage to be saved, and I wanted Ben to change. That was the miracle I held out for.

Kim: Right.

Ramona: I know in just working with a lot of Christian women is that's a big struggle. You just—my gosh—I even—one night, I got out of bed in the middle of the night because I had read something about Samuel anointing Saul with oil—King Saul. I thought, "Wow, there's"—again, I'm pretty naïve when it comes to Scripture.

Kim: Uh-huh.

Ramona: I said, "Well, if this worked for Samuel, it's going to work for me"; right? So, I got out of bed, and I went to our kitchen pantry. I got some olive oil down, dip my finger in it, went back to our bedroom. Ben was sleeping, and I just—I prayed with all my might, Kim. I was like—"God, please, stop this. Please, Lord." I was pleading with Him. I drew this little oil—and my kids would call them oily crosses—this little oily cross on Ben's shoulder.

I thought, "Well, when he wakes up, he's going to be everything I always thought he was."

Kim: A new man.

Ramona: Right. Basically, all he was, was greasy. That's hard.

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: It's hard.

Kim: It's hard. It's hard. I believe it's very important for us to go back to that point where you're engaged to Ben, and you begin to see the poor treatment escalate—because there are women who are in relationships right now, and there are some red flags going off. Some may not recognize them. Others may see them; but they are hoping for the best—

Ramona: That's right.

Kim: —hoping for change. What are some things you started to see just prior to your wedding day?

Ramona: That's a great question. Well, the name calling, for sure. That was definitely becoming a problem, and my response to that—when I look back, I just see how—this

sounds sort of silly—but I wrote up a contract. It wasn't the first contract—okay?—with Ben. I included myself on this contract—again, thinking that I am a part of the solution.

I basically listed the words that he would call me, the name-calling; and I said, "Let's both agree that we're never going to call each other these names. I promise I will not call you these names, and you please promise you will not call me these names." We both signed it, and we dated it. I thought, "Okay, this is a signed contract." My dad was in business. This was serious; you know?

Kim: Right.

Ramona: But needless to say, that didn't last long. So, definitely that—as much as it may not seem necessarily like—"If someone doesn't keep their word, is that a red flag?" Well, yes, it is.

Kim: Take me back to the very first time he physically assaulted you. What happened?

Ramona: We already had our first child. She was three years old, and I delivered our second. We were living in a tiny, little apartment; and we were both going to school full-time.

Kim: Bible school?

Ramona: Bible school; mm-hmm. Ben had asked—he said, "I want to care of the bills," which made me nervous because I wasn't sure they would be paid on time; but I was overwhelmed with school and babies, and I was just like—"Okay; sure"; you know?

Well, I had discovered one morning that there was a pink slip in the mail from the electric company that they were going to shut off our power because he hadn't paid it. I was really upset.

His mom called as she often would on a Saturday morning. I was crying, and I was upset about this power going to be turned off and him not paying the bill. He heard that I had shared that with her. When I got off the phone, he picked me up, and he threw me against the headboard of our bed. I was in—I was like—"What is going on?!" It just—it—I can't really find the words to describe—you know?—but it's just a mindbender; you know?

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: This person says they love you and promises of forever and all that, and you've already had your second child with threw me like I was a sack of potatoes.

Kim: The two of you are literally attending Bible school—

Ramona: Sure.

Kim: —in the day, and here within hours of pursuing greater knowledge of Jesus—he is throwing you against the headboard of your bed. When this happened, it sounds like you knew that part of it was because you had shared something about him to someone else.

Ramona: Right; that's right—that didn't put him in a good light.

Kim: So, do you think that that prevented you from sharing the physical abuse that you would later come to experience in addition to what had just happened?

Ramona: Definitely, the fear of punishment, for sure.

Kim: The fear of punishment.

Ramona: The fear of punishment coupled with the fact that I really tried hard to protect our—his image / our reputation. We were really well liked at the school. We were amongst the minority of college students that were married already and had children. Again, you know, how Ben presented to friends and family was very different than what we lived with; and he wasn't like that all the time. There were times where he was really funny and fun to be with.

So, it just—it's what I explain now to clients—the type of conditioning. The phrase is called intermittent conditioning. In a nut shell, what it means is—it's reward, reward, punishment / punishment, punishment, reward / reward, punishment. There's no predictable pattern of when punishment's going to happen or when reward is going to happen. So, if I knew that every Wednesday Ben was going to hit me, I would be gone on a Wednesday.

Kim: Right; right. I'm just getting a little bit emotional here because when you talked about reward, reward, punishment, flashback—that was my life.

Ramona: I know.

Kim: And to this day, when good things happen, I, in the back of my mind, automatically think, "Okay, when is the punishment coming?" I have never been able to understand why that is the case in my life as a 50-year-old woman until today—intermittent conditioning.

Ramona: That's right.

Kim: There are those being abused who are being conditioned—

Ramona: Right.

Kim: —and they don't even realize that. That reward is what keeps them coming back—

Ramona: That's right.

Kim: —into that same abusive situation.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: When was it that you realized that you were living in an abusive situation? When did you first use the word abuse?

Ramona: Before I started using the word abuse, I knew that something was very wrong. I, myself—just like an abuser has a Doctor Jekyll / Mr. Hyde duality in their presentation between public persona / private, so does the recipient of abuse.

So, I had my public presentation—all put together, straight-A's. I ended up graduating valedictorian—okay?—of this Bible school. He and I graduated together. So, I knew in my gut that it was wrong because of the secrecy and just the fact that you don't treat people like that; but I didn't start using it until—if you see this form here—

Kim: Yes, describe what's before us. What are we looking at right now?

Ramona: Okay; what we're looking at is—and this is an answer to your question, “When did I start calling it abuse?” This is the exact form I filled out when I started working with the very first counselor. I ended up working with her because when we moved to the West Coast, it became known—I'm not going to get into the details of it—but CPS, which is Child Protective Services—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —was notified about what was going on in our home. The social worker told me that if I let Ben back into the house, I risked losing the kids. So, that was a massive, massive wake-up call to me.

So, through this social worker through Child Protective Services, she connected me with a counselor who was specifically trained in domestic violence. I started working with this lady; and in the very first counseling session, she said, “I have a form”—which is the one you are looking at right now—“that I want you to fill out.” She said, “I want you to mark whatever you've experienced in your relationship with Ben, even if it happened once.”

Well, when I first looked at the form, and I read at the top “Abuse Evaluation Form,” I was like—“Oh.” That's the first time I read the word. It's the first time that that, in a sense, kind of hit my brain that there is a word that we use for this type of behavior. It's

not—"He's got a bad temper," "He's in a bad mood," "You have too many bills," "You have to learn how to communicate"—whatever—all these excuses that we make for abuse.

Kim: Mm-hmm.

Ramona: It's because he can.

Kim: Because he can.

Ramona: All right. So, I went ahead, and I just started marking. She has these different sections here, as you can see—physical abuse. She had it divided, and I just started marking most of the things on here: emotional, verbal abuse.

Kim: There could be 50 / 60 options for you to mark.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: And I'm looking at this piece of paper, and you have nearly marked every single one—

Ramona: I know. There were a few I left off.

Kim: —with very few exceptions.

Ramona: Right; right. Well, I never knew—what ended up happening is this ended up being entered into my divorce when we were going through divorce. I requested a protective order / a restraining order which was granted. This was like an amendment—whatever—I'm not sure of the proper legal term; but it was added with the request for the restraining order. So, I never knew what was going—that other people would read it—but—

Kim: Would you have filled this out if you knew other people would read it?

Ramona: Back then?

Kim: Back then.

Ramona: Not to the degree of honest I showed; no.

Kim: Why not?

Ramona: It just made it too real, I guess; you know? I knew enough—because I had gotten my degree in counseling. At that point, I had my Master's Degree. I was actually

in private practice when we were living in the South, and I stepped away because the incongruency between what I told clients—to live in truth—and the lie that I was living.

I remember the day I walked into one of my colleague's office—because no one knew about it—even with her, I didn't go into any detail—but I said, "You know I'm going to start refer my clients out, and I need to step away." I remember her saying to me—she was very polite, little Southern gal—in so many words, she's like—"Are you crazy? You know you have this lucrative counseling practice?" I just—I didn't go into detail as to why, but the incongruency was just destroying me.

Kim: There was a time when you walked into a counselor's office, and you wore sunglasses. It wasn't because it was bright and sunny. It wasn't because you were trying to go incognito. There was something else. What were you hiding?

Ramona: That was actually our pastor, and that's when we were still living in the South. So, that was before I met this counselor and filled out this form. It was also before I knew that you do not do couple's counseling when abuse is present. I didn't know that, and I wasn't calling it abuse yet. So, I thought it was a couple's problem.

So, we would meet with our pastor, typically, together; but on this particular—honestly, I don't remember if it was an individual session, or Ben just didn't come because that was a big problem. If he knew I wanted something—like counseling or to meet with friends for dinner or whatever—and he was upset with me for any reason, he would back out last minute and not keep his promise.

So, anyhow, I met with our pastor. I remember I was sitting in his office, and I had a black eye. Before—you know I caked on the makeup and put on some glasses. When I walked into our pastor's office, I left the glasses on. He—as we started our session, he's like—"Why are you wearing glasses?" I lied to him.

Kim: Did you?

Ramona: I still sort of feel bad about that; but anyhow, I lied to him. I said, "I've just got a really bad headache, and the light bothers my eyes—it bothers me." He said, "Well, can you just please just take them off for a second?" So, at this point, what am I going to do—say "No?" "No, I'm not going to take them off." So, no, I took them off, and he looked at me; and he said, "I'm calling the police." I said, "Please don't." I said, "Please, please." I said, "Don't do it. I promise if this ever happens again"—famous last words—"If this ever happens again, I will the police myself."

Now, the reason I never called the police is because Ben had always told me: "If you ever call the police, someone's going to end up dead." That is what he would tell me. Because of his training / because of his threats, I just believed him. Because that was a big thing—he would buy guns. He would buy them. I would hide them. He would buy them. I would hide them. So, I just took him seriously.

Kim: So scary.

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: Did he, at one point, threaten to snap your neck?

Ramona: That was—I know that sounds so—but yes, yes, he would—that was a common thing he would say. He would say—or he would threaten to snap my neck, and he'd say, "I'll cut you into so many pieces not even your"—

Kim: Goodness.

Ramona: —"mother will recognize you"; yes. He would laugh at that. He would think it was funny; but again, with his military training, Ben's a big guy—real big guy—even if he was little guy, I would take something like that serious.

Kim: Right.

Ramona: It scared me.

Kim: To the woman who is listening to our conversation right now, and she's heard some of those same words—she's afraid. She feels trapped in this space because she knows that if she reaches out for help, she's in trouble.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: She knows if she stays, she's in trouble. If she has children involved, they could be in trouble. How would you counsel that woman?

Ramona: What I would encourage her is to—well, go to my website, DrRamona.com, and I have a section on safety planning. I actually wrote my safety planning section for when a person is preparing / their contemplating leaving and the things to keep in mind when you're preparing to leave. Then my next section is when you're actually leaving. Then the third is after you've left because, Kim, the most dangerous time for injury and fatality—it goes up by 75-percent—the risk factor—is when a victim tries to leave. So, that is the most dangerous time—is when you are leaving.

So, if you can prepare—now, if you can't, and you're in eminent danger, then, you just—you have to just go—go for it—even if you don't have anything but the shirt on your back. And I've worked with people who have had nothing but the shirt on their back and their baby tucked under their arm. They just don't look back.

Kim: You were in an abusive relationship for how many years?

Ramona: 20.

Kim: How did you make it through? That is a long time—

Ramona: I know.

Kim: —to live under those circumstances.

Ramona: What sustained me the most was definitely my faith. As much as I was confused for many years about the “Pray more and I’ll get the miracle I want,” I would talk to the Lord constantly.

I remember one particular time when I was home by myself, I was folding laundry, and my son had come home. I always folded laundry in the same place on the second floor. It was spread everywhere, and I’m just trying to tackle the piles. I was talking to the Lord because, often, when I was home by myself, I would just talk to Jesus out loud. My son was walking up the stairs, and he says, “Momma, are you talking to Jesus?” I said, “You best hope I am. You kids drive me crazy.” [Laughter] I’m just kidding.

But it was. It was—I talked to Him all the time. That was why—when I was riding here this morning, it was a beautiful drive to your studio and building here—I was just looking at the trees and the sun and the winding roads, and I was like—“Wow, Lord.”

I can remember, Kim, so many nights, I would lay on my side, and we would be back to back. The tears would just fall sideways; you know? Women know what I’m talking about—men, too—if they are going through this.

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: Those sideways tears on your pillow, and I just was like—“God, please help me.” I would always say, “Help me, Lord. Help me, Lord. Help me, Lord.” My relationship was constantly on my mind because abusive relationships—they require all your focus, your attention. So, it was really—it was God, and He just protected me. He held me. He’s who I talked to. He’s always been my go-to guy.

Kim: Now, you talk so candidly and deeply about your faith and how it was God that helped you to endure those 20 years. Was it your biblical viewpoint that kept you in that abusive marriage? I know that there are some women who are dealing with this similar situation, and they believe that there is only one reason to leave that marriage; and that is infidelity.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: What do you say to that woman who also shares your Christian faith, yet, she’s in a dangerous situation? It’s a difficult one.

Ramona: Right. It’s one I wrestled with myself.

Kim: Absolutely.

Ramona: I'm not a Bible scholar; okay? So, I don't profess to be. What I do know is that—"Jesus loves me. This I know"—and what I do know is that when I think about my Jesus on the cross, I think, "He died for me. He died for you. He died for people." Marriage is important. Marriage is important to God. Marriage is important to me, and it should be.

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: But if we put the institution of marriage above the safety of a human life, I believe that's backward because Christ did not die for institutions. He died for people. So, I believe we must always prioritize the safety of human life. If a victim of abuse decides to divorce, my thought on that is that she's merely legally carrying out what the abuser already severed spiritually. I believe abuse severs the covenant.

Kim: There can be shame involved in an abusive situation, and it's difficult for the person being abused to share. Yet, as you mentioned, the safety of that individual is so important in God's eyes as well as that marriage.

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: My heart aches for those who are wrestling in that struggle. I don't have the answers, but God does.

Ramona: Yes, He does.

Kim: My hope is that the person listening to this conversation / the person hearing your heart for the Lord and for life can understand that they can seek protection.

Ramona: That's right. That's right.

Kim: It's so hard—such a hard situation, Dr. Ramona.

Ramona: It is. It is, and I would turn to the Scriptures a lot—especially the book of Psalms. Many nights, I would—after Ben fell asleep, I would go and grab my Bible, and I would hold my Bible. I would encourage my kids to do that. My one—my oldest daughter slept with it for so many years that her little Bible, like, curled up; but there are a couple of verses that it's okay for me to share—

Kim: Please do.

Ramona: —in regard to what we are talking about right now. In Psalm 72:14, it says, "He will redeem them from oppression and violence for their lives are precious to Him." Isn't that so sweet?

Another one, in Psalm 140, verse 1—it says, “O Lord, rescue me from evil people. Protect me from those who are violent.”

Then, this particular one in Psalm 18:16-20 says, “He reached down from heaven and rescued me.”

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: “He drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemies, from those who hated me and were too strong for me. They attacked me when I was in distress, but the Lord”—I love that part—“but the Lord supported me. He led me to a place of safety. He rescued me because He delights in me. The Lord rewarded me for doing right. He restored me because of my innocence”—not because of my perfection. I’m not—

Kim: Right.

Ramona: I wasn’t then, and you could ask my sweetie today. I am not a perfect wife; but no one deserves to be abused. Abuse is not love. True love is safe love; and when there is fear in a relationship, you know, there is abuse.

Finally, this particular verse is near and dear to me. In Psalm 56:8, it says, “You keep track of all my sorrows. You’ve collected all of my tears in your bottle. You’ve recorded each one in your book.” So, all those tears that when we are laying on our pillow—the ones that drip sideways—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —and even those ones that no one ever sees—those ones that are on the inside, which to me those are even worse—the ones we don’t cry—

Kim: The ones we fight back.

Ramona: Yes, the ones we fight back; exactly.

Kim: God cares so much about us that He, not only sees every tear—

Ramona: Right.

Kim: —but He collects those tears.

Ramona: They are precious.

Kim: When did you first say, “Enough is enough?”

Ramona: That's good way of asking me because there was the first time, then, you have to recommit to it. The very first time was when I was sitting across a table in a restaurant; and I guess people have to read my book for this—unless we get to this part—but I—in my story, I take Ben back after a three year separation; but just prior to that, I was sitting down with a lady who was helping people with financial problems and just being in that marriage and joining my name with his credit and all of that. I was—my credit was a mess.

So, I was sitting with her. Somehow, we had—I don't know how—what tipped the conversation, and I didn't—I only shared a little, teeny bit of my story. Nothing like what we are doing today. She just—she put down her pen, and she looked up at me. She said, "When are you going to say, 'Enough?'" I remember thinking—I didn't say it out loud—but I remember thinking, "Man, I didn't realize I could."

Kim: Oh.

Ramona: You know? I know that may sound crazy, but I just—I don't know—I mean I wanted to say—I had left Ben many times, and the average person in this type of abusive situation—they leave six to eight times before they leave for good.

Kim: You know I want to say, "That doesn't take me by surprise that you didn't think that you could say." You didn't know you had a right to say, "No."

Ramona: Right.

Kim: "Enough is enough."

Ramona: Right; exactly.

Kim: You've been conditioned to accept it.

Ramona: And to believe—and my faulty thinking about God thinking that I just—I don't know how long I'm going to have wait for my miracle, but I'm going to wait. I'm going to be patient. I'm going to be still before God. You know these—those are all true Scriptures but misapplied in this situation; but just looking at her that day, I thought, "Hmm? That's interesting." So, mentally, in my head, it was like—"Okay, she's right. She's right about this. It's not only okay, but that's wisdom talking to me."

Kim: Right. Does it make God any less powerful that He did not change your husband?

Ramona: No, it just makes Him God because He gives us a freewill. You know the story I often think of is when Jesus was on the cross, and He had the two criminals. One of them is saying—I'm paraphrasing here—"You are the Savior. Remember me when You go to paradise." Jesus tells him—"You're going to be with me in paradise." Well, the other guy on the other side of the cross is mocking the Lord.

One day when I was reading that, I was like—“Wow, Jesus didn’t turn around—He’s hanging on that cross—and say to that other guy, ‘Hey, buddy, do you know who I am? I’m Jesus. You better get right, right now’”—

Kim: Right.

Ramona: —“‘because it’s not a good plan for you, if not.’” He let that man choose. That is what distinguishes us from animals. Animals have instinct. We have freewill. We’re created in God’s image. That’s a gift. It was not Ben’s will to change. The bigger miracle was me accepting the fact of God’s sovereignty that He allows each of us a freewill; and sometimes, we choose in ways that are contrary to what He even desires for us.

Kim: Dr. Ramona, take us through the process of you finally coming into a place of walking away from your abusive marriage.

Ramona: All right. I had taken—if I may, kind of just give a little preface that part of the story. When I took Ben back, it was after the three years where I was in counseling. I don’t—individual counseling—I don’t believe he did, but he was involved with the men’s group. I was involved with the women’s group. Then my dad said, “I want to send you two to a week long, intensive marriage-type of thing”—where we were one on one with this psychologist for a week straight.

So, after that, I had purchased a home. Again, a lot of details to that story—but I was involved with some real estate; and I had gotten a commission. I decided to put the whole thing on a house. I bought this house, and I was sitting there on New Year’s Eve, and my son was in Europe. He was playing soccer. My daughter was being manipulated by her dad and wasn’t speaking to me. That’s another whole story. My littlest one was just kind of bouncing all over the walls with everything. She was at an amusement park that night.

I was sitting there eating Chinese food on New Year’s Eve by myself with—in this new house with boxes all around me, and I just missed my family. I missed—which I didn’t realize, then, that family can be defined differently; but I was still seeing it as father, mother, 2.5 kids, dog, and a white picket fence. I was so lonely.

I said to Chelsea, my best friend—I was talking to her. We talked for over three hours on the phone. I said, “Chelsea”—I said, “I can’t take this anymore.” The kids are all over the place, and I’m sitting here in this empty house hearing my own voice bouncing off the walls. She said, “Well, just sleep on it”; you know?

So, the next morning, Ben called me. He said, “What are you doing?” I said, “I’m just going to go take the dog for a walk.” He said, “Can I go with you?” He never liked to walk. He did in the dating years, again. Remember in the swooning years.

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: I said, "Okay." We walked several times around the lake, and he never complained. After that, he said, "Can you just—can we just give it one more try?" I just said, "Okay." This was after a three and a half year legal, physical separation—a little over three years, I should say.

Kim: Did you really believe he had changed?

Ramona: Well—

Kim: Or was there a combination of you experiencing this loneliness and—

Ramona: Wanting the family back.

Kim: Yes, wanting the family back.

Ramona: Right. Knowing the kids were hurting—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —and knowing that—especially with my dad—was not supportive of the divorce, and I mean now he supports me wholeheartedly. Then he was just really confused. I just felt lonely, and I just wanted to have that feeling of what I thought was family back. So, I took him back.

We were together for almost four months. During that four month period, he quit marriage counseling. I went back to the couple's counseling deal. When the therapist questioned him on some mismanagement of money, he got up and walked out of the counseling office. The counselor—I just sat there crying on the couch, and the counselor told me—he said, "I'm going to be honest with you." He said, "I don't believe Ben has what it takes to make this work."

Kim: Once you realized that Ben did not have what it took to change to make this marriage work without the abuse, how difficult was the process—emotionally and procedurally—as you walked away from that marriage?

Ramona: Very; very difficult. I actually—there was one particular evening where I had reached out to a mentor of mine and dear friend. He taught Ben and me when we were in undergraduate school. He was one of our professors, and I just adored him. To this day, he and his wife are just little, human treasures to me. I reached out to him, and I said, "I'd like to talk with you. I have to make a decision." He was a person that I often would go to when I was at kind of place where I just really wanted some counsel that I knew was going to be wise and solid.

So, he said, "Okay, call me on such and such a night. I'm going to have my cup of tea, and I'm going to be all ears." So, I gave him a call. I asked him—I said, "You know"—he

knew the background; and at this point, he knew about the abuse. He knew us for many, many years / a couple of decades.

I said, “You know”—because when I—basically, when I put my foot down, I said, “I want you, Ben, to go to batterer intervention program”—which in our state involves many weeks of sitting in a class with all men or all women depending on the nature of the group and looking at your abusive mentality. So, when I said that, Ben in retaliation filed for divorce; right? Thinking that, probably, that I was going to back down from—

Kim: He was calling your bluff?

Ramona: Yes, you got it. So, I was like—“What do I do? What do I do?” So, I reached out to this mentor and brought him up to date on what was going on. I said, “What do I do? Do I”—because I hadn’t responded with hiring an attorney or anything at that point. He said to me—he said, “Ramona”—he asked me a question—he said, “Do you think that when you get to heaven that Jesus is going to say, ‘Way to go! You hung in there. You stayed, and He’s going to say, ‘Come here, Ramona,’ I’ve got a gold star for you. Let’s just put that gold star right in the middle of your forehead?”

I don’t know why I was thinking that he was going to say to me—“Just pray more. That miracle is on its way”—because it’s not his heart at all; but I thought that. That’s the question—he answered my question with a question—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —which is brilliant.

I said, “Well, I don’t believe Jesus gives out gold stars in heaven. He is the gold star. He is the morning star. He doesn’t give out gold stars.” I said, “Well, I don’t believe that is going to happen.” But that was the point where—when I was asked the gold star question, I just—I don’t know—I just said, “You’re right.” There is no such thing. So, I hired an attorney—my first of three.

Kim: And Ben did not make it easy.

Ramona: Ooh.

Kim: How long did the divorce—

Ramona: It was another three years after that.

Kim: Another three years. Was it three years of emotional back and forth with Ben, or did you separate from one another and not have to really have conversation or interactions?

Ramona: Right. Well, he had gone—he was out of the country—working out of the country. So, that helped. Eventually, he had an affair; but I always tell women. Don't wait for an affair. Abuse severs the covenant. Just in my particular case, that's part of my story; but yes, he—once he realized that I had hired an attorney, and I wasn't going to back away. I mean this is my speculation—but he just wasn't signing things. He wasn't signing—he knew I wasn't going to date while that was going on until the divorce was final. So, he was just dragging it out—is what I think happened.

When I say three attorneys—and I pray other people listening don't have to go through that—but my first attorney, I believe, was intimidated by Ben. That's when I was still hoping that, maybe, it could be court-ordered for him to go for batterer intervention. I had asked her to request that, and her response to my request was "Ramona, nobody cares."

Kim: Whoa!

Ramona: That's exactly what she said to me.

Kim: And she's representing you?

Ramona: She's representing me. I'm thinking, "I wish she would have told me that before I gave you my retainer."

The second attorney was known by our family—my family—and I think he knew that my dad was not supportive of it. I think he was persuaded by that. So, he didn't work for me.

Kim: Okay.

Ramona: Did not represent me well.

Then, finally, the third attorney—I decided to go with someone who was going to really take it seriously. The third attorney was just a gentleman—a wonderful man. I asked him—I said, "Will you protect me and my kids? I need to know this." I said, "Look me in the eyeballs." He did. He looked me square in the eyes, and he said, "Absolutely." He said, "Good men don't hit their wives." So, he did a very good job, and I thank God that the Lord brought him into my life.

Kim: You talked about wanting this lawyer to protect you and your children. Now, your children have most likely witnessed—

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: —some things.

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: In what ways were their lives impacted? What did you do as a mom to try to protect them?

Ramona: You know there are only two places—sorry—in the book that can still make me cry. This is one of them. Just knowing what my kids went through, what they saw—especially my son. I’ve forgiven myself, but I still carry pain for that because no child should have to grow up around that; you know? No person should have to live with that—even if you are an adult—but my—

I remember when Ben and I were still together, this was before any legal separation. We were still living in the South, and my son and I were talking. I don’t remember what the question was; but I remember him so articulately, Kim, describing the cycle of abuse that I talk about in my book. He didn’t use the terms—tension building, explosion, honeymoon phase—that pattern of abuse that these relationships go around and around the same circle. He used his own words.

But years later, after I got training and I understand—“Wow, I’m in a pattern here. I’m in a cycle that gets worse over time.” It’s called cycle of violence or abuse. It has a name. He, in his own young self, described it without using the words. So, they were very—like you said earlier about walking on eggshells when you were a child—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: That’s the tension building phase. You didn’t know to call it the tension building phase, but that’s what it was and what it is. So, the guilt I carried for so many years regarding my kids—you know I’d often leave with them. We would go—I would take them to the beach, several hours away, giving Ben time to “cool off.” I would try to make it seem like it was a vacation. I would say, “You guys, Mom is going to take you to the waterpark.” Often, they would thank me. They would say, “Mom, we had such a great time.” They didn’t know why I had left.

Kim: That there was a reason.

Ramona: There was a reason.

Kim: Dr. Ramona, as I listen to you talk about the experience of your children and how domestic violence played out in their lives and the effect that it had on their lives, you said something to me that may be a bit of a surprise for someone who is listening in on this conversation. Because an obvious question would be for me to ask you, “Did you forgive your husband?” But in what you just shared, you said that you needed to forgive yourself.

Ramona: Yes. For me, personally, when I chose to forgive Ben, I just—I don't know—it was a decision I made in my will because I knew that, for myself—knowing myself—if I waited to feel like forgiving—and that's not me *only*. I would imagine a lot of people resonate with that. I knew it wasn't going to happen.

I remember telling the Lord: “Lord, You know, I don't want to hate Ben”—even though I was so hurt and angry and felt a lot of different emotions. I said, “God, I have a dad I love; brothers, I adore; a son, that is just precious to me; and I want to get married. I hope to get married again someday. I work with male clients; you know?” So, I said, “Lord, by an act of my will, I choose to forgive Ben. I surrender the outcome and my vindication / justice—I surrender into Your hands because I'm not the one that can get that for myself.”

Sometimes, we hold on to forgiveness or unforgiveness, I should say—or the granting of forgiveness—because we have confusion around it. It is a very confusing topic; but as far as forgiving myself, that—and I'm going to be very honest with you, Kim—it wasn't until I got to this section as I was writing the book—the book took me four years to write.

I intentionally talk—I dedicated an entire chapter to the subject of forgiveness, and it is toward the end of the book because I believe it is often misused and misapplied as if it's like a cure-all or the ultimate panacea to the person's pain. It's not. If it's used prematurely or used as a way to make it all better, you can cause further injury to the person who is already injured.

A lot of people—including myself at the time—have a misunderstanding about forgiveness. Sometimes, well-meaning believers will suggest—“Well, you know, why don't you just forgive him?” The implications are sort of like, “It'll get better / it'll be better. He may change”; you know? There are all sorts of unspoken in that.

Kim: Right.

Ramona: What I tell people is that forgiveness is not a magic wand. It's not a cure-all. It's not accepting abuse, and it does not require reconciliation. Reconciliation requires two people meaning—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —that the person that has abused needs to repent and take responsibility for their actions, recognizing the consequences for their actions.

Kim: There are some times where someone may seek to reconcile, but it's a dangerous situation where they do not need to be in the presence of that individual or that abuser. They, I guess, have to be okay with not being able to reconcile and, still, choosing to forgive.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: Is that right?

Ramona: They are separate issues. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not synonymous. It's not required to reconcile because if you've forgiven, then you reconcile. That is a faulty assumption. That is not true. Like you said, it can be deadly.

So, anyhow, just understanding, really, what forgiveness is and how to apply that—but for myself, it was forgiving myself that was—oh, my gosh, I can't even describe how hard that was as a mom; you know? Because to me, in my thinking, as a mother, it was my responsibility to protect my children—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —and the fact of the matter is I still believe that. There are a lot of reasons why women—and if the case may be, if it's a man in this situation—why we stay. There are lots and lots of reasons why we stay; but—

Kim: Will you talk about some of those reasons?

Ramona: Well, for me, it was the idea of protecting the family, believing that eventually my prayers are going to be answered, not understanding that abuse severs the marital covenant. Having that duality of presentation to the public where people saw us a certain way—so, if I did come forward with my story, who is going to believe me because we look like the ideal couple? We're in ministry; you know? We speak publicly together. There was no way that, I thought, people were honestly going to believe me.

But I held it against myself for many years. And when I came to the place in writing about it in my book, I remember sitting there; and I was—where I had my desk set up, there was a whole wall of pictures, and there were a lot of pictures of my children when they were little. I was just looking at those pictures, and I was just crying. I was like—“Lord, how can I write about forgiving”—because I knew I needed to write forgiving myself; but yet, I was still stuck. I thought, “To be honest as an author and as a person and as a woman of God, I give an account for my words.”

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: “So, I can't talk about it and not live it.” So, I actually stepped away from writing that chapter for a while; and I did my own work. I lay out in the book about how I actually identified things that I wanted to forgive myself for.

I said them out loud, and one by one, I said, “Lord, I forgive myself for”—such and such and such and such—“I thank You, Lord, that you have forgiven me. I choose to forgive myself and lay this at the foot of your cross that You took a stripe for this”—just as he

took stripes on his back for the abuser in his or her choice to abuse. He took a stripe for the victim and their woundedness and the results of abuse.

One of them is to hold unforgiveness toward yourself. So, it was actually when I was writing the chapter that I worked through it.

Kim: What did you tell your children as you—

Ramona: Yes.

Kim: —got to that place? What was the conversation you had with your children?

Ramona: That's such a good question because I actually talk about in that chapter honoring your children's pain. What I mean by that is, I think, it's important to recognize that it's one thing to come to a place where you forgive your abuser and you recognize what that means—meaning you don't have to necessarily take them back. Secondly, forgiving yourself; but then, also, asking your children for forgiveness because my kids—they were dependent on me. They were kids.

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: They were at the whim of my decisions. So, with each one of my children, I—because their personalities are so different—and this is what I explained to the reader—is think about your child and think about his or her personality.

What I mean by that—like with my first child, when I asked her to forgive me, it was kind of like a one and done. I said to her—“You know, baby, I'm sorry. I'm sorry what you went through and what you saw.” Of course, I'm just bawling. She said, “Momma, I understand, and I really do. I don't hold it against you. I know it was complicated.” She was like—“Mom, just let it go.” I brought it up down the road, later, and she reminded me—she was like—“Momma, remember we talked about this. Remember how I said, ‘Just let it go; I don't hold it against you.’” So, it was my first.

My second—my son—it was more of a timing thing with him. When I first tried to approach him, he just wasn't ready to discuss it. He wasn't ready—just wasn't in a place where he wanted to dialogue about it. So, with him, it was like I kind of had a feel for when he was in a better place.

So, when we ask our children for forgiveness, it's not about “me” as the mom; it's about “them” as the child. What do they need? Where are they in their life? Sometimes, we have to wait for years; you know? This was down the road that I approached my kids with this.

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: Then, with my last child, with her personality—I always said she’s the exclamation point to our family. She is just—has the best sense of humor and just keeps me in stitches all the time; but with her, it’s been more of repeating myself.

Kim: Okay.

Ramona: She’s need to hear it more than once.

Kim: So, they each—different personalities—

Ramona: That’s right.

Kim: And you didn’t sit them down in a group together—

Ramona: No; definitely not.

Kim: —and ask them all the same thing across the board.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: But you tailored the way you approached your children, the way you honored your children to the degree that would match their personalities.

Ramona: That’s exactly right—and where they were—

Kim: Powerful.

Ramona: I really prayed a lot about it. It’s really being dialed into your child and then recognizing—if your child doesn’t want to talk about it or, maybe, responds back in kind of a harsh sort of way—because they are still in pain and hurting—to not take that personally. It’s between them and the Lord. You’ve done what you can do, and just continue to remain sensitive to them and don’t—because I asked my children for forgiveness doesn’t mean that they might be prepared at that moment.

Kim: Right.

Ramona: It’s not that easy and nice and neat. Life is messy, and relationships can be tough.

Kim: It is. I think about all of the children who grew up in abusive situations who have not had that mom or that dad say, “I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to protect you from this. I’m sorry that this is what you went through.”

As you were describing how you approached each of your children, in my mind, I began to picture that what you were doing was you were taking the power away from the enemy to create this ongoing life of resentment.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: You gave room for the Spirit of God to move in those children's lives—not that God can't move without that apology.

Ramona: Right.

Kim: That's not what I'm saying; but by leaning into that pain / by choosing to forgive yourself and seeing the hurt that your children experienced and honoring them by empathizing what they've gone through / what they feel, it's really powerful.

Ramona: I didn't realize what I was doing at the time, but I was creating a safe space—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —for them to step into and continue their healing well journey.

Kim: And it will be a journey.

Ramona: That's right. It is.

Kim: And I love that you went back, and you said, "Okay, how are you doing with this?" It wasn't this one time and gone; but now, as they get older, when they have thoughts or memories pop up, again, you have created that safe space for them to come to to talk it out.

Ramona: Because they are so uniquely different; you know? It's—two of my children really enjoy counseling and the counseling process. One is not—you know counseling—that arrangement is not for everyone; you know? So, they are all on their own path, and I trust the Holy Spirit. I mean He's—what He is doing for me, He's doing for them. He's doing for your listeners. It's His job to heal broken hearts.

Kim: You know women—they often stay in these abusive relationships because they love their abusers. What do you tell the woman who is currently in an abusive relationship, and how can you help her understand that it is possible—as you say in your book—to leave him loving him?

Ramona: Yes, the whole idea that she still loves him or he still loves her—case may be—is something I personally never saw on a list of reasons why a person stays in a relationship like this; but I added it to my list—

Kim: Ah.

Ramona: —that—and not everybody will concur with this that they still love that person; but for me, in particular, I did because, for me, when you're in my heart, you're in my heart forever. That's just how I'm wired. So, leaving a person you love goes against what seems logical—

Kim: Right.

Ramona: —or how it's supposed to happen.

That quote you just said there—"When I leave you, I'll leave you loving you"—when I was working in a domestic violence shelter—this is when I was working on my doctorate—I was staying up one night, and I was folding laundry. This mom and four of her children came into the shelter. All her babies were sleeping, and she got up. She said, "I can't sleep. Can I fold laundry with you?" I said, "Sure."

So, we're just folding, and it's late at night. She's telling me her story. She said that her husband would always tell her, "You're never going to leave me. You'll never leave me." She said, "You know what? If I leave you, when I leave you, I'll leave you loving you."

Kim: Ah.

Ramona: That was very powerful.

Kim: That is.

Ramona: That has always stuck with me because, really, you're—if a person chooses to leave, you're leaving two men in one body. You fell in love with Dr. Jekyll. You're afraid of Mr. Hyde. So, you're leaving two men in one body. So, the one that you love that you always thought would show back up and stick around forever—you're leaving him too. It's hard.

Kim: Wow. It is hard. It is hard. In your book, you have some wonderful, practical tools that women who are in abusive relationships can go to. Can you tell us about some of the practical things you have in your book? This book, *Healing Well and Living Free From an Abusive Relationship*, is one that I wish my mother had. It's one that I will highly recommend to some of the women I work with now.

Ramona: Thank you. That means a lot to me. Thank you.

I wrote it the way I would want a book to be if I could have had something like that back then when I was going through it. So, I intentionally wrote it very non-clinical, very much like—my desire was—you know like I'm sitting across the table having a cup of coffee

with someone. I wanted it to be packed with information but not overwhelming, and I wanted the reader to sense that I really am walking through this with them. I get them.

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: I get them.

Kim: That is clear.

Ramona: Is it?

Kim: It is absolutely clear—

Ramona: Good.

Kim: —that you get them.

Ramona: Good; good; I'm glad.

Kim: What's your life like now?

Ramona: So wonderful. [Laughter]

Kim: Tell me about it.

Ramona: It is. You know I really believe that one of the byproducts of healing well is that it puts us in a different position; and what I mean by that is all of my relationships—not just my relationship with my husband—

Kim: Really?

Ramona: —my working relationships are all better because as an overcomer, there are things I've done / steps I've taken to heal well that have brought my strongest self forward—who I was always meant to be by God's design. Because I believe there is this propensity to attract where we are at—

Kim: Yes.

Ramona: —okay? The years that I actually stepped out of private practice—I want to let people know that. I stepped out private practice, and I went through counseling for six years, actually.

Kim: To remain authentic to what you were—

Ramona: That's right. To my healing well really—my intense time was during that six year period when I wasn't in private practice. I was going to counseling. I was really working on myself, and I was not dating.

Kim: And there is this dude I see over here.

Ramona: Yes, he is such a—I refer to him as my sweetie because that's what he is. [Laughter] Tim is amazing. He is; he is.

Kim: Tell me who Tim is.

Ramona: He is my husband. After the divorce and you have to read the book to get the full story, but I didn't meet him right away. Oh, it was a couple of years after the divorce; but we actually met through eHarmony. I know that's not for everyone. Frankly, I was shocked that happened. [Laughter] But my brother had met his spouse / his wife through eHarmony. He encouraged me to do it, and just to get him off my back, I did it; but I'm so glad I did.

But healing well put me in a different place, and Tim did the same thing. He spent a long time in counseling really looking at himself / really addressing his own wounds and things he has been through in life and his losses and his grief. So, when we met each other—and I was very honest when I filled out my profile and so was he. So, it took a long time. When I was answering the questions, I would ask my kids, "What do you think? Thumbs up? Thumbs down?" They would—especially my third one—she was like—"Mom, that is not even you. Change that answer."

Kim: Oh, that is too funny.

Ramona: You know, but today, I'm with a true gentleman. Tim taught—he put the gentle back in gentleman for me. He treats me with respect, with kindness. I mean we don't always agree; but when we disagree, we disagree in a way that's respectful and kind—very, very different than my first experience.

Kim: Since this interview, believe it or not, I've had a lot of opportunities to talk about the topic of domestic violence with individuals; and it was so empowering to have this information that Dr. Ramona shared because I felt like I was finally able to better understand how to walk with friends who are experiencing abuse. I've actually recommended Dr. Ramona's book to several people already because the wisdom she has / the experience she has speaks volumes.

Because she is so candid with sharing her story, she'll put the reader at ease; and I believe as people read her story, they will say, "Ah, finally, someone who understands." If you have found yourself in a position where domestic violence is your reality, first, let me say, "I am so, so sorry. I hope my time with Dr. Ramona can give you some

encouragement / some light at the end of the tunnel to know that it is possible to step out of that space and into a place of God's shelter, His strength, His peace."

Psalm 120 starts out: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me." That's where our hope lies—in the Lord—even in the darkest of moments when we think we are all alone, no one cares. He is there. He hears our cry, and He cares.

Once again, thanks for listening. If you'd like more information on our guest Dr. Ramona Probasco or her book which is called *Healing Well and Living Free From an Abusive Relationship*. Check out our show notes. You can find them on the *Unfavorable Odds* page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts.

If you enjoyed today's conversation with Dr. Ramona Probasco, I hope you'll consider subscribing to the podcast. You can search for *Unfavorable Odds* on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you go for podcasts. We love your feedback and positive reviews are appreciated.

One more thing, I want to ask you to help us to spread the word about our podcast. Maybe, think about one or two people who may enjoy or benefit from listening.

On the next episode of *Unfavorable Odds*:

Cameron: Every parent has their wildest dream, and every parent has their worst nightmare. Our family experienced both in a 48-hour span. When I heard that my worst nightmare had occurred, it was so surprising to me what came out of my mouth.

Kim: Cameron Cole, next time.

I'm Kim Anthony. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Unfavorable Odds*.

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