



## Episode 6: Anthony

### Official Transcript

**Aren** Hello, and welcome back to episode six of *Dear Church*. I'm your host, Aren Rennacker.

“Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship.” These are the opening words to Adventist Fundamental Belief number 23: “Marriage and the Family”

And as a church, so much of what we do is based upon those two things: marriage and family. We offer cradle roll and Vacation Bible School. We tell children’s stories in church and have our own school system. We provide premarital counseling and host wedding ceremonies. All good things.

And today’s guest on *Dear Church* experienced his perfect Adventist love story. He met his wife in academy, fell for her while working together at summer camp, and had their fairy tale wedding, just as he was starting his work as a pastor.

But what happens when that storybook marriage doesn’t end happily ever after? When the fairy tale begins to fall apart? Today’s guest shares the love story we don’t often hear, and how the most painful experience of his life—led him to where he is today.

**Anthony** Hi, I’m Anthony, and this is *Dear Church*.

**Aren** Anthony, thanks for taking some time to talk with me.

**Anthony** So glad to be here, man. An honor, it's always an honor to talk to you. Let's do it.

**Aren** Can you start by telling me a little bit about your upbringing?

**Anthony** Yeah, for sure. So, I'm Canadian—yeah, so I'm Canadian. I was born in Red Deer, Alberta. Just a hop, skip away from Berman University, formerly CUC, Canadian Union College. And I grew up there just for a few years before my parents moved down. My dad—we moved our whole family—he moved us down to the states so he could finish school and pursue a degree in theology.

And I grew up with awesome parents who were both visibly in love, affectionate and also, like, deeply spiritual. Like I grew up in a home where the Bible was open, where my parents, you know, you'd wake up on any given day in the morning, and you'd catch my parents like in the living room, Bible open, praying together. And I kind of grew up in that environment. So...

**Aren** How did you feel about church?

**Anthony** So I had mostly a positive experience with church, but at the same time your boy was a little bit of a rebel.

You know, this was the era of like the emo kind of gothic renaissance, you know, early 2000s. And so I would show up to church in like all black, like my studded belt from Hot Topic and wear my choker, you know, black fingernail polish.

**Aren** I'm imagining you had your slip on Vans and skinny jeans?

**Anthony** Oh, every day. Oh yeah. I was the early adopter to skinny jeans. And like, I wore skinny jeans before they made them for men. Like I was wearing girl pants in the early days. So, yeah. That was me. I was like, I was that kid.

**Anthony** Many people who remember that era of me and friends that knew me then would say that I am not the same person as then because I was a depressive teenager for a long time. But I had this awesome dean at my dorm who just pursued me relentlessly. He gave me Bible studies and he kind of explained the gospel to me in a way that I'd never heard before.

I did not know that God could forgive sins in the past. I felt like I was just trapped on a treadmill and I thought I was, you know, he could come back any time and I would be doomed. He just had a way of saying it in a new way that I'd never heard. And frankly, it changed my life.

**Aren** After being quiet and detached for most of his young life, Anthony now felt a new sense of meaning. When he went to college, he got involved in various ministries, something he'd seen firsthand from his dad—but when it came to picking his own career, nothing seemed to fit.

**Anthony** I could never figure out what I wanted to do. I just felt like I was running, jumping from one major to another. I had been graphic design, then journalism, videography, communications. I just didn't love any of it and I knew that I wanted to love something. And we had to write this major paper and I was failing the class. In fact, I had failed this class twice before because I couldn't write this major paper which was supposed to be on what we wanted to do with our life, like career.

And I remember the professor had said to me, “Hey, just write about what you love the most.” And so, in that class I remember just breaking down one day in the back of this class on this computer and just saying, like, Jesus it's just you. Like, it's only you.

And I just stopped running from it and so I just wrote, I just wrote about my faith.

And I remembered it was like the door had been unlocked, it was like all of a sudden, I just knew in the depths of my heart that, like, I'm supposed to be a pastor.

I changed my major to theology that day and or that later that week and I called my dad and I told him and he was like, he was just quiet and he's like, "We've been praying for this for a long time." [LAUGHS]

**Aren** Like most young pastors, Anthony imaged getting placed in a big, contemporary church that would change the world. And, like most pastors, he wasn't. Instead, he was given a congregation of about 30 retirees in rural Washington and paid just half-time. But he was also compensated in other ways—gaining lessons that taught him what it truly means to lead and to serve. Things that would change his world.

**Anthony** One of the couples, older couples, they were mid-divorce when I got there. And I kind of got sucked into kind of the conflict between them and I ended up just trying to spend time with both of them, but they would both feel jealous when I would spend time with the other, and I ended up going to help the husband. He was a—he worked doing, like, flooring. And I remember one afternoon I just did a bunch of flooring with him. And I remember laying down this flooring and him just opening up to me and at times getting emotional and sharing what was going on.

And I had a moment where I realized a couple things. One, like, I can't actually be the Christ for people. But also, I realize like, man, this is really what it means to be a pastor. It's not necessarily, like, 500 people in the room. But rather, wow, just me on my hands and knees doing this flooring with this guy and sharing a sandwich out by the truck and just like hearing him share his heart.

That community and that church became one of the most beautiful times of my life. God humbled me, and He gave me the gift of amazing, beautiful people that I still love to this day.

**Aren** During this time, Anthony was also a newlywed. He and his wife had met in academy and then bonded while working together at camp. They saw each other as best friends, but only best friends. At one point, they discovered that Anthony and her mom had shared the same childhood bedroom in the same home, years apart. It felt as if the world was somehow working to bring them closer together.

**Anthony** We worked for one summer together and we kind of became besties that summer. And we kind of had a little friend group with a couple other people. But then those two other people started dating, so it just left us to hang out. So we hung out a lot.

We would go on these outings just as a staff to bond. And we went, we went on this, like, late night Walmart run, just as a whole staff. We took this big yellow school bus and I remember we sat next to each other and we're just hanging out and talking, listening to music. This was the era of—we had to share, we would share the iPod headphones. So, I had one, she had the other. We're just listening to music, whatever, and she fell asleep on my shoulder on the way back to camp. And I remember looking down at her and that was the moment where it was like it unlocked. It's like my eyes were open and I was like, oh snap, like, this is it.

**Aren** Did you actually ask her, “Will you be my girlfriend?”

**Anthony** I did, I did. I'm a bit of a traditionalist, yeah. I got her a little like Angry Birds ring pop and I gave it to her, and I was like, “Will you be my girlfriend?”

[LAUGHS]

**Aren** Yeah, how very traditional of you. [LAUGHS]

**Anthony** Dating your best friend can be either the best or the worst. For us it was the best. It was so fun. It was literally so good.

There was a moment where she made for me, she used to make this dish this, like, enchilada dish. And I remember tasting it for the first time and I was like, oh snap, like, she's like a really good cook. Like, I could eat this for the rest of my life.

I think the longer we were together, because we dated three full years, the more it just it just made sense.

**Aren** You were happy.

**Anthony** Yeah man. Being with your best friend, it was the best.

**Aren** After two years of dating, Anthony began planning his proposal. He decided to do it on New Year's Eve, with a surprise token to their past. Years earlier, they had been in a play together at camp where he was the prince and she was the princess. A literal fairy tale.

**Anthony** I went to the camp, I got the costume for the prince that I had worn at camp and I proposed in her backyard. I lit up with a bunch of lights and in the in the trees and on the ground.

When she got back to the house, I had her blindfolded and I led her to the back and when it hit midnight I told her to take the blindfold off and I was there with one knee in the ring in my prince costume.

**Aren** Literally at midnight on New Year's.

**Anthony** Yeah.

**Aren** You're a romantic person, aren't you?

**Anthony** Oh yeah. Yeah man. 100%. I cry in, you know, I cried in *Ratatouille*. I cry in *Up*, you know. I'm crying all the time. I cry every day, you know.

**Aren** Okay, but we all cried in *Up*.

**Anthony** Yeah, true. That first part is so—that's so millennial.

**Aren** Tell me about the first few years of marriage together.

**Anthony** Yeah man. Being married was the best. It was the best thing in my life. It felt like we never fight. It felt like we're just on the same page. It felt like we're just best friends. It felt like nothing was wrong

And we would do these check-ins regularly where we would just say, hey, is there anything that you need to get off your chest, any resentment you feel building up, anything we just need to clear the air. Anything that maybe you've been holding in. Let's just make sure we're on the same page and just, like, because one of our core values as a couple was, like, total transparency. So we shared everything and had no secrets and I remember we had a talk and we couldn't think of anything that was wrong and we were both kind of musing, like, how do we stumble across the perfect marriage?

**Aren** Around this time, Anthony got hired to be the youth pastor at a larger church in California where he'd be paid full-time. His wife was also able to find a job across the street from where Anthony worked, as she began a grad school program. Things seemed perfect. But they began to realize how demanding their new life had become.

**Anthony** It was like we'd see each other in the morning and the evening, and that was it. So, we kind of, we started to become ships in the night in a lot of ways. But even through that time, I think if you had asked us then we would have said like, oh man, marriage is still the best. It's like, the moments when we were together were still, like, the best. We were still us. But it was like that time together was slowly being pushed out.

**Aren** It was also at this time that Anthony received news from back home that his parents were separating. He knew things had become difficult for them, but not to this extent. He remembers journeying through their divorce together with his wife, and the gratitude he felt to have her by his side.

Later that year, they took a trip with friends, and his wife confided in him that she had recently been struggling with her own questions—questions like “Who am I?” and “What am I doing with my life?” Anthony’s initial reaction was surprise, but not alarm. This might even be a good thing, he thought.

**Anthony** But one of the things she had said was, she, you know, she was afraid to say, but she shared with me was like, you know, I'm afraid that I didn't know what love was when I got married, and we just got married because we were best friends.

And so, I was just like, hey, I think this is great, I'm here to support. Ask those questions. I'm not afraid of those questions. And maybe you know what this is Aren, I would beg to guess that you do, that when you're with someone enough time you just start to feel the sense of, like, relational resilience. Where you start to feel, like, man, we can kind of conquer anything because we've kind of conquered these hard things. So, you start to feel this, like, strong sense of like, man, come hell or high water, like, I know one thing is true. Like, it's gonna be us.

From that time to the end of the year, things progressively started to deteriorate. She became more and more closed off and she felt like she was struggling with her mental health, which I absolutely believe and I wanted to support. But it felt like we just became disconnected slowly over time.

I'm careful telling the story publicly because I like to protect her reputation, and I don't like to portray myself as if I'm the hero in the story. Because by no means was I, am I, perfect—a perfect husband. That said, I have learned in recent years simply to own my story and that telling my story is not disparaging a person. It is simply having ownership and being honest.



**Aren** With that, I'll let Anthony tell the rest of his story without interruption

**Anthony** It wouldn't be till maybe November-ish when I started to really feel like red alert, like, something is wrong. Like, my marriage is falling apart in front of me and I don't know why. And I didn't have answers and I felt like I, like I didn't know what to do. I was just lost.

But eventually it just became so terrible to the point where, like, we couldn't communicate. I would attempt to reach out, I would attempt to talk to her, but it was like there had been a wall erected where we had this relationship of total transparency before, it was like that was shut off, that was gone.

At this point, I was like fully underwater, like in full blown depression, like, survival mode. I remember just sitting in my office all day just like staring at my phone, doing nothing, like, doing no work, I just felt like I was just coping. I felt like I was just trying to survive, and I dropped the ball and I was missing appointments and I was not getting back to people. You know, all the stuff that pastors do. I let down the team a lot because I hadn't shared what I was going through, they didn't know.

My wife came home one night and she was, like, losing it. She was, like, bawling. It was, it was like, you know, a family member had died. It was, like, crisis and I was like, what's going on? Let's calm down. What's happening? We sat down and she looked at me and said I've been having an affair for the past half year or so.

It really caught me off guard. I was utterly shook, as they say, to the core of my being. And looking back there were signs, of course, you know. In retrospect, hindsight is 20/20, but I had never really even considered that that would be a possibility. And when you've known someone for so long and had been friends with someone for so long and deeply trusted, it just was not something I had considered could happen. And so it really, it kind of wrecked me, to be honest. Kind of broke my world.

You know, in response, I kind of had said, hey, I want to make this work. I'm, I'm here for the long haul. I still want everything we've ever dreamed about. You know, like, our kids that we had created names for and the future that we had planned and like trips that we had been excited about and, like, I'm like, I'm still on the ship, you know? But she didn't know she was.

And so, I had said, hey, here's what I really want to see. I want you to move back home, and I want us to go to marriage counseling. And could you at least stop seeing this person until we figure this out? Like, until you have an answer for me, and she agreed. She was like, yeah, you know, she promised to do that.

Probably from then till March we were kind of in this limbo space. We just didn't really know what was going on. I felt like I was, I was trying to sort of win her back in a lot of senses. But it felt like nothing I did really kind of mattered.

I still remember this night in March, she came home, she came to the house and she was crying again, kind of like sobbing. And I was like, what's going on? I remember that night because it was raining. It was like a movie, it was, you know, it was typical movie scene moment.

She comes in and she's like, hey, you know, I know I said I would stop seeing this person, but I didn't. I've still been seeing this person this whole time. And I'm like, okay. But she confessed to me that things had ended with that person, that he had ended things. And that she didn't really know what to do. She felt like she was lost, and she wanted to make it work now that that relationship had ended.

**Aren** How were you feeling?

**Anthony** I was really angry. [LAUGHS] Yeah. I was really angry.

I really considered deeply, just like being done and in that moment. But I felt at the time that I knew how deep the grace of God was for me in my life. And I knew how consistent the love of God had been in my life.

Everyone in my life was telling me, like, you need to be done, bro. Like, this is not—like you need to get out, like you've done enough. And I just felt like I haven't because God has, man, moved heaven and earth for me when I thought that I was lost, when there was no coming home. And so I held on.

I came back I think the next week and I had said, like, I'm still in. And I want this. I'm still in and I just want to know that you're in. That's all I need to know, like, we can do the work. But she still didn't know. She had said, "I think I'm in."

And there had been some key breakthrough moments that I was like, you know, this is the sermon I'm going to preach at the end of it. This is the book I'm going to write one day. How God healed our marriage and how He did a miracle and how He changed her heart and my heart, because there were things in me that needed to shift and change and grow that I knew, and I was willing and I wanted to and I was so. I was open.

So she said she thought she was in and I was like, okay, so this is what I need: I need you to move back home, the same things, I need you to move back home, I need you to go to at least one marriage counseling session with me. And—I'm trying to say this in the way that I mean. She let me down.

It got to the point where I just gave chance after chance after chance. You know, I would go to marriage counseling appointments and I would sit and wait and she would bail every time. She wouldn't show. I would go to restaurants and we'd have a dinner schedule and she would bail on me and I would be waiting. Like, every week for months I went to marriage counseling appointments to the point where I just did counseling alone.

At a certain point I finally was able to just see and admit, and it took me a long time with therapy to acknowledge, this is not a person who values me. And I am worthy of being valued. And it took me a long time, Aren, to believe that about myself.

And I remember in therapy getting to the point where I was finally able, I still remember the day where I was able to say, no, like—I am worthy of being valued. And that was a triumphant day for me.

So, we had a conversation and I just told her, it's okay. I know that you're done, but you don't have the courage to say it. So I can say it. It's okay. You're free. Like, it's okay. Like, fly free, you know. And that was one of the most relieving days of my life.

I remember she left, she walked out the door and I just got on my knees in my disgusting living room. And I remember just crying to God. And I remember saying to Him, God, am I letting you down? I feel as if I stood up there and I promised I made this promise and I said till death do us part, and I meant that, and I can't keep it. And—am I letting you down?

**Aren** How did God answer that question?

**Anthony** Over years of time. But I think at the end of the day God has been gracious to me and just reminded me of His love and His faithfulness and has just freed me of any shame. Something my therapist said, “God calls us to be His hands and feet, but not Him.” So, you can't actually go to the cross for people. Only God can do that.

Divorce is one of those things, you know, you don't take a class in school. It was one of those weird things where it's like, how does this work? What are we doing? You know, lawyers and money and like all sorts of stuff. Ours was pretty amicable, so it was pretty smooth.

I remember a key moment, I took a bunch of kids to, was it Disneyland maybe? And one of the girls asked me there, we were just waiting in line for a ride or something,

and she asked me, "Are you guys divorced?" And I said, "Yeah, it's looking that way." And that was a moment when I realized, like, oh the kids know as well. Like, they're not dumb. You know, they're catching the vibes.

**Aren** With his divorce finalized, Anthony's conference felt it would be a good time for him to have a change of scenery. They decided his new view would be that of seminary, where he could begin his healing as he got his master's degree.

**Anthony** The journey back to life after divorce was a year's long journey for me. I felt absolutely lost in the world, like, totally displaced. You feel kind of orphaned and, like, homeless in the world, kind of emotionally. Like, you had a home and it's gone and you don't know where it went. And I felt that way for a long time.

I also lost a deep sense of self. Like, I felt like I did not know who I was without her. And so for a while, for honestly, for a lot of years, your boy was a mess. Your boy was really lost for a long time.

You know, like, bro, the amount of grace that God has had in my life. Because if my seminary professors knew that I was showing up to class hungover. And that was all just, you know, to cope with my kind of life falling apart. I didn't really know a healthy way to cope with the change.

But I found myself in a very, an amazing friend group at seminary. And I ended up just having an amazing community of friends who just loved me consistently. We'd have a Bible study every Friday. And there were so many tears shed at that Bible study. So I would be, like, during the week, a literal mess, and then on Friday, I'd come to Bible study and my friends, we'd read the scriptures together and I would tell my story and they would support and we'd pray for each other. It was through that Bible study of close friends that it really was the doorway to me beginning the healing journey, I would say.

**Aren** How are you doing now?

**Anthony** Bro, what a journey. There was a time where I remember laying awake at night, and I could not imagine a future where I didn't feel the despair of losing my wife. And for a long time you feel like the light, like, that doesn't exist. It's just dark the whole way through. But eventually you realize: there actually is light. And it's actually there. Like, the darkness is a myth, it's only temporary and that the light is actually there.

And it's really nuts because, sitting here five years later, you kind of discover you're far more resilient than you ever thought you were. That there's just like a deep well, it like carves a well in your soul of resilience, this deep reservoir that you didn't even know was within you to make it through something difficult. And then when you're on the other side, you're just like: I can't believe I made it through that.

Sometimes I hold my cat, Leo, he's a 20-pound Maine Coon. He's very fat.

[LAUGHTER] He's been with me through the whole journey. I've had him since he was five months old. I just hold him and I just sometimes I say, I say to him, "We made it. We made it through."

**Aren** There's still one more piece to Anthony's story, something that began as his marriage was ending. He and his friends started having deep discussions about their Adventism. Some felt they were believing in church doctrines more than ever; others, like Anthony, felt they were questioning certain beliefs for the first time. There were three friends in particular Anthony loved having these conversations with, which led to an idea.

**Anthony** We felt as if our Adventism was shifting in a lot of senses. And we knew enough of our friends that also their Adventism had been shifting and changing since undergrad that we were like, well, what if we just give a voice to that? And what if we just gave a voice to trying to find what this thing means to us?

**Aren** They decided to start a podcast together, hosted by Anthony and his friends Jesse, Sean, and Erik. They called it *Seeking What They Sought*, a reference to Adventism's original

founders. The show's cover art features a black and white portrait of Ellen White—wearing over-the-ear headphones. Their Instagram bio describes the show as “A podcast where four friends try and have honest conversations about Seventh-day Adventism.”

They launched in 2018 and have published over 60 episodes since. What began as mostly conversations between the hosts has now grown into interviews and discussions with some of the more prominent voices in the Church. They even had General Conference president Ted Wilson on the show.

**Anthony** We joked for a long time that it's just our moms listening. Because for a while it literally was, it was like our moms and like 10 friends. [LAUGHTER] But yeah man, it's been really cool to see the response just because I think we were craving a place to have honest conversations and we're like, what if we stopped just like wanting that to happen and did that?

My favorite thing about the podcast is time and time again, we'll have a conversation with someone that I've made assumptions about already in my head, even if they're deep, subconscious assumptions. “Oh, this person is this way. They believe this about this thing.” I've already boxed them in. I've already pigeonholed them, so to speak. And then we have a conversation, and I realize everyone's just human. Like, wow, there's such a humanizing thing that happens when you have conversations, especially with people you think you already assume you'll disagree with. And that's, I think, what I really love is we humanize one another by engaging.

**Aren** *Seeking What They Sought* is currently wrapping up a series called “Polarized.” You can listen to that or any of their 60+ episodes wherever you get your podcasts.

**Aren** It's an honor to hear your story, Anthony, and I truly appreciate your willingness to share it. I'm wondering if now we can hear your letter to the Church?

**Anthony** Sure. Yeah man.

Dear Church,

For a long time, I think the primary emotion I experienced towards you was anger. Anger because from a young age, that was the God you taught me about. I'm still trying to unlearn a God who is primarily angry and petty. Still trying to unclasp the fist of a God who prioritizes lists and rules and operates like a cosmic auditor, constantly waiting for me to make a mistake so he can write it down in his little black book.

I was angry because you said we were the most biblical denomination, that we were “people of the book.” And yet, when I read it, I found a Jesus who welcomed the least of these, all while you pushed them away. I was angry because your obsession with being unique and correct left me with years of unraveling spiritual superiority and intellectual arrogance. It's taking me a long time to learn to listen. So I have been angry.

But the years have softened the heart. It's taken me a long time to look back and see that, while you left me with pain, you left me with beauty too. Beauty because you cultivated spaces where I could belong when I was young. Spaces like summer camp and academy, Pathfinders, where I felt I was part of a family and met some of my closest friends. Beauty because for all your faults, you hired bold, unashamed people who taught me the gospel as I got older. Who explained to me that God was more than the angry fist. Beauty because as I traversed perhaps the hardest years of my life as a church employee, you gave me surprising space to not be okay, to hurt, and to wander. You taught me my trauma did not disqualify me from ministry.

So, Dear Church, took me a long time. But I find myself surprised, for I have finally, fully accepted you for who you are, the dark and the light, just as you did for me. And now I see I was only angry because I cared. Now I see that you are me.

Sincerely,

Anthony



**Aren Dear Church** is a production of SECC Youth and the Southeastern California Conference. Production support from JO Cordero, music from Cracker Punk and Blue Dot Sessions, cover art from Taji Saleem. I provide the hosting and editing.

Special thanks to our guest today, Pastor Anthony Lyder. Anthony now ministers in the great state of Texas, where he enjoys leading worship, meeting with young adults, crying during movies, and podcasting. Again, I encourage you to check out his podcast, *Seeking What They Sought*. If you have any ties to the Adventist Church, I think you'll like it.

If you enjoyed today's episode, we invite you to subscribe and leave a review, and if you'd like to learn more about the show and find episode transcripts, visit our website, [seccyouth.com/DearChurch](http://seccyouth.com/DearChurch). We will be back next week with another episode featuring a new guest, and we hope you'll join us.