

Unfavorable Odds

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Episode 28: Forged Through Fire

Guest: Mark D. McDonough

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Mark: In that moment, all I kept begging the Lord to do was, “Take me. Please take me.” I couldn’t stand to be alive one more second. I just remember the unbearable pain and screaming, “God, take me. Please, Jesus, take me, take me, take me!” And then one more second would pass.

Kim: From the FamilyLife® Podcast Network, this is *Unfavorable Odds*. I’m Kim Anthony.

Unfavorable Odds is about finding hope and help in those seasons of life when things get pretty tough. Jesus has promised us that whenever we walk through those dark valleys, He’s always with us. We will never have to go it alone. So on each episode of this podcast, we’ll be talking with people who have learned *how*, during those dark times, to draw their strength from Jesus.

I have interviewed quite a few men and women who have experienced tragedies, but never have I sat down with someone who has endured as many victories over tragedy as Dr. Mark D. McDonough. He survived a catastrophic fire that left him scarred both physically and emotionally. In spite of this and all the other major challenges he’s faced, he has what seems to be this supernatural ability to persevere which has led him down a path towards his purpose.

He’s written a book called *Forged through Fire: A Reconstructive Surgeon’s Story of Survival, Faith, and Healing*. I had the honor of sitting down with Mark to talk about his remarkable story and how he was able to persevere.

Mark, at age five you began to develop some unusual symptoms. What were they?

Mark: I was in a lot of pain in my arms and legs, mostly my legs. It’s deep, deep aching pain that precludes me from being able to walk or get up off the couch, out of bed or out of a chair and kept complaining to my parents that my legs were hurting.

They really noticed it one evening while I was trying to get off the potty chair. One of those little wooden potty chairs was positioned on the top of the commode. I instinctively reached for the plunger next to the toilet as a place to support my weight as I came down off that chair. My dad could really see that I was weak and couldn’t support myself

by the strength. It was only a matter of days that we were in the pediatrician's office and facing that diagnosis, Guillain-Barre Syndrome.

Kim: And what is that syndrome?

Mark: Guillain-Barre Syndrome is a viral disease where a virus, the varicella virus, which is the same one that's herpes or chicken pox, shingles—those kind of viruses—attacks the myelin surrounding peripheral nerves. Myelin is like an insulator but it's also a conductor. It's the substance around our peripheral nerves that helps a neurological message travel down the nerve to an endpoint.

I was having problems getting messages to my muscles telling them what I needed them to do and the message I was getting to them was weakened. Because the message wasn't telling my muscles to move, my muscles also on top of that, grew weaker from not moving. It was a catch-22.

My fears were around separation from my parents and that they couldn't stay in the hospital with me. There was no pediatric ward, so they weren't allowed to stay beyond very restricted visiting hours. It was scary at night alone with the beepers and the monitors and wondering, "Am I broken? Will I be fixed? If I'm broken, is it my fault? Is this because I did something wrong?"

You start to wonder all those things, or I did anyway.

Kim: Yes, I would think any child would wonder those things. Then you also mention how the doctors really didn't talk to you and help you to understand what you were going through so you were kind of out of control and just, I guess, left in the dark in a sense.

Mark: I guess that feeling of helplessness and powerlessness in a new environment like that. You're newly diagnosed. It was the same with my burn trauma. I'm in that emergency room, that trauma bay, and thousands of doctors and nurses are surrounding me and poking and prodding and not answering questions, talking to each other, talking over my head.

I remember as a 16-year-old in that trauma bay, it took me right back to having had a spinal tap done when I was a child and all these physical terrorists—I called them—people in white that seemed like they were holding instruments of destruction. It was just a scary thing.

I just remember writing the book—as many years as it took—in that part of the book describing that trauma bay, seeing how readily I identified with that powerlessness and fear and nobody's answering your questions and wanting answers to my questions and years again later in the hospital thinking, "I know that's the one part of being a doctor I

could do better at.” That sort of motivating me to say, “I can be the best burn doctor ever.”

Kim: Right.

Mark: We transfer all that ideology to hero worshiping—worshiping those kinds of characters. There were people I respected. There were doctors who were spiritual giants. The one who ran the burn unit where I was a patient was just a wonderful Christian man and I idealized him. I said, “Those are the kinds of doctors—I want to be a doctor like that who would take the time, the extra minutes, to spend and explain.”

Kim: Mark, I do want to talk about the fire and your experience there—

Mark: Sure.

Kim: —but I want you to take me back after you received your driver’s license, you all decided to go on a family vacation.

Mark: The vacation was rejuvenating in one sense, but stressful in another. My mom didn’t have any idea what it would be like to be locked up with six guys [Laughter] for eight, nine days but—

Kim: Brave woman.

Mark: —almost two weeks, almost two weeks. She was. She was a saint. All in all, it was a good trip. But then we, as you know, got home and the house had been burglarized, so any sense of healing that we got in the trip was quickly eradicated by the sense of invasion when your personal space is violated that way. There was blood on the walls. They had gotten into the liquor cabinets and taken silverware and anything of value and just ransacked the whole house.

Kim: That had to be heartbreaking, especially for your parents.

Mark: Yes.

Kim: Take me back to that night before you went to bed.

Mark: I had come home. It was my night off. I worked in a steak house as a dishwasher and bus boy and had been out with some friends. I think I got home around 12:30. As I normally would, I drank a glass of milk before going up to bed. There were six smoke detectors on the kitchen counter sideboard.

My dad had just left town that day to go to San Francisco on business. His first time going to the west coast. We were going to install those detectors the night before he left and didn’t have the right lithium battery in—those little flat batteries. They were new

back in the 70's. He said, "We'll take care of that chore as soon as I get back, son. Use your head. Take care of your mom and your brothers. I'll see you in a few days."

I went to bed that night and woke an hour later to the intense heat and the sounds of wood cracking and the smell of the smoke and the orange hue that was leading through the heavy thick smoke but enough to know that's fire and the sound just unbelievable like a tornado. I was very close to a tornado later in life and it was like a train going through your backyard. That's what it sounded like in the house. It sounded like just this huge wind blowing and this terrible creaking, crackling of wood as it splintered in the fire.

The heat was just unbelievable. It's like you're standing inside your Thanksgiving Day oven basting the turkey and you can't get out the door. Somebody locked the oven door on you. I had to—all I could think of was to find air and relief from the heat.

I'm screaming for my brothers to get out their windows. I shared a room with my brother, Tim, who was climbing out his window. Dan and my brother, Packy, were in the room adjacent to ours. They were climbing out of their windows—Dan out onto the garage roof. Packy jumped two stories but they were high stories and broke his arm as he went out the window.

I went straight across the hall and tried to punch the window out in the bathroom. It was the bathroom at the top of the stairs. It was a colonial home with two bedrooms on one side of the top and two on the other. I just knocked the glass out because I needed air. Unfortunately that knocked the window out of the tracks, so I couldn't get it up to get out of the window—all the while trying to get across the stairwell to my mother's bedroom and my brother Toby's bedroom.

The fire was coming up the stairwell acting like a chimney and tearing the wallpaper up off the wall. The tendrils are just barreling up towards my face as I came out of the bathroom. Then I knew there was a door at the foot of the stairs. If I could just get to the bottom of the stairs, I could get out that door, go out the front and come up the back to her balcony.

But the front door was swollen in its door jamb because of the heat and it was metal. I just couldn't get it open. I pulled and pulled, and it wouldn't open, so I got low and went toward the back of the house, and in doing so tried to protect my face. The fireman found me by the back door blocking the exit out to the garage. I had blacked out somewhere in that trek toward the back door, but he persisted and saved my life.

The next second—conscious moment I had was in the ambulance just a few seconds later and them saying—I could hear over the radio, "If he's badly burned, go straight to Metro."

I didn't know what Metro was or what that meant but later learned that the big city, intercity hospital had a specialized burn unit and they wanted the ambulance to take me straight there. But we stopped on the way at the hospital where I was born so they could get saline and pour it over my body to cool some of the burning. In that moment, all I kept begging the Lord to do was, "Take me. Please take me!"

Kim: Really.

Mark: I couldn't stand to be alive one more second. As soon as I was conscious, I knew something terrible happened. I didn't know if my mom or Toby made it out. That's all I kept trying to ask. Of course, they're trying to keep me from talking. They're trying to get an IV started on me or two. I couldn't see anything. But I just remember the unbearable pain and screaming, "God, take me. Please, Jesus, take me, take me, take me!" And then one more second would pass.

Kim: In your book, you really describe in detail the pain you were feeling. It's the first time I've ever seen a description like that. Do you mind getting into that a little bit?

Mark: No. There is nothing like it. Anybody who's ever experienced burn injury will say they didn't ever know or could never have imagined a pain like it. Even women who've had one, two, three, several babies, and difficult deliveries who also were burn victims for one reason or another, couldn't compare the two.

But the only way—the best way I can describe it is just praying with all the yearning possible in the heart for Jesus to end it, knowing, "If, Jesus, you're there, please you have to stop this. I can't take it one more..." and one more second would pass. Just this burning—this burning sensation that didn't stop.

Then when everybody started moving my body as I got to the trauma bay—they're lifting me up to try to get a big steel plate behind my back to get an x-ray to see if the tube that they just shoved down my throat is in place to get air to my lungs. It's funny having gone through medical training and come out as a trauma surgeon, seeing it from both sides. I know they're focused on, they've got 60 minutes to save or lose me.

Kim: Sixty minutes?

Mark: They call it the "golden hour." In any major trauma, the interventions that are undertaken in that first golden hour are those that will determine whether the patient survives the ordeal. I mean certainly many things can happen down the road or complications that could change the direction of everything, but in that first hour all those physicians and nurses are running around you. They're trying to get lines in and get everything situated.

You're scared to death and don't know what's going on and want somebody to tell you. You've got the arrogance and ego of a 16-year-old teenager that just can't believe

what's going on. I'm scared that nobody's telling me about my mom or my brother or answering me. I didn't hear until I got stabilized. That was many hours later.

In the burn ICU, they have trauma bays designated just for that. You're essentially, from the second you hit the door of a trauma center like that, you're under the care of the burn specialists. It wasn't like I went from the ER to a quiet bed somewhere. It was intense, hands-on, full-court press for a good 36-48 hours.

Kim: What were the chances of your survival when they first brought you in?

Mark: A general rule of thumb is, if you take the age of the patient and the percentage of burn, times four and you come up with an exorbitant amount. But I had like a 90 percent chance of dying and maybe a 10-14 percent of survival. By most accounts, the experts say those statistics are actually more positive than reality because there's so many intervening complications with burn patients.

A burn injury attacks every organ system in one way or another from the very beginning, and the largest organ in the body is the skin. The regulation of temperature and fluids causes a lot of shifts and a few changes that can cause the kidneys to shut down, the heart to give out, every other system to collapse. It's very harrowing in the early stages.

Kim: When did you find out what happened to the rest of your family?

Mark: After everything in the trauma bay settled down and they got me situated in a private bay or room. There's one or two nurses designated to just my care. They're running around the bed plugging stuff in and hooking lines up. The TV's connected to the upper corner in the room. The nurses usually have the TV on because there something to keep them company while they're doing all their busy work with the patients. I heard it on the news that—

Kim: No!

Mark: —this tragic story—this beloved family on the west side of Cleveland that suffered this terrible house fire, and that the youngest of the five boys did not survive. That was Toby, age six. I didn't hear about my mom yet but they—it wasn't until two days after the fire that they pulled the plug.

We, my brothers and I—our dad and I had discussed it and the need to disconnect the ventilator because it was the only thing keeping her alive. She was with Jesus as far as we were concerned. We had made that decision together but—

Kim: Was that a hard decision?

Mark: No, it wasn't. It was just the right thing to do. It wasn't like we had a choice really. It was more like, "The only thing keeping her alive is this machine and the mom that we knew is not here anymore."

Kim: Okay.

Mark: The thing that still sticks with me is the immense pain I felt for my dad. I mean he's out of town and gets this call that your youngest son's with Christ and your oldest is in critical condition and Dorothy may not make it. He got that call from a neighbor of ours who was always an uncle, Uncle Joe, one of those kind of family friends. I just can't imagine getting that call.

Then he's got to ride an airplane back from San Francisco to Cleveland and see all the normal people in the world and think, "You don't know what just happened to me." All of us think when you go through that kind of a trauma, the whole normal world goes on without you. It's not true of our spiritual world or our spiritual family. But in that sense of emptiness, I just couldn't imagine the pain that my dad was feeling.

Then to come and stand at my bedside and refuse to believe that it was me. All he could see was bundles of bandages. I was swollen twice my normal size. He just touched my face and leaned over and kissed me. I knew in that moment, I was so afraid I let him down—the man of the house. "Use your head. Take care of your mom and your brothers—take care of your mom and your brothers. I'll see you in a few days."

As much intellectually as we know we're not at fault for that, you feel a sense of responsibility and you always want to please your mom and your dad. [With emotion]

Kim: Of course.

Mark: Now mom was gone, and Dad was alone. Phew, I thought it was tough recovering from the injuries, but I just couldn't imagine being a patriarch losing your wife and child that way. Then my other brother, Packy, when he committed suicide, my dad was in the most pain I'd ever seen.

You wonder how people do it, and God is the only answer. We wouldn't do it. That's just all there is to it. I always get frustrated by people who say, "Oh, God won't give me more than I can handle."

Oh, He will! He does it all the time! You just can't handle it without Him helping.

Kim: Amen.

Mark: He'll give you more than you can handle alone for sure. But thank God for Him.

Kim: As I hear you talking about your father and I look back on those pages where you describe that there was some tension. Of course, with a teenager and his dad that's nothing that is unusual.

Mark: Yes.

Kim: But yet as you're lying in the hospital bed and he's coming to visit you and you see that pain in his eyes and what you just described of how you can't imagine him having to hear that news and fly home and have nobody else know and understand what is literally going on in his heart, I see this love and this tenderness for your father that you seemed to have discovered that was beyond anything you had felt before.

Mark: Yes, we had a great relationship certainly all of our lives, but after the fire was just untouchable, really special, and there's a silver lining. I mean God brings good to *all* things and He does for those who love Him, according to His purpose. It's so inspiring to me to hear people's story, like yours—the struggles that you went through.

So many lose faith or reject their faith because of the struggles when it's the struggles that give us the insight and the strength to help others with similar kinds of struggles. I love what you're doing in your podcast.

Kim: Thank you.

Mark: Really touched.

Kim: Thank you. I appreciate that and I, like you, desire to take whatever things that I've gone through and encourage someone else and help them to understand that you *can* get through this. You can get through it and become a better person for it.

Mark: Certainly.

Kim: I want to take you back to the hospital during those first days that you were there. You were in such bad condition that you were not able to have the surgeries you needed right away. They had to wait a few days but then that day came. I believe it was—

Mark: —August 13th.

Kim: —Friday the 13th, August the 13th. Tell me what you remember from that first surgery.

Mark: The first surgery for any major burn patient is called the debridement. It's the first time you have the patient under general anesthesia and now you can really examine the wounds closely, tear the dead tissue apart, and cut the whole burn, the bad burns, away. There's usually a lot of blood involved but we wait until a patient is physiologically

stable enough because it can be very stressful on the heart and other organs. There's again—there can be a lot of blood loss.

My physiological status was not stable because of a significant inhalation injury. I kept desaturating, dropping my oxygen levels, because of the carbonaceous sputum and contaminants that were inhaled during the smoke inhalation. But after about ten days, they felt I was stable enough to survive it, so they scheduled me for the debridement procedure which was going to be the early morning on the 13th of Friday the 13th.

What I had was an event called intraoperative awareness where I woke up on the table and was aware of everything happening. There's three medications involved in anesthesia. One makes you forget everything, one eliminates pain, and then another isn't always used, but sometimes a paralyzing agent is used.

Kim: Okay.

Mark: They did in my case because they were moving my body around a lot. They did that frequently with large burn cases. So I couldn't move. I couldn't blink an eye or wiggle a finger to tell them I was awake, but I was feeling everything that was happening.

Kim: Oh, my goodness.

Mark: I would feel them cutting skin down off my abdomen and feel the blood dripping down the belly.

Kim: Oh!

Mark: I felt one of the residents had my left arm off the side of the table and was cutting skin off the arm and then just let go of my wrist and my arm swung down to the side of the table and the blood was dripping off my arm. It felt ice cold and like a hundred pounds.

Kim: Oh, my goodness.

Mark: I'm saying, "Guys, I'm awake! I'm awake! You don't know I'm awake." I'm screaming in my head, "They don't know I'm awake. They don't know. Stop! Stop! Stop!" I can't blink an eye. I can't twitch a muscle. I'm praying, "Jesus, please take me." It's like the second I woke up in the ambulance—All I kept begging the Lord to do was, "Please take me." I couldn't stand to be alive one more second, and then one more second would pass.

But then, all of a sudden, I was completely at peace. It was like I was floating in a La-Z-Boy chair with my legs—my knees bent, my arms at my sides, on my back just kind of floating in a relaxed position and just euphoric and laughing and pain free completely

and thinking, “Oh my God!” —yes, no kidding; no pun intended—“What else?” And thinking, “Something’s happening.”

There’s this gentle warm light coming over me I see this three-dimensional “L” that goes off my forehead straight out on a 45-degree angle and then drops off suddenly. I’m floating up this slow ramp toward this white glow. It was like I was lying on a beach with my eyes closed on a sunny day and I can see the sunlight behind my eyelids. I can feel the warmth and just a gentle breeze, and everything is just the way it’s supposed to be.

But I had the sense that it was like there was a big board meeting somewhere. We all knew the outcome was this was not my time yet. I was going to go through some stuff and some tough stuff with my Dad yet, and he couldn’t bear losing me at that moment. I knew that.

The next thing I knew it was like 11:30 at night. I’d gone into the OR at seven in the morning. I can feel this pain in my abdomen, and I know what it’s from; that they had gone inside. I had these big metal wires going across my belly because I was so swollen, they couldn’t get the belly closed. So they put sterile towels over your organs and they just bring the skin about eight inches apart.

Kim: Wow!

Mark: Then there’s wires strapped—wire going across, to hold everything in there while the swelling comes down.

Kim: Oh my goodness.

Mark: But I’m thinking, “I wonder if I’m going to have a big scar from that.” [Laughter] Just like on the big scale though recognizing, “Wow! This has been a big day.”

The people kept coming in the room saying, “Boy, you had a close call there, young man. You were circling the drain. You bought the farm for a while there. We were sure you were a goner.”

But my dad’s sitting there. I see his face and I know he’s been through a heck of a day. I know that he told them, “Do whatever you have to do to save my boy. I can’t lose my son.” I don’t know how I knew that, but I knew that.

Occasionally, I could speak over the ventilator. I could get this really gruff whisper, much more rusty than it is now, but I could get a few words, and I asked him if he believed in Jesus and he said, “You bet, chum.”

I said, “I think I met Him.” Changed my whole life. My whole perspective. But as I say, too, in the book, it didn’t mean now that I had seen the burning bush, everything’s a

walk in the park. Because we still had that little bit of doubt sometimes. That became the journey, how to avoid doubt, how to stay close and nurture that relationship.

Kim: Following your 24-hour pass, you had come back to the hospital. You were very emotional. In those emotions, you encountered Dr. Frat.

Mark: Yes, I'm back there and I'm struggling with the question, "Why God did you choose me for this?" I'm just missing my mom and my brother and feeling self-pity, a lot of it. Dr. Frat was on what, I'd learn years down the road, was called stealth rounds, where the attending physician, the one in charge, makes rounds quietly by himself without his residents so he doesn't have to get caught up in teaching and he can focus on how the patients are doing.

He used to sneak around late at night and make these rounds. That was back in the days you could smoke a pipe. He had a curved pipe like Sherlock Holmes. He'd come around the corner and I saw him. I knew he was on the ward, but I was in a terrible mood. I was sitting in a chair and I'd slammed my foot on a bedside table. I had an ulcer on my heel and had just hurt my heel. I was just an obstinate little pity potty.

He came in the room and said, "I gather your trip home was good. At least I heard it was but you're just not happy about being back here." I kind of said I wasn't happy about being anywhere.

That was the start of what was a beautiful selfless giving two- to three-hour talk about seeing the milk bottle half full instead of half empty. A real simple concept, "Okay, here's where we are. Take the positive and go with it, or you're going to focus on what's not here and what's lost and be bitter about it." It was a simple thing, but that was a huge concept to learn at that age.

My kids write. They write music and stuff all the time. I'm always blown away by the mature ideals that they developed at young ages. Maybe it was just a fortunate time in my youth but it saved me from a lot of obstacles that otherwise would have been, could have been real bad news things, looking for other ways to fill that void that only God can fill. Drugs and alcohol could have easily been a big part of that recovery process. It was a part of it ultimately, but could have been way from the get-go.

Kim: Tell me the purpose for which you believe God allowed you to experience what you experienced and live.

Mark: I just think we all, in a fallen world, we all have a story. Everyone really has a story. The best ones have highs and lows and pain and struggle and trial and tribulation, but also joy and a sense of redemption and forgiveness. We all have our struggles and it's those struggles that make us better.

I think He just chose a lot of unique ways to teach me some simple lessons and lessons that I need to relearn all the time. That's how simple they are. The recovery network taught me a lot about, the longer I'm here, the more I think I know, the less I really do. The simple things become so much more important, just love and forgiveness,—

Kim: Yes.

Mark: —fruits of the Spirit because I don't have the answers.

Kim: In what ways have you been able to help people as a doctor because of what you've experienced?

Mark: I hope in some ways. Hopefully, in not necessarily doctor-specific ways, because a lot of my life, even since med school, has been in other veins besides directly in medicine. I think the lessons I've learned and continue to try to pass on are perseverance and surrender. I hope I've been able to help people in that way. I love doing the reconstructive surgeries and reconstructive surgeries with burn patients because that's what I would have selfishly is mostly those experiences.

Kim: Yes.

Mark: I always enjoyed it but then again, ten years into my practice I had a mitral valve failure and needed open heart surgery. That required that I couldn't do the full-time surgical practice that I was doing, so I'm still struggling with exactly what He wants me to do now with all the training and knowledge.

The platform has been good and a way to give back. I do some volunteer work in a free clinic here in Orlando. I've done some mission work in Dominican Republic and South American and love doing that kind of thing, but I'm praying about it a lot now.

It's been interesting how everything—the turns that the journey has taken it—I never would have guessed. I'm always asking God, just give me a little bit more clarity on what direction He wants me to take because every path I choose seems to involve more struggles and more lessons and more—you kind of go, "I just want to get where I can coast and feel comfortable." But I don't think He lets us do that.

Kim: Right. Yes, I was about to say, "I don't know if..."

Mark: Yes. It wouldn't be as fun. [Laughter]

By sharing how we survive and struggle through our pain, then we can help others that are similarly struggling in the same way. We try to teach that to our kids, too. The number one lesson in our house is always—my wife will say is forgiveness, but beyond that, making a difference. The name for their band was Before You Exit. It was all about making a difference before you exit.

Kim: Oh, I love that. I didn't realize that was the meaning behind the name.

While we're talking about your sons, your three sons, when your wife was pregnant with your second child, you had a physical set back.

Mark: Oh, yes. She was due August 31st of 1995. I was—just started my first year of surgical residency. I had done a year in the lab after med school up in Cleveland. Then we settled in Tampa. She's due at the end of the month, and it's now August 5th, which is the anniversary of my mother's death, two days after the fire. Remember the fire happened August 3rd, and then three days later we took her off the machine, August 5th.

Well, August 5th, that week was a stressful time a lot of years in my life, and I didn't always see it. I didn't always see it at the time, "Oh, this is the same week, duh!"

Kim: Right.

Mark: That week we happened to be focused on it. I think it had a big part of it, but I had a mild stroke and woke up in the middle of the night, "I think I've had a stroke."
[Speech garbled]

My speech was slurred, my whole right side. It was three weeks until I got everything back. My fine dexterity went in my hand. But I'm sitting there. I can't move. I can't walk.

I asked my brother in law the next day, "Read me the story of Job." I feel like every time I get moving, something slams me back.

Kim: Yes.

Mark: Now I'm going to be practicing medicine from this wheelchair. It looked like it anyway, but prayed for faith. By God's grace, slowly I got muscle strength back and was able to walk. My hand dexterity, everything came back within three and a half weeks. Of course, I've had no down side to it or any other problems.

Kim: Did you just wonder, "Why do all of these things keep happening to me?"

Mark: [Laughter] Yes, I still do. You wouldn't believe the dental stuff I'm going through now that I'm almost in retirement and sixty-some-thousand dollars' worth of dental work from a complication that was a medication-related thing and something completely—you can't get insurance for that kind of stuff. I spent my whole career trying to squeeze insurance money out of insurance companies. Now I need it and I can't get it.

Kim: Wow.

Mark: You definitely wonder but everybody does. Everybody has—again, when I tell the story people go, “Oh, but your story you just can’t believe it sometimes. As soon as you finish one part, you say then your brother committed suicide. What?!”

It’s easy to get mad and struggle with God and say, “Oh come on. It’s just more than my fair share.” Then right away He’ll tell me somebody else’s story that I just feel like an idiot for complaining.

Kim: Your story has been a series of triumphs over tragedy, but in your book, you write that perhaps the most tragic and shocking occurrence affected your three now-grown sons. What happened?

Mark: They’ve always been performers in theater and music, but music has been their true talent. They were doing a US tour, having just released a new album called *All the Lights*, a beautiful powerful piece. They were doing their hometown show here in Orlando with Christina Grimmie. She had toured with them in Europe as well, so she was like a sister to them. In fact, because she was like their sister, she agreed to do this US tour. She opened for them and then would do an encore song with them as well.

That night she was just incredibly glowing. We look back at the video and stuff and she was on stage doing the final song with Riley, a James Bay song. There was this light right on her. The boys were cast off in shadows with this glow over her and everybody said it, too. I said it.

I stood at side stage just before she went out and she was wearing this long down jacket because it was so cold backstage. The air conditioning turned so low. I thought to myself, “I hope she’s not going to wear that on stage.” But then my next immediate thought was, “But nobody would notice because she’s glowing like I’ve never seen.” After she did the song with my middle son, Riley, she went to each boy and hugged them for a long moment it seemed. We still watch the video. We can’t believe it.

She had just said the night before—we were in Atlanta because my wife and I were at that show as well and we said driving from Atlanta to Orlando—“I hope we don’t write another chapter to your book.” We were talking about the fact that one time we lost a trailer making interstate travel—but anyway, little did we know the chapter was about to unfold the next night—she had just said that night in Atlanta of all the touring she had done she said, “I’ve never had more fun than with your boys. They’re just like my brothers.”

She’s a spiritual warrior too. She does this version, her own cover of “Christ Alone.”

Kim: Oh, I’ve heard it. I’ve heard it. Incredible.

Mark: Yes. Then the boys wrote a song,—look this one up—called “Clouds,” Before You Exit. It’s three words, Before You Exit, “B,” “Y,” “E.” “Clouds” is a song they wrote about her.

She was backstage and was talking with my sister-in-law who had taken her niece back there to meet Christina because their little sister-in-law had been a big fan, so Kitty, my wife’s sister, takes the little girl back to meet Christina.

Christina and my brother-in-law and sister-in-law are talking and my brother-in-law said, “Can we pray for you and your career?” They just did. They started to pray and when they finished the prayer, they said, “Amen. My sister-in-law said, “God is good,” and then the two of them simultaneously said, “All the time.” That was the last words she said.

She went from there. She said, “I’ve got to go to the merch table.” She went right to the back of the auditorium and started signing autographs. She’s just like two or three people into it; this guy stepped out of the line and shoots her.

I’m right behind stage still, and I hear the pops. One of the security guys goes, “I hope that was balloons.” I peeked around to get a glimpse and I could see *his* body laying in the floor. I didn’t know it was the shooter but trauma mode kicks in and I go right to him. Somebody says, “He was the shooter.” He’s dead. He’d shot the whole side of his face off.

Kim: Oh my goodness.

Mark: I glance up and I see another body toward the back of the auditorium. The whole floor of the auditorium is on a slant, but they’d taken all the seats out so that they could get standing room only.

Anyway, I go running up to this other body and as I come over the top, I recognize it’s Christina and it’s like looking down at my daughter, and start CPR and said, “Oh, stay with me, honey. Jesus is with you. Jesus loves you and I love you and we’re going to be okay.”

She got a breath for a second and then never got any sign of—I think she was Jesus after that.

Her poor brother watched this guy shoot his sister. Then her brother knocks the guy’s arm down but the guy pulls out another gun on the other side.

Kim: Oh, my goodness.

Mark: Her brother thought, “That was my end. I thought, ‘He’s going to shoot me now,’” and as the gun came up he waved it in front of the brother’s face and came all the way around to his own face and shot his face off.

Kim: What do you say to the person who hears your story; they hear Christina’s story, and they’re saying to you, “Why in the world continue to trust a God who would allow you to experience trial after challenge after trauma?”

Mark: Because how can I not? It’s so evident through all those experiences how this is so out of our hands. This is so bigger than we can imagine. Those experiences are the kinds of things that would make some people turn away. I understand that to a certain degree, but so many people, like they have to go through life with this big resentment that precludes them from experiencing any of the love and what a shame that is.

Kim: Do you feel like you’ve taken the time you need to grieve all of the losses you’ve had through the years?

Mark: I think I do and then I’ll have a thing happen, like the other night we were watching something, a movie. Jamie Foxx plays this prisoner and a lawyer played by Michael—

Kim: Michael Jordan.

Mark: Michael B. Jordan plays the attorney who saves him from death row. I was just weeping, not just crying. I kept saying to my wife, “This hurts so bad to see other people in that kind of pain. Why does life have to be that way?” She’ll say, “That’s old issues bringing that up,” or “That’s this tragedy,” or “That stimulates that,” and you think a lot of things that happen to us in our personal experiences can be triggers for other emotional upsets.

I guess to answer your question, sometimes I think, “Yes, I’ve grieved more than I can stand to grieve.” Beat that horse dead over and over. How many times you go to therapy and do the betonka bad and get it all out. [Laughter] Okay it was tough. It happened. It’s over. I forgive. I move on. I love God. I love the world.

But then you break a shoelace and it all goes, “Pfft” and you go, “Wah!” It’s not like that. But yes, you say, “This seems unfair.” But you look around and see how many people are really struggling and how fortunate I am. It’s hard to stay in a pity potty.

Kim: Dr. Mark D. McDonough’s story offers hope for all of us, but especially those who feel as if the challenges will *never* stop. As I journeyed with him through his story, there were times when I thought, “There is no way that another difficult challenge is about to happen to him.”

Some of us, we may have given up if we had to go through what Mark went through. Yet God's grace was sufficient for him as it is with all of us. Maybe you find yourself in a place where you have had ongoing challenges and you're wondering, "Where is God in all of this? Has He forgotten me?"

I'm not going to sit here and pretend that I have all the answers or that I understand why some of us tend to have more hardships in life than others. But what I do know is that God *has not* forgotten you. Psalm 139 verses 17 and 18 say, "How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand!"

Can you imagine how often God thinks about us as those thoughts outnumber the grains of sand on this earth? And in Christ His thoughts about us are good thoughts. Thoughts of blessing, peace and hope.

But I get it. There are times when we know all the right Bible verses, but we don't necessarily *feel* that hope.

What do you do if you're finding yourself fighting a battle and your faith is wavering? I'd like to point to something Mark wrote about in his book. It was some advice his doctor gave him when he was still in the hospital recovering from his burns. When his faith was wavering, his doctor simply encouraged him to continually ask God for the faith to believe. That sounds too easy, right? Even so, I encourage you to do the same.

God wants you to walk by faith. When what you desire is in line with God's will, you can "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Matthew 7:7-11

God really is a good Father and He will give us the faith we need to persevere through *whatever it is* we're experiencing.

Thanks for listening. If you want to find out more about Dr. Mark D. McDonough or his book, *Forged Through Fire*, check out our show notes on the *Unfavorable Odds* page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts. There you'll also be able to listen to the other podcasts on the FamilyLife Podcast Network.

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Next time on *Unfavorable Odds*:

Megan: My grandfather had told my dad that he would excommunicate him from the family if he ever agreed to me dating LaMorris. He would prefer that I married a long-haired alcoholic hippy than a black man.

Kim: That's LaMorris and Megan Crawford, next time.

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

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