



Season 1, Episode 2: “Surrendering to Jesus”

Hey there, friends! We are going to continue something we started last week and that is the whole theme of telling our stories... today, with a little bit of an emphasis on *surrender*. I'm going to continue telling you part of my story in hopes that you can see how surrender was a big part of how I came to meet my husband and marry my husband and come into the ministry that I have today. So if you didn't listen to last week's episode, go back and do that and it'll kinda catch you up to speed. But I'm going to start out by sharing with you some of what I was going through *before* I met my husband, John, but *after* I had that big turning point in my life where I really started to fall in love with Jesus.

I told you last week that I was involved in Bible study and I was really, really loving studying God's word and knowing him through his word and that's where I fell in love with him- it was just in his word. And as I was studying with this group across town at another church, I just kept thinking, *Wow, we need to do this at my church! The women in my church need Bible study.* (We did not have a formal Bible study in my church at that time.) So I went to talk to my friend, Happy, that I mentioned to you last week. Being a deacon in the church, I just thought she seemed like the likely person to take the baton and run with it. And she said, “No, I think you should do it. I think you should lead it.” And I said, “Noooo, I'm not a teacher, but I would love to be there and I'd bring some people.” And then I mentioned it to my best friend Patty, and she said the same thing, “You know, I think you should teach it.”

And so when the notice came out in the church bulletin and no one had signed up to teach it, they pushed me into doing it. I facilitated and then taught Bible study at my church. And then after that, women started asking me if I would write something. So little by little I would start to write and share and teach and do that sort of thing. I began to disciple women outside of Bible study. It didn't even really understand what discipling women was at that time, but I started to do that. But I really loved, loved, loved God's word, and I loved teaching it. I loved studying it. *I loved all of that.* And it just kept sinking deeper and deeper into my life and into my heart and making it really big difference. And I would find that friends would come over and talk to me, or even at work, girlfriends would stop by my office and they'd share whatever was on their heart, a broken heart, just a heavy load or whatever. I found that I always have something really good and really juicy from God's word to share with them that would really encourage them. I just loved doing that. And of course, I was growing as much as I could in how to study and how to teach and all of that. I still was single at that time... I was maybe 41 at this time and not married but still very much wanting to get married. And that really was a longing of my heart. It still was a

longing of my heart. I wanted that. *I thought* I kept surrendering it and I kept praying though, *Lord, I would really love to be married and I would really love to have a husband.*

And you know, one night, again– I've said this before– I've never heard the audible voice of God, but one night to my heart I felt like he said, *You want to get married, but do you really even know about the job? Like, have you looked at the job description of what a wife really is?* And of course I had not. I had some examples in my life that were good examples and some that were not so good. I just decided to scrap everything and I thought, *You know what, that's what I'm going to do. I am going to open up the word of God and I'm just going to look and see what he says about marriage.* I did a big search. I looked in the back of my Bible in the concordance and hunted down everything I could find on marriage, on women, on wives, and all of that sort of thing.

And what I found out y'all is that the Bible says a whole lot about what it means to be a godly woman, a godly man, a godly husband, a godly wife, a godly parent, but it doesn't say a whole lot about *dating*. In fact, I couldn't really find anything in God's word about dating. So I just decided to do my homework on what it meant to be a godly woman and a godly wife. And of course, it came across the big topic of *submission*– the word we all kind of flinch when we hear– and learned that that is such a good and powerful word, but I had a totally different take on it until I really unpacked it in the word of God. And it really means “to come under with strength the mission of someone else.” So when it says, “Wives, be submissive to your husbands...” that really is a position of surrendering to their authority in the marriage, but not being in a substandard position, but in this position where you really do support that mission with strength... and every marriage has a mission because every Christian marriage has a Master and that is Jesus.

So anyway I really learned a whole lot about marriage and I still wanted that very much. I was leading Bible study, I was digging into the word even more, but still very much longing for this man to come in and become my husband, whoever that was. So one night I was at Bible study and a friend of mine asked me if I was dating anyone. I said I wasn't and they said, “Well, we'd like for you to meet this friend of ours and his name is John Tolson.” And I was like, *John Tolson, isn't he a pastor downtown at a church? I am not marrying a preacher.* My uncle heard me say this and he happened to know John and he said, “Hey listen, nobody said you had to marry him! They just said they wanted to set you up on a date with him and I think you should go. He's a really great guy, a man's man, and I think you should go.” So I thought, *Okay, well maybe he'll call me.* And of course I didn't hear from him. But I did hear word on the street, (because when you're over 40 and you're single and in Orlando, Florida, you pretty much know everybody who is available) so I had heard on the street that he was actually dating somebody and was probably going to get married. And so I thought, *Huh, well I guess that's, you know, not to be for me.* But I remember taking it to the Lord and saying, “Lord, I'm so sorry that I put you in a box and told you that I wouldn't marry a preacher, that I wouldn't marry somebody in ministry because really, Lord, I want what is *your best* for my life. And if that's what you want for me, then that's what I want too.”

So I'm praying about this guy I've never met in my life and praying about this situation. And so again, to my heart, the Lord said, *You know, Punky, you still want marriage more than you want me.* And oh y'all. That just felt like the biggest just throb in my heart. It was like, Ugh. And I just said, "Yes Lord, if I'm being honest, I think I do. I think I do." And y'all, maybe you can understand this... I think a lot of times we are seeking God's hand instead of his face. Just, you know, doing the thing, doing the churchy thing, checking all the boxes so that we can get what we want from God instead of really seeking to find him and to know him and to love him.

And so I had this moment of surrender and I'm, I mean even now, I'm talking about this and I'm just getting all quirky inside thinking about it, but I remember saying, "Wow, Lord, I, I think I need to put this on the alter. I think I need to just lay this down" and again, to my heart, I just heard him say, *What would you do if I told you that you would never be married? Where would your relationship with me be then?* And I mean, I cried y'all. I just saw it and I just said, *Okay Lord, I'm putting this on your alter and this is really hard for me to pray, but more than what I want. I want what you want for me.* And I was almost willing myself to say those words- more than what I want, I want what you want for me.

I'm not trying to compare myself to Jesus here, but Jesus did say words to that effect in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he went to the cross. He said, "Lord, if you can take this cup from me, please do it, but let your will be done." And I believe that that is a prayer that the Lord honors because it's a prayer of surrender. It's a prayer saying *that thing that I want- that thing in my heart- that thing that I want more than anything- I'm going to put it down. I'm going to lay my Isaac down on this altar and I'm just going to say, "Take it, Lord, take it."* Because if being a single woman the rest of my life is really your best for me, then I want to want your best for my life. And so I did. And it didn't feel good, y'all. It was a really scary prayer to pray. And I had to keep praying it over and over again.

And it was hard. It was disappointing. I had to grieve it like a death. I had to really turn it over and grieve it like a death. And so some months went by, maybe a year in fact, and my good friend Sandy, said, "Are you dating anybody?" And I said, "No, I'm not. I kind of took a sabbatical from dating- just dating Jesus." Doesn't that sound all self-righteous and good?? ;-) But she said, "Well, I want to fix you up with my friend John Tolson and I'm like, "John Tolson? I heard he was about to get married." "Oh, no, no, no." she said. "They broke up."

And so she gave him my name and number and he called me. He was really fun on the phone and I was excited to go out with him. When we were giving each other directions on how to get to our houses, we realized that we lived right around the corner from each other. We lived literally four houses away. Like you could see my house from his driveway and his house from my driveway! And yet, I never knew him. Now I had known *of him* because he was on staff at a popular Presbyterian church in Orlando, Florida. He had a popular class, a really great, powerful Bible study on Sunday morning that several hundred people attended and lots of my friends went. He had this great reputation and he also led a men's ministry, so I knew of him, but I didn't know him personally... but at the recommendation of my friends, I let him come pick me up.

And so we went on a date and had a great time. And that was when John asked me that question that I told you all about last week: What would I do if I could do anything and money wasn't a problem? What was I passionate about? I really kinda thought *was I supposed to say, "Him"?* It was the oddest, strangest but coolest "first date question" I think I've ever been asked.

Anyway, I will spare you some of the details of our ups and downs of our dating relationship. But I will say that at one point when we were dating for awhile, Luke, John's son, (my son now) came home from college on a break. John was out of town and he told Luke and I that we should go out together and get a dinner.

I don't think I've said this earlier, but John was a widower. He had been widowed for a little over a year when I met him. He had been married for 30 years to one of the most amazing women I've ever heard about - Ruth Anne Tolson. She was dearly loved, a great friend, and a great mom to Christin and to Luke. She was a great wife to John and a great ministry partner. Ruth Anne passed away in 1999, so John had been married to her for a long time and had a great marriage. And so I was thinking to myself, *Gosh, it must be just so hard to get back out there and date again after 30 years of marriage. That's gotta be so hard.*

So anyway, Luke was home from college on break and we went out to dinner and he was a cute and funny (and he still is) and he asked, "So how are things going with my dad? And I said, "Well, I think they're going good. We're really having a good time." He said, "Yeah, he seems to really like you a lot." And I said, "I like him too, but I gotta tell you it is, it's really been hard for me to realize that my happiness is at the expense of your great loss." And he said, "Yeah, how do you think I feel? I probably wouldn't even be in this family if they hadn't lost Adrian." Now, John and Ruth Anne had a second daughter after Christin was born. Her name was Adrian, and she lived five days. She contracted an infection in the hospital as an infant and she died after five days.

Ruth Anne, being a diabetic (it was complications from that disease that took her life), was cautioned not to get pregnant again, so John, Ruth Anne, and Christin adopted Luke and Luke came to them as an infant.

That was a profound moment when he shared that with me that he wouldn't have been in that family if they had not lost baby Adrian. And so the two of us just looked at each other and shook our heads and we're like, *Wow, you know, God has a plan and it's quite interesting.* And so that was a special bond that Luke and I shared- and still share to this day.

John and I dated about a year and then he came over one Friday night and I could tell all along that he had been kind of back-and-forth struggling although he had told me from the get go, "You know, I'm not dating you to just date, I'm dating you because I want to get married again and I'm asking the Lord if you are the one."

And so he came over on a Friday night when we were just sitting around and talking and eating pizza. And he just said, "You know, I can't keep doing this to you. I just can't make a decision and so I'm gonna let you go and we'll just go our separate ways."

Y'all, we cried. We cried and we prayed together. We got down on our knees and prayed together and he got in his car and drove around the block and went home. And, I laugh now, but it really wasn't very funny that night. But here's the thing... I was heartbroken because I really felt like the Lord had said, *This is the one, this is the man you're going to spend the rest of your life with.*

So when he left the house, before I picked up the phone and called anybody, I did what I knew God's word said to do— *to rejoice in all things and in everything, give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.* So I went to my room and I got on my knees and I said, "Lord, this isn't ending the way I thought it was going to end, but I'm trusting you and I'm asking you to guard my heart and affections so that I don't put a wall up and I don't block myself from finding love again because this guy set the bar really high. He's a godly man and I know I will not settle for anything less for the rest of my life, but you're going to have to put my heart back together again because I'm pretty broken right now."

I prayed that and sat there with God for awhile... and then I picked up the phone and called my girlfriend and told her and we boohoo'd.

That was on a Friday night. It was a hard weekend and it was a hard Monday night when I taught Bible study. On Tuesday, I was starting to feel maybe a teeny bit better and then Wednesday rolled around. I get a phone call Wednesday night while I am "therapy painting" my living room. (Because, you know, it's what you do when you're going through a breakup and you've run out of money and you've eaten all the chocolate in the house— you start repainting your living room.) So that's what I did. And I was painting my living room with my hair in a ponytail, sweaty, curtains taken off the wall, stuff piled up everywhere and I get a call and it is John. He says, and I quote, "Hey punky, it's your *friend* John Tolson." Okay, pause. *What the heck would you have done?*

Because everything in me, *everything in me* wanted to go, "Why the heck are you calling me?" (And probably worse, you know.) I just said, "Yeah?", and he said, "I was just wondering if I could come over and talk to you. I have something I wanted to tell you." And I said, "What about last Friday night?" And he said, "Well, I know, but it won't take much time. I just wonder if I could just stop by for a minute." And I said, "Well, I probably need my head examined, but yes, come on over." So he was over in just a few minutes and he walked in... and no, I was not nice to him. I was not nice. I did not put on any "warm fuzzies." In fact, I was very cold to him, but— I let him in. (Now he says I *threw* something on the floor, but I didn't *throw* something on the floor. I had a stack of magazines on the sofa and was trying to clear place for him to sit down, so I took the stack and I *popped* it on the floor.) He then said, "Well, if you're going to start throwing things around, I guess I'll just leave. This probably was a bad idea." And I said, "Ah, wait a second. You don't call me up after last Friday night and tell me you have to tell me something, and then come over here and not tell me. You tell me what you needed to tell me."

So he sat down on the couch and I sat on the corner of the couch as far away from him as I could get. And he starts this preamble and just says, "I made a big mistake when I left here Friday night. And I realized it as I was pulling out of the driveway and I got home and I just thought, *What is the deal, Lord?* I just realized I was scared and around the corner from me is the most wonderful woman and I would be crazy if I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with her. I can live without her, but I *don't want to* live without her. I don't want to spend the rest of my life without her. And so, I love you and I'm not here to ask you to get back together with me. I'm here to ask you to marry me."

I said nothing. I felt like God had his hand on my throat and was whispering in my ear, *If you say one smart remark, I am taking you out right now...* because those of you who know me well, know that I have it in me— and everything in me just wanted to go, *You gotta be kidding me.*

But I didn't. I just sat there and then he started whole thing over again, repeated the whole story. And I looked at him and I said, "So... are you *telling* me this or are you actually *asking* me to marry you?" And he said, "Oh no, I'm asking you to marry me. I'm asking you if you will be my wife." So I said, "Yes. Yes, I will." And we both started crying and I just thought *this is really not how I thought it was going down, Lord.* And I think the Lord was just cracking up. I think he was having the biggest field day just laughing at me because here I am in my sweaty workout clothes, paint all over me, my hair in a ponytail, probably no makeup on, my house is a wreck, and the man I have prayed for forever asks me to marry him. There was no violin, there were no red roses— there wasn't even a dadgum ring! But that's okay because *God was in it* and he wrote this story and it was amazing. He absolutely knocked my socks off. I was speechless.

I said to John, "You've got to call my parents first thing in the morning and ask my dad if you can marry me." (Yes, ladies at 42 years old— my daddy was still alive then— and I said, "You must ask my dad for permission to marry me.") John did that the next morning and then I said, "You have to call Christin and Luke and you have to tell them, you have to get their permission." Which he did, and of course they gave us their blessing and we announced it to my family the next Sunday, which was Easter, so we kept it a secret from Wednesday to Sunday.

Now on the Friday after John proposed I was finishing up painting my living room on a ladder painting the corner near the ceiling. It was good Friday. And y'all, I just started crying. I just started crying from, I don't know where. I just, I don't even know. It just came out of the blue. I just started sobbing and crying. And I'm like, *Lord, why am I crying? What is going on? Why am I crying?* And I just finally verbalized *I think I'm just scared. I think I'm scared because it's always been just me and you, Jesus. And now it's going to be me, you and John, and I just don't know how I'm supposed to work this out. How am I supposed to do this love thing? How am I supposed to have time with you and him?* I just had all of these questions and I felt, again, the Lord just say to my heart, *Punky, it's always going to be me and you, but you're going to have to work harder to keep it that way.*

And it's been true - I have had to work harder. There are things that Paul talks about in 1st Corinthians 7 when he talks about married people and single people – that married people have the cares of their spouses. The husband has the cares of his wife, the wife has the cares of her husband. Your time is divided and then you put children than mix and your time is even more divided. You have to make that commitment and you have to make that time and you have to keep at it and stick with it. It doesn't happen perfectly, and it doesn't happen consistently, but it happens more often the more you stay committed to it.

So we got engaged and yes, I ended up getting a ring. After we got engaged and announced it, there was a young woman in my Bible study, her name is Arden– she's a fantastic woman and was a very good friend of Ruth Anne's. She was in Ruth Anne's Bible study and disciplined by her.

Arden said to me, "I'd love to take you to lunch and share something with you." And at lunch she told me that she had stayed the night with Ruth Anne about two and a half years before she and passed away. She said Ruth Anne shared with me that she was ready to go home to be with the Lord, that she knew that he was getting her ready and that that was okay. She was ready and she said, "But listen, John needs to get married again. I want him to get married again and I am praying for his wife."

And this was what Arden said to me. She said, it's crystal clear the conversation I had with Ruth Anne when I stayed with her, she told me that John was going to marry again and she thought that I would know her. *She said it would be a woman who knew her purpose was to glorify God.* And then Arden said, "She basically described you in a nutshell, Punky," and she said, "I kept telling her, 'No, no, no, we don't need to talk about this. You are John's wife. We don't need to talk about this,' but she wanted me to know that it was okay and that you had her blessing." And I was speechless. I just was speechless. I thanked her for that. She handed me a letter and she said, "Now I want this letter back after you read it, but take it home and read it." Ruth Anne had written a letter and she had copied it and signed them and asked John to send them out after she passed away.

Arden had one of those letters and in it Ruth Anne said she had had a great life and not to feel sorry for her. And she said, "There's really only two things I have ever regretted in my life. Number one was that I would not have known and loved my grandchildren this side of heaven and number two was that I would not have known the woman that married my husband."

And y'all, I stood there and looked at that letter and I don't think I even cried. I think I was just breathless. I said, "Lord, you've got the wrong girl. You got the wrong girl here." And if you listened last week, you know part of my track record and my story, and I just thought, *You know what, that track record does not end up at this place. I don't deserve this.* And none of us deserve any of the good things that God does for us. But, I knew I did not deserve that. That, that was *sheer grace*. It was just beautiful, beautiful grace. And it still leaves me stunned. I still shake my head over that and can't believe God did what he did for me. And the hard, hard, hard thing about that y'all, is that my "yes" came as a result of their "no." Christin and Luke and John got a "No" when Ruth Anne was not healed of diabetes.

And because of that, I got a “yes.” Now that's some crazy grace and crazy story writing that God writes that I don't get and I have tons of questions about.

I married John on August 25th of 2001 and we have shared 18 great years together. I have the most incredible stepdaughter in Christin. My son-in-law Joe is amazing– he's an amazing man. And then I have a fabulous stepson in Luke. And actually when we got married, I became a wife, a stepmother and a grandmother in one ceremony! Our oldest granddaughter, Adrian (who's named after her baby aunt that passed away) was 16 months old and is now a sophomore in college. It was a great day– mixed emotions all around. We certainly did remember and celebrate Ruth Anne's life because she's a huge part of my life. You know, I fell in love with a man who was married to her for 30 years. I always say I got the blessing of all of Ruth Anne's hard work that she poured into John to whip him into shape. She is celebrated and talked about in our home and in our family, and I am blessed to be able to be a part of that family.

After John and I got married, it wasn't long after that that we got the call to move to Texas. As we are packing up and doing some things in the house, I came across a box of calendars that were Ruth Anne's dated back to the 70s.

John had said to me before we got married, “You know, I would like for you not to work after we get married, but you can do what you want to.” And I was like, “Well, what would I do if I didn't work?” And he said, “Well, you like to teach, you like to study and speak– you could do more of that. You could take some ladies to lunch and just love on them.”

And that really did not make a lot of sense to me at that particular time. I thought it actually sounded kind of lame and purposeless. But, anyway, fast forward– I find these calendars and I asked the Lord– I did pray and I asked the Lord for permission if I could look into some of those calendars (because that's pretty personal thing) but y'all, as I opened those calendars... week after week, day after day, year after year, there were appointments that Ruth Anne had with friends for coffee or so-and-so was coming over to visit or going here and meeting with this person and that gal and this girl and this friend. And it hit me like a ton of bricks. That is what John meant by taking ladies to lunch and loving on them. *Just spending time with women and loving on them.*

And that's what Ruth Anne did so well. She loved on women. She poured her life out for her family and she poured her life out for women that God brought into her life to love on and to encourage and to instill beautiful, rich, biblical truth into their life. She taught me what it looks like on a calendar to practically walk it out with Jesus and invest your life in people, to take the time that you've been given and to use it well and to use it for God's glory.

So surrender, surrender to God's plan because he has got the most beautiful, most profound plan and purpose for your life. All those years, I wanted so desperately, so desperately to have something, to have marriage, to have love to fill my life up every wrong turn I made, every wrong relationship, he just said over and over again– and I couldn't hear him– Oh sweetie, if you only knew what I have planned for you.

I want to leave you with this today because he's got plans and purposes for you. We probably all know Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. Well, that's usually every senior high school student's "life verse" or "verse of the year," but I want you to listen to what God is saying. He is saying that he has plans and a purpose for your life. Another translation says, "For I know the thoughts that I think for you says the Lord." *The thoughts I think over you. God has planned and dreamed about you and he has plans for your life.* And so it says this, "For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, not for evil, but to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and you will come and you will pray to me and I will hear you." And this is verse 13, "and you will seek me and you will find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, declares the Lord."

So if you unpack that verse, what he's saying there is *I've got plans and purposes for your life and they're good plans. They're good plans for you. I've got dreams for you. In fact, I've dreamed a whole life for you.* And then he says this, *but if you'll come and you'll pray to me and you will seek me, you will find me when you search for me with all your heart.*

When you break that down, what he's saying there is *when you seek me like I am a vital necessity for your life. When you want me like you want your next meal, you will find me.* He promises you, you will find him. He says, "You will seek me and you will find me when you search for me wholeheartedly with all your heart." And I really believe that as we seek after the Lord... that we seek *his face*, that we seek to *know him* and to *love him*, to fall in love with him and to follow him all the days of our life... the plans unfold, the plans and the purposes that he has for you and for me, they unfold as we seek after him, as we run hard after him, as we keep chasing after Jesus all the days of our life.

What is it that you're seeking after? What's your relationship with the Lord like? Are you seeking his hand or are you seeking his face? Do you want him just for what he can give to you? Or do you want him for who he is to you and wants to be to you?

You think about that. All right. That's that for that. I hope you'll be back next week for another episode of life on life and in the meantime, don't you ever forget that you are greatly and dearly loved by the King.

xo -P