

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays in the background as Katie speaks.]

Katie Axelson: Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel. When we travel, we get to hear from people different than we are. We hear different perspectives, we better understand others' stories. We learn to stand with people instead of just having opinions on issues. I'm your host Katie Axelson. I'm here today with a new friend, Emily Louis. Emily is the host of Abundant Grace podcast, she's a mother of four and she grew up as part of a cult church. Now she's passionate about helping ease the weight of religiosity that people have placed on their shoulders. Emily, welcome to the show.

Emily Louis: Hey Katie, thank you so much for having me!

KA: Yeah absolutely. So I have gotten to hear a little bit of your story as we've chatted, and in the podcasting group that we are both a part of. But I would love to hear your story from your perspective.

EL: Okay, I'll jump in! So yeah, as Katie said, my name is Emily. I now call myself an unlikely worthiness coach because that's not who I used to be. And I know it sounds super cliché to say this, but I trust that people will understand it but: God really writes the best stories. And I'm really thankful for where He's brought me today. So to give you like, the background, my story: I grew up in a church context that was cult-like. So we were very passionate about doing things the right way, believing exactly the right way and being the only ones that were right. And I dove in on this with you know, both feet. I was the goodie-two-shoes. I wore the label, labels of like "legalist" very proudly. And just tried to be enough and tried to be good. Because that was what got me accepted, that's what helped me feel safe. And that was with people and with God. Some people have, you know, experience where they're like waiting for the hammer to fall, like God is about to strike them down if they screw up. My experience was kind of tied to my core love language actually, but my need for belonging. And my core fear was that He was just going to leave me if I messed up. So I tried really hard to keep Him happy. And that sounds like a good thing at first right? Doing what makes God happy. But it's actually never the child's responsibility to manage the parents emotions and the same is true for God. And it's not our job to keep God happy with us, like He's God, much less if we compare it to a parent, a grown adult. Like, it's His job to manage His emotions and obviously He's God, so He does better than I do with my kids, right? But He doesn't need me to control His emotions or try to make Him happy but I spent a lot of energy doing that. And I felt - I felt so exhausted. I remember going to church, I probably had maybe three kids at the time and I was just whooped. But there - and I should have stayed home! I should have stayed home. But I went to church anyway, you know exhausted and run down and not really showing it or even admitting it to myself, that I was like, I don't know, on the verge of - now I think I could label it burn out or a breakdown - being so tired and run ragged. But that's how I again, found my validation, found my - any ounce of self-worth was found in measuring up and trying to do enough.

KA: Wow.

EL: So jump forward to a gift of a faith crisis. [Emily and Katie laugh.] My ex-pastor was - at the time he was my pastor - he was exposed as abusive for domestic abuse, and it opened up my ability to start asking questions. It was very hard, like asking those questions, because it felt like

you were questioning God. It feels like you're questioning God even though like as you begin to disentangle things, you realize you're just questioning your theology and what you've been taught, but man, it sure feels like you're questioning God.

KA: Sure.

EL: So asking those questions can get really heavy and fearful and realizing that they had been there all the time but I had done a very good job at burying them very deep. So his - his domestic abuse opened up the opportunity for me to recognize my own spiritual abuse. And name it that. And named religious trauma. And begin to heal. And on that, on that path of healing and growth some really key things happened. One thing that happened was God lead us to resources that let me understand God's unconditional love in a way that I had never understood. Because I'd always believed in Jesus! If you'd have asked me if Jesus loved me, I'd have said yes because I believe and the Bible says.

KA: Sure.

EL: But I didn't experience His love, because I was too busy trying to work for it. I was too busy trying to get Him to like me and tolerate me, afraid that He was going to leave. So I would spend a lot of that energy trying to prove it. But then when it was unconditional, it was like the pressure was off, a weight lifted off my shoulders. And it was so freeing. And we eventually, we chose to leave the church community that I had grown up in, that I was - you know, my parents got married there, we got married there, my husband and I. And after experiencing the pain and trauma of being shunned by that community that I had spent my whole life-

KA: Sure.

EL: -trying to fit in with. Again, God brought us, brought me, to people who saw value and worth in me that I didn't even see in myself yet. Healing my relationship like first it was that relationship with Him, like "Oh, my perception, my view of Him was off." And He healed that. And then continuing to heal my relationship and my view of others, and learning to trust again, and let them value me, and let them love me, really let me be confidently myself and step into who God is calling me to be without the fear of rejection, without as much fear of being seen and being judged. Because I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, I'm on mission, I am myself, so I don't have to fit myself in those boxes for people to, you know - that's such a funny thing when we do that. Do you want people to like a version of us? No! We want people to like us. So learning how to be authentically me is so, so powerful. So there's the overarching story, I think.

KA: Awesome. That gives us a good framework to kind of continue to chat from, so thank you for that. How did you recognize that you were in an unhealthy or cultish church environment?

EL: That was just one thing, one little thing at a time. My mom describes it like - have you ever heard how to boil a frog?

KA: Sure. Yeah.

EL: Yeah. So that's how it was. And I grew up in it too, to boot! Especially for my mom, like entering is an adult was just like - that seems inconsistent, or that doesn't seem quite right. And it's just one thing at a time. For anybody who doesn't know, or - I'll jog your memory like how to

boil a frog is you put them in cold or cool water and you gradually turn up the heat. And by the time they realize it's boiling and not a good situation, they're stuck. And that's how it can be in an unhealthy situation, you just dismiss one thing or another. And one of the things that's weaponized is your own like, or I guess "torn down" is a better way of saying it, is your own discernment, your own ability to be in tune with the Holy Spirit and judge what's right. Because someone else is telling you what to believe instead of being told how to think. Or I mean, yeah, instead of being taught how to think, being told what to think.

KA: Sure, sure. So then what is the process of getting out look like?

EL: Oh it's so messy. [Katie and Emily laugh.] I wish it were easy, just like you wake up one day and you're like, "Oh this is an abusive, toxic situation. I'm leaving." [Katie laughs.]

KA: Right.

EL: But it doesn't work in domestic cases, it doesn't work in churches. So the process is going to be different for everybody but you have to get to the place where you know that it's time. You know that it's not what's for you, and that there's something else. And that process looks like asking questions, that process might look like trying to change things from the inside before you leave, it might be learning about other - like other beliefs so that you can begin to look at yours differently. But it will take time. It'll take time. Or it did for me, and it does for a lot of people.

KA: Yeah. How much time do you think it took?

EL: It took us two years.

KA: Wow. From recognizing "this is not great" to being fully removed?

EL: Mmhmm. Yep. I would say like, you know hindsight is sometimes clearer. Six months before we left is when God was like, "You guys are done. You need to leave." And like, it's still took six more months of staying and trying to like, trying to make excuses or trying to like make it work, or - I don't know. We weren't really even attached at that point. We wanted out. But when you're in a situation where you've been essentially brainwashed into believing this is the only right church, and this is the only right place to be, leaving can feel like you're setting your family on fire. It feels like you're walking away from God's only blessed place. It's like you're leaving like you're leaving Eden, or you're leaving the Promised Land. When it's been presented that way, so it feels so risky to step away.

KA: Yeah, I can see that. How has it affected your relationship with God? Like, leaving what was told to be the promised land, and leaving what you were told you had to do to to help be - happy, to help God be happy. How did that affect your relationship with Him?

EL: It has helped it so much! Letting go of all of the rules and the expectations and the "shoulds" that like burden us - letting go of those has helped our family thrive. And my connection to God now is so different because I'm not afraid He's going to walk away.

KA: Oh, sure.

EL: I know, I know that He's with me. He's closer than my next breath. And I hear His voice now and it's not a threatening voice. Someone else, I think it was J.S. Park told me, said it this way

that - um, I think I'm attributing the wrong thing but he said something similar so it's close. But he said, "Religious trauma is like living in a haunted house, but the ghost is God." You think that negativity, that condemning, harsh voice is actually God. And it's not. So reframing who the Holy Spirit is and how God speaks to me and that He's not leaving me those are the huge pieces.

KA: I sometimes think that church wounds are the worst kind of wounds in trauma. Not to downplay any other kind of trauma, but when you've got a church wound, your community is involved and in your relationship with God is involved. And so you no longer have all the safe people you thought were safe or all the people that have been safe historically, and you don't even know like, which way is up with God. Because there are so many questions from what you've been taught and what you've experienced. Would you say that you agree with that thought or you disagree with that?

EL: Yeah I think I would agree with it, gently though.

KA: Okay.

EL: Because that's my trauma, that's my story. But it is - it's awful how many different areas spiritual abuse can impact. It can impact your relationship with your – like you said – friends, it can impact how you relate to your kids, it can impact your sex life, it can impact your career, what you think is available to you. So yeah, I guess I would have to agree with you.

KA: Yeah. I'm sure somebody may someday prove me different, but religious trauma is part of my background as well. And so like, as I've been processing it versus other traumas in my life, I'm like "Oh this has definitely been the hardest one for me to process through."

EL: There's so many layers.

KA: So many layers! Do you feel like you ever got to the bottom of the layers or you feel like you'll continue to unpack that?

EL: I think I'll still unpack them, yeah for sure. [Katie laughs.] Yeah, for sure. About a year ago – this is funny but I bet there's somebody who's listening who's gonna relate and be like "Oh I'm so glad I'm not the only one!" – so I - [Emily laughs.] I got, basically, triggered about a year ago and it was by something I saw on Twitter. And I know that sounds ridiculous, but I think there's probably somebody that can relate. But it was something that I had posted, and it was like, it was trending for sure.

KA: Sure.

EL: The topic was trending. And then I saw a bunch of other friends post and they were posting the opposite of what I had posted. And I, inside was like, I'm like this old story of, "I'm feeling triggered when somebody disagreed with me" because I put so much value in being right. If I am not right, then I am wrong. There's something wrong with me. And so that brought up a bunch of ish. It took me a couple of days to like, "Oh this is what's going on," like I had a migraine. It was like, crazy the physical response that I had to this. And that's when I said, "Okay, I don't want to carry this stuff around. I want to process this in a more, more in-depth," and that's when I looked up a therapist. Like: I need to process through this. I don't want to be triggered by a disagreement on Twitter.

KA: Sure. So let's talk about things that were helpful. So therapy is helpful. What other things have you found to be helpful?

EL: Coaching has been really helpful as well. That's been amazing. So I think on the therapy side, we look a little bit deeper, we look at the trauma. There's somebody who's trained in helping heal your brain. And then on the coaching side, even my business coach has been so powerful because one of the things that coaches do for you, is they let you borrow belief from them. So I've had a spiritual mentor, a business coach, where they believed in my business, or they believed in me and they saw God's calling and value on my life more than I did. And that was, I need that some days. We need to be able to borrow belief from other people. So that's been huge for me. Also books! I've read so many books on - whether it's healing trauma, or just grace-centered books to help us, help me, break out of the like performance-based trying to earn or prove that I'm enough. Just reminded that I am enough. So those are two of the resources that I've used, as well as music. Yeah. Love a good playlist too!

KA: Always good playlist. I'm an Enneagram One myself so I'm just a perfectionist just by nature. Add in any like trauma or experiences where I feel like I've had to earn my way to a position or earn my worth - what advice do you have for those of us who struggle with that?

EL: [Emily laughs.] Oh man. I'm an Enneagram Three so I'm, I'm an achiever. And I want people to view me as whatever, respect, I want them to respect me. So I think that struggle definitely affects a lot of us. But one of the things that's really valuable as we are finding our worth is resting and being still. A lot of times we ignore our need for rest in exchange for just driving or perfection, or being seen as strong. You want to be seen as strong and capable. And on one hand, there's nothing wrong with that. We want to be capable. We want to go achieve. We want to do our best. But where can we stop? Have we created space for us to stop? In 2018 I think it was, the first time I had done a word of a year, I was like "I'm gonna give this a shot. Okay God, what do you want from a year? What should I do?" And He told me very clearly "be still." Like, that's the word.. And I have this notion that my year was going to be like this calm year [Katie laughs.] I know, you laugh. It's pretty apparent now but it was a busy year. It was a full year. And I was able to be still in my spirit. I was able to choose rest. One of the most beautiful things that God speaks over us, and invites us into is Sabbath. So I'll give you a couple examples that are powerful. In Genesis, Adam and Eve's first day of life, like their first full day, was a day of rest.

KA: So valid.

EL: It was God's seventh day of work but it was their first day. And I think that's a beautiful picture of rest not being earned. It's a gift. And it speaks to our worthiness. When Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, and He ascends just above the Earth and there's a voice from Heaven that says "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." God speaks this over Him before His earthly ministry, before He's accomplished anything, before we even really know who He is. And everybody's probably like "Oh, this is what John is talking about?" You know, because he said "Behold the Lamb of God," he's like, "Okay there is something here. What's going on?"

KA: Sure.

EL: God was affirming who Jesus was, his core identity as the beloved by God before He accomplish anything. And the same is true of us. And that's why, that's why we work from a place of worthiness and acceptance and love. You don't have to work for those things, those things are already our birthright. They're already our identity. So we start from those places rather than trying to earn them, or prove that we're worthy of them, it shifts so much. I think I totally got distracted and derailed on your question, so if you want to circle back! [Emily and Katie laugh.]

KA: No that was super helpful. Also want to explain why I laughed because I don't - I don't want you to think I was laughing at you when you called your year "be still." I called one of my years the Year of Peace. Which lasted all of that five minutes on January first, and then it was kind of a disaster after that. But I had this little rock with the word Peace on my nightstand, and so every single day it would sit there and taunt me... but it was also an anchor. And I cannot at all pretend that I was excellent at peace that year, in fact I mostly got mocked by my little rock, but it also was this reminder that I'm supposed to be, maybe not "striving for" but like "resting in" and "experiencing." And sometimes I just wanted to be like, "God where is the peace? There is no peace here. Where is it?" But it was also a chance to like, take a deep breath and be like, "This is the year of peace. I'm not experiencing it right now, but that's still what this year is." And so trusting God even in the chaos when I was hoping for peace.

EL: Right. So I guess tying it back in.

KA: Yeah!

EL: You had asked like, what can we do to get off of this, to stop at achieving? And one of them is rest. And whether that's you literally take things on your to-do list and you delegate them or you stop doing them. You start saying no more. Or you can also schedule in a Sabbath. And if a Sabbath feels really daunting, or it's a new concept, or a new practice, you can do like four hours. Start like - we have like, all or nothing mentality. And what if we let rest not be all or nothing. And we're like "Okay, maybe for four hours I'm going to shut my phone off." Or whatever is restful for you. Do that for four hours and call that your Sabbath. And then you can expend, you can move to a full twelve hours, twenty-four hours if that's what serves you. But that - Sabbath happens on a schedule and it's so good for us to have to pause and rest when we're not ready.

KA: I - when I was in grad school, a whole day off was not at all feasible, because I worked four days a week at one job, two days of work at a different job, and then I had two days of classes. Yes, there were eight days in my week that season. It just meant I was running from one job to another or class to one another. So I couldn't ever take a full day off. But on Wednesday - I had to be up really early on Thursday mornings, so I was very diligent to make sure that my Wednesday night was clear. And so that became my Sabbath, from whenever I got home from work on Wednesday, five, six, seven o'clock, whatever, that was my Sabbath evening. And then one of the other days, I don't remember what day it was, I didn't have any commitments in the morning, so that was my Sabbath morning. And I could not do twenty-four hours altogether of the Sabbath, but I could get a Wednesday evening rest, no school work, nothing - I mean, I could cook on Wednesday night but that was all I would do. And then whatever morning I could

sleep in, that was how Sabbath was important to me at that season, was making sure I had a morning to sleep in. And so I would split up my Sabbath that way and that worked well. Even though my season was wildly busy, I was able to make it work with my schedule and a whole day off would have been delightful, but it wasn't feasible. [Emilly laughs.]

EL: Right. I love that.

KA: Or like, the Jews actually Sabbath from sundown to sundown. So it's Friday night at sundown til Saturday night at sundown. So if you can't get a whole like day because you've got commitments, could you do from sundown one night to sundown the next night, or some variation of that to be able to get that time of rest.

EL: Ummhm. Yeah, those are all great ideas.

KA: What is it look like to grow in confidence to be yourself?

EL: It's been a really fun journey, and it's been a lot more opportunities than I would have dreamed about. Like for example, this year, I got the opportunity to preach a couple of times.

KA: Very cool!

EL: That was so outside of the box that I had painted for myself. Another thing that has grown out of that, not out of preaching but out of being myself, is my business and my podcast! I thought that my life needed to be a homeschool mom, a stay-at-home mom, a homemaker with no outside job or no other nothing. Like that was my mission. And that's a beautiful mission but it can't your full identity, right? And some of us also need to be doing something else as well. And I had that nudge inside of me like crazy. But I thought it was like some sinful part of my heart that like wanted this other thing. And I remember crying and asking God to take it away. Like, "Take away this desire, it's so wrong." Well, I told my husband about the desire. For some reason I struggled with this for years and I finally told him about it, and he was like "You should do it! That would be amazing!" and I was like, "Oh should I? Should I really do this? Okay!" And so that opportunity opened up to like, being afraid to start a business and what will people think and is this - now our family, our season especially in the winter right now looks so different than what I would have imagined their life looks like. My husband spends quite a bit of time at home, and I spend a couple of days a week at the office because his winter season is slow. And he gets to spend time with our kids more. And my oldest is in public school. Like, so many different things have shifted, but because I know my worth isn't found in what I'm doing or how I'm fitting in or how other people think or approve of me, and I'm not trying to work for God's acceptance or approval because that's already given, and I'm in line with my mission that He's given me. So because I'm not striving for those things, I can confidently be myself. I can boldly say, "I am running a business. I'm hoping to impact the way millions of women relate to God and themselves." And all these other opportunities can open up when we're grounded and not trying to prove something. That's where we get our confidence, is from basically our God-given identity and our birthright.

KA: That's so good and so important too, because it is a mindset shift from "what I've always been told is wrong or what I always thought is wrong, even if that's what I'm telling myself," to "this is actually desire that God has put on my heart and He's expecting me to pursue it for the

sake of His glory and for my enjoyment.” Like, those things are not at odds, God's glory and my enjoyment.

EL: That's such a good word! We think somehow it's super holy to be like, somber and miserable or something, or like, we glorify the struggle.

KA: Right! I don't know that I have ever seen a parent mad that their child was having fun in a safe, healthy way. Like that's just not reality. And if we're gonna use the parent analogy with God, which falls short in some ways but is also helpful in some ways, if you're enjoying yourself in a safe and healthy way, how delighted is He in you enjoying that?

EL: Yeah. That's beautiful.

KA: Thanks. While we're here, let's hear a little bit more about your business and your podcast!

EL: Aww, thank you Katie! My podcast is called Abundant Grace, pointing to that first key that really helped me find freedom. And there we explore topics around who God is, who you are, the goal of helping you confidently and boldly be who He's calling you to be. And then I do some one-on-one coaching as well as group programs to help women own their worthiness and stop feeling less-than and stop feeling afraid to be seen and judged so we can, so they can confidently be themselves. That work is such a gift.

KA: Yeah. It sounds really fun and really struggle – struggle is not the word – really hard but also really rewarding.

EL: Yeah sometimes it can be - like my job is to hold space a lot of times and that can be, like that takes a lot of work on my end. But it's really a blessing and an enjoyment.

KA: Where can we find you online?

EL: You can find me on Instagram @Emily.AbundantGrace. And you can go to my website, I'm going to have a page just for your listeners at [EmilyKLouis.com/HaveHope](http://EmilyKLouis.com/HaveHope). And my name is Emily K. Louis [Emily spells her name and website for clarity.] And I'm going to have a link to some videos that I have on keys to feeling more confident and links to my podcast and socials so you can catch me there. And I would love to get to know you and hear from you, so if you want to send me a DM or send me an email, I would just love to visit with you.

KA: That would be awesome, we will definitely link to all of that in the show notes as well.

EL: Thank you!

KA: So a couple fun questions for you! What do you wish everyone knew?

EL: I wish they knew that they were already worthy, and that they were already enough. And lovable.

KA: Lovable! Oh, that's a good one. Would you be willing to pray for us?

EL: Absolutely.

KA: Cool!



EL: God thank You so much for this space, thank You for podcasting, thank you for Katie's vision for Have Hope. God, I pray for the listeners here as they are tuning in to hear other peoples stories, God that's such a valuable and necessary mission and task for us today. Help them to be encouraged if they relate to my story. Help them to know that God can, that You can, bring them through to write a beautiful story, and that You can heal and You transform and You can help them let go of bondage or expectations or boxes that they've tried to cram themselves in. And I ask that if they know someone who is walking through something similar, or has spiritual abuse, or religious trauma, that maybe they would send this episode to their friend or they would just learn to listen. And I ask that You would bless them with healing and transformation and draw them closer to Your heart. In Jesus name, amen.

KA: Amen. Thank you so much. I love getting to hear people pray because I feel like it shows their heart. And I feel like it showed your heart to help us draw closer to God even though we've been through things that have tried to pull us away from God. So it's a chance to step towards Him again. And that's one of my favorite things, is getting to link arms with other women and take a step towards Jesus together. So thank you so much for linking arms with me tonight.

EL: Absolutely, thanks Katie! I really appreciate the conversation.

KA: For sure! I have one final question and this is a fun one. Because Have Hope; Will Travel is built around the idea of hearing other people's stories, we are constantly learning from someone who's got a new perspective or something that we've never heard before. So I would love to learn: what is something that you have learned recently?

EL: Oh wow! That's fun. I learned a random fact at the grocery store today. [Emily laughs.] That - now, I haven't tested this out, but this is about avocados. That the shorter rounder avocados have a bigger seed, and the longer avocados have a small seed.

KA: Woo! I have never heard that before, but I love avocados and I'm thinking through my avocado experiences, and I think that I agree with that theory.

EL: Yeah, so I don't know if it's like the male flower or the female flower or...

KA: Sure.

EL: but!

KA: That's interesting.

EL: Very interesting!

KA: I love avocados. There are two of them in my fridge right now that I'm a little afraid are going bad but I'm going to - well, not eat them anyway but what I can out of them what I can anyway. [Emily laughs.] I know something fun about avocados! If you pull the little like piece off, the stem part off, you can see the green on the inside or the dark on the inside and you know how ripe it is.

EL: Ohh!

KA: Yeah, so if you like, flick it off and it's a light green it's not quite ready yet. But if it's like brown, it's over-ready. Over ripe. So I also know that avocados are really hard to harvest, and sometimes I think to myself that's why they're so expensive.

EL: [Emily laughs.] Oh, I got them for \$0.69 each today.

KA: I'm coming to your grocery store!

EL: Right? [Emily laughs.]

KA: I feel like anything under a dollar is a good deal for an avocado.

EL: Right! I'm going to make, I'm going to go mix some avocados with some salsa and call it guacamole.

KA: Ohh, that sounds delicious. Awesome. Well Emily, thank you so much for getting to share your story with us, for trusting us with it, for helping us draw closer to Jesus, for educating us about avocados and religious trauma. You know, two things that always go together. [Emily and Katie laugh.]

EL: Perfect! I love it.

KA: Really appreciate your time and your story.

EL: Thanks Katie, have a great night.

KA: You too!

[Theme music: upbeat electronica plays in the background as Katie speaks.]

Katie Axelson: As always, a big thanks for listening. Be sure to connect with Emily at [EmilyKLouis.com/HaveHope](https://EmilyKLouis.com/HaveHope). I would love to connect with you as well! You can find me at [KatieAxelson.com](https://KatieAxelson.com). Did you know that we have a free resource to help you have better conversations with the people in your everyday world? You can find it under the resources tab at [KatieAxelson.com](https://KatieAxelson.com). We'll see you again in two weeks my friend, and until then: know that you are loved, know that you are seen, know that you matter, and know that your story brings value. Bye.

[Katie stops speaking and the theme music: upbeat electronica ends.]