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Intro: Hey friends! Welcome to Girls Night. I'm Stephanie May Wilson and I am so happy that you're here. Each week I have a girlfriend over and we talk through one of the biggest questions we have about our lives as women.

We're talking about friendships and faith and relationships and self-confidence, about our calling in life, and how to live every bit of our lives to the full. Life is so much better and easier and absolutely more fun when we navigate it together as girlfriends. And I cannot wait to get started.

So, guys, I'm so excited to be back for Season 15 of the Girls Night Podcast. And we're kicking off this season with a really wonderful episode. We're talking about why it's so important to celebrate the big things and the little things in our lives, and how to practically do that.

I love this episode because I always find myself craving delight and whimsy and celebration and popsicles more in the summer than any other time of the year. But this episode is actually so much deeper than just having more parties.

Something I learned in this episode is that joy is one of the most vulnerable things we can ever feel. It's way less vulnerable to feel disappointment or to imagine worst-case scenarios and to rehearse bad things happening. It's like if you're preparing for the worst it won't hurt so much if it happens. Whereas if you really open your arms and your heart to something good and embrace it, then if it gets taken away, you feel like you're gonna be crushed. Even more so because you didn't see it coming.

It's like naming a puppy you're not sure you're gonna get to keep. It just feels easier not to name it. But actually it doesn't work this way. And I'm so excited for you to get to hear why.

A guest walking us through this incredible topic is my friend Nicole Zasowski. Nicole is a marriage and family therapist as well as an author. She recently wrote a book called *What If It's Wonderful?: An invitation to Release Your Fears, Choose Joy, and Find the Courage to Celebrate*. Friends, if you'd like to feel more joy and contentment in your life, that's all of us, right?, this episode is for you. I can't wait to dive in.

But before we do, I have a resource I wanted to make sure to share with you. It's my newest prayer journal called *The Between Places: 100 Days to Trusting God When You Don't Know What's Next*. I actually wrote this book as my husband Carl and I are going through IVF, and so this book is so close to my heart. It's for

women who are in the thick of it, written by a woman who was and in so many ways still is totally in the thick of it.

I love this journal because it's a powerful practical way for us to connect with God in times when our future feels really uncertain. Through guided prayer prompts, *The Between Places* will help you trust God with the trickiest, most uncertain, and most important parts of your life.

It'll help you believe more fully than ever, that God is good, that He loves you, and that He's taking care of you. It'll help you live today with more contentment, step into the future with more courage and faith and rest in God's peace knowing that He's with you every step of the way. To order a copy of your own, just head to my website. It's stephanimaywilson.com. That link will also be in our show notes.

Okay, are you guys ready? Let's hop into the episode with Nicole.

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Stephanie: All right, friends, I am so excited for who you get to hear from today. I'm sitting here with my friend Nicole Zasowski. Nicole, you've been on the show before but I loved our conversation so much, I just knew we had to have you back. So thanks so much for coming back on Girls Night.

Nicole: I was so, so excited to be able to talk to you again. I'm not just saying this. It was truly a highlight a couple years ago of my first book launch season. So I was really excited to get to connect with you.

Stephanie: Oh, that's so nice. I love that. I told you this, but I was working through Barnes and Noble a couple days ago, which is not something we get to do as often as we used to,-

Nicole: No.

Stephanie: ...you know, just wandering through bookstore. But I saw your book and I got to pick it up and hold it and feel it. And it's beautiful. So congratulations on your... It's your second book, right?

Nicole: Yes. Yes.

Stephanie: That's so exciting. That's so exciting.

Nicole: Thank you.

Stephanie: We'll make sure to link to your first episode in the show notes. But for women who haven't gotten to meet yet, can you tell us who you are, what you do, and a fun fact about yourself?

Nicole: Yes, I am a marriage and family therapist. I have a practice in Greenwich, Connecticut, just outside New York City. And occasionally I get to do marriage intensives and speak on topics that intersect psychology and faith. Do that with organizations and churches around the country.

I am a mama of three. I believe all kids are miracles. I just happen to have a story that reminds me of how much that's true. And I am married to my best friend. We live in a tiny little coastal town. You wouldn't know New York City is close by, but it's this weird juxtaposition of living very close to a large city and being in a quiet, little sailing town. So it's fun.

Stephanie: Totally ideal. That is awesome. That's so cool.

Nicole: Yeah. My husband works in Manhattan, so he really enjoys getting the break and having a total change of pace just to train right away. So it's great.

Stephanie: That's really cool. That's really cool. Okay, what's your fun fact?

Nicole: It's a little embarrassing, but it's the first one that comes to mind. So I'm just gonna go with it. I keep my bananas in the refrigerator because I don't like to look at the color yellow.

Stephanie: Do you not like yellow as a color in general or is it particularly the banana shade of yellow? Or is it just in our kitchen?

Nicole: The banana shade is not my favorite. There's layers to this answer. The banana shade is not my favorite. My house is just not a house that is very welcoming to yellow. I feel like it kind of clashes with other things in the house. But I'm trying to think of what item I would choose yellow. It's not my best color to wear. So even like clothing items, it's not what I would reach for. It's just not my favorite color.

Stephanie: But are there any other colors that fit in this category?

Nicole: Not a big fan of red or orange. I'm very neutral. So if you must use color, use blue. And like I mentioned, we live in this very coastal area. So it just sort of lends itself to that.

Stephanie: I'm the same way about red, though.

Nicole: Okay.

Stephanie: I have not hidden fruits as a result of that, but I respect it. It's so amazing. That's so amazing. I do absolutely have weird stuff. Like I don't like looking at this or... But yeah, I'm that way about red, other than lipstick and I did have a red car at one point. Those are like my red things. I will do yellow but I think it's... I don't know, something about the blonde hair. I can wear yellow but yeah, my house is really neutral.

Nicole: I would think you would look good in yellow-

Stephanie: Oh, I love it.

Nicole: ...with that blonde hair.

Stephanie: That's so fun. I love that. If anyone else has a weird color thing... Yeah, I love it. If anyone else has a weird color thing, I need to know. So send us a message or something so that Nicole knows it. So Nicole knows she's not alone. I'm so glad we get to talk today.

You have a new book and it's called *What If It's Wonderful?*, and it's an invitation to release your fears, choose joy and find the courage to celebrate. And I love this because as I started hearing about this topic, at first it's like celebration... Okay, celebration should feel kind of easy, right?

I think a lot of us, at least in our heads, would gravitate towards more positive emotions or like more enjoyable emotions. I know I do. Like I would way rather celebrate than be sad or scared. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I think we are really scared to celebrate. And to celebrate is actually a really bold, vulnerable thing. So I'm so glad that we're talking about this, because I think that everyone is gonna go, "Oh my gosh." I just think that it's gonna hit all of us in a way that we maybe don't even expect from the get-go.

I know that when we write a book or start a podcast or do something like this, it generally is because we've had to learn this thing the hard way. So what does that look like for you? How did this topic become so important to you?

Nicole: This book is no exception to that. Some people see confetti on the cover and they assume that I just had a lot to say about joy and celebration, and was an expert in those things. Hopefully, I have more to say than I did before on this topic. But it was absolutely a book that was born out of a season that could largely be characterized by loss and change.

And when you go through a loss, there's the loss itself, whether that's a betrayal or the literal loss of a loved one, or just a season that looked really differently than you hoped it would. There's the thing itself, and then there's the cost. And the cost is the impact to our sense of identity and or our sense of safety.

And what took me a really long time to realize was that for me, part of the cost of my own painful season was that when we did start stepping into a season with more good news and more breakthrough in our story, my joy was accompanied by a lot of fear, and I started to protect myself by preparing for the worst-case scenario, always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I thought that celebration always came with a catch. I rehearsed disaster, I practiced disappointment. And I was so grieved when I realized that, yeah, some of the loss I'd experienced is tangible loss. But a lot of the loss I had experienced was because of my refusal to fully engage the very good life that was right in front of me. And I thought, "I don't want to miss out on my beautiful God given life, because I am so busy preparing for the worst."

So that sent me into a deep dive in Scripture and a deep dive in neuroscience research and looking at the way that God created our brain, and in the ways that were shaped neurologically by experiences to really understand what does it look like to practice celebration and joy in a healthy way.

Stephanie: I love, love that. I'm writing down notes because there's so many things I want to ask you. I think that our answers are each really different. But I want to hear you just kind of call some of them out, because they think, again, this is kind of a thing that... I think we all do, but maybe we don't. I don't know, like we wouldn't know how to identify it in ourselves. What are some common reasons that people hesitate to celebrate?

Nicole: This was so interesting because I was writing this book and starting to think about it during the pandemic. So I had this opportunity to have this conversation with so many people, not only clients but people in my personal life. And it seems like there were... Like you said, this is not an exhaustive list. But it seems like there were five reasons that seem to come up over and over again that point to our hesitancy around celebration.

The first is kind of what I just described is fear. Most people don't realize that joy is actually the most vulnerable feeling we feel. At first glance, like you mentioned earlier, it seems like we would gravitate toward those more pleasant emotional experiences and pursue them with reckless abandon. But it was so interesting to be reminded that joy is actually vulnerable. It's scary. And it's because we find it easier

not to hold something or safer not to hold something than to hold something that might break. So we protect ourselves by disengaging from that joy a bit.

The second reason is we are waiting for a reason to celebrate. We think, "Well, I'm perfectly willing. I just don't have a reason to celebrate." And that's because we've so as a culture narrowed our definition of celebration to be a reaction to good news or a reward for an accomplishment. But as I learned, and as maybe we'll talk about later, rather than a reward or a reaction, although celebration does include those two things, celebration is much more often a rhythm that we practice that's available to all of us in all kinds of seasons that helps us cultivate joy in the life that we already have.

The third is, you know, obviously we're in community, and we might be walking through a totally different kind of season than somebody else in our community. And rather than knowing how to fully rejoice with those who rejoice and fully mourn with those who mourn at the same time, we tend to see those differences and disengage and get very quiet in our celebration.

The fourth is we understand celebration to be self-aggrandizing. And there's a plot twist on this one that maybe we can talk about. But we assume that celebration is bragging or draws attention to ourselves, and we're not sure how to reconcile our value of humility with this invitation to celebrate.

And then the fifth was certainly true for me. You know, I had a totally different relationship with God in the dark. In my season of pain, I drew close to Him and was really reintroduced to His character in a totally different way than I had known Him before. And that relationship was really precious to me. As hard as that season was, I loved the intimacy that I had with Christ in that season. And I loved what I learned about Him.

And I was sad having grown up in the church my whole life, as I entered this different kind of more joyful season, I didn't have a context for what it looked like to engage with God deeply in my joy. What does it look like to interact with Him? And I was afraid that that intimacy would go away.

It's as if I pictured him, you know, really close and walking me over uneven ground. And then as soon as we got to ground that was soft underfoot Him saying, "Okay, have fun, you let me know when you need me again." And we need Him just as much in our joy, but a lot of us are confused as to what that actually looks like.

Stephanie: I feel like I can relate to every single one of those in different ways. The one that I think feels most painful to think about is the being afraid to hold on to something

good because you're afraid that you'll lose it. I think when we've gone through something really hard, it feels like the worst has happened.

I think there are a couple of things that happen. One, I know that I've gotten to experience... I've spent a lot of time rehearsing disasters. Anxiety is totally something that I struggle with. And so there have been a lot of times in life where I'll almost try to prepare for the pain by feeling it in advance.

But one thing that I've gotten to see is that a lot of times the worst-case scenario doesn't happen. The thing that we envision in our heads, the thing that I'm really afraid of, some things that I'm afraid of have happened, some things have happened that I didn't even see coming that I didn't even know to be afraid of like, I don't know, a pandemic. And then a lot of the things that I've been afraid of haven't happened.

And then the other thing that I've kind of noticed is that when I'm rehearsing things, I don't necessarily see the whole picture. So I'm not imagining the fact that other good things will also be happening at the same time, or that in my pain I'll have people around me who really love me, who support me, that God will be there really closely with me in my pain or in my fear. I don't see that full picture. So that's kind of one half of the coin of fear.

And then the other thing is that there are also times though when bad things do happen, so we're afraid of them happening again. So like, if you have lost a relationship, you have lost a pregnancy, you have lost someone you love, that was so hard that you're afraid to hold on to hope because you're afraid that you'll lose something else.

I don't know, that's just kind of a giant pile of thoughts. But I want to know what you found, because I know you found some really interesting things when it comes to what's happening in our brains when it comes to like rehearsing worst-case scenarios, right?

Nicole: Yeah. Well, just to respond to what you shared, one interesting thing I found in the research is, because this is such a common tendency to prepare for the worst-case scenario and wait for the other shoe to drop, is the research says that even if, and that's a big IF, capital I, capital F, even IF that should actually be true, that should actually happen, we are no more emotionally prepared. Like it doesn't lessen the pain if that does happen by preparing for it in advance. What we do protect ourselves from is a lot of delight in that season leading up to the thing that we fear.

You know, a lot of people say that the worst of our fear is in the anticipation. And I think that speaks to what you were saying: we don't have eyes or even an

imagination for how God is going to provide in that season should the worst happen. We don't have an imagination for the ways that we will grow on the far side of that.

So everything you said made perfect sense. And yes, there are some other dynamics going on in the brain that mean that left on neutral, our brain leans negative. One of these is called the hedonic treadmill. And it basically means that your brain rapidly adapts to joy.

So maybe you receive news or a gift that you thought would make you want from nothing else, and there is that initial moment of thrill and then slowly, that joy fades into the background and your brain adapts to that. And we know that there are spiritual and emotional reasons for chasing the thing that it. But there's also a neuroscientific reason that that thing does not satisfy.

The second is our brains are just stickier with painful information. And most of us have heard something along those lines. But what this means practically for us is because your brain is so efficient, it only wants to pick up what it thinks it's going to need, which tends to be large and painful things.

So all those little moments of connection with your loved ones, maybe noticing beauty and nature, just a random conversation with a stranger in a coffee shop that brought you joy, you know, whatever it is, these moments of delight that we encounter all the time, they're not things your brain thinks are important. So it will dismiss and discard those moments.

And the third thing I found so interesting, although I talked about many more things in my book, but just to mention it here, we have this awful habit as human beings of telling our joy how it can be improved upon. So I always give this example of giving a presentation.

Say, you give a speech, or you share your testimony and you're in front of this group of people and you feel really good about what you're saying, your contents, you can tell you're connecting with the audience, maybe you even get a few compliments on your way back to your seat when you're finished. And you sit down and you feel so good. And then you start thinking, "Oh, would it have been better if I told that story?" Or "they said I was a good speaker, they didn't say I was a great speaker." We start telling our joy what would have made it better.

So these are just a few dynamics in the brain that mean that all we have to do to feel disappointed and despair is nothing. So it takes intentional practices to retrain our brain and create new neural pathways toward hopefulness, toward delights, and joy.

Stephanie: Talk to me about neuro pathways, because I know a tiny bit about them. But I feel like the more I learn about them, the more it's just really helpful. I can see like, Oh, this is how this is working in my life, and this is how it would be better if I could pay attention to this little bit more. So talk to us about... just like a quick neural pathway rundown.

Nicole: I will speak in layman's terms because even I am not an expert in terms of the super-scientific terminology. But essentially the brain goes where it knows. So what is most practiced in those thought patterns, those ways of thinking that you practice most often? That is like a well-worn path in your brain.

So it's kind of like if I stood with you at one end of the woods and there was a well-blazed trail right in front of you. And then I gave you an ax, and I said, "You can either take that well-trodden path, or you can blaze your own trail." That's a little bit of what it feels like in your brain when it feels an emotion. And whatever behavior is most practiced, usually it's a reaction that's understandable but not very helpful to try and protect you from that feeling or defend against that feeling. That is usually the most well-worn path.

So while that is discouraging news as a starting point, the hopeful part is, every time you do something different, every time you take that feeling, and you say, "Okay, I do have a choice here, I am going to practice this instead," it's like blazing a new trail.

And then the next time you're standing at the edge of that woods, that trail is a little bit more well-worn. And then the more you practice it soon, your brain sees that as just as viable an option as this other behavior that is not so helpful. And maybe over time there's some brush that grows over that other path because you have taken this path that was once less traveled.

So just knowing that the brain goes where it knows is motivation for me to start introducing my brain to a new way of doing things. Probably my least favorite fact about the brain is that feelings often follow actions. It's usually not the other way around. Sometimes we have those unicorn moments where we feel like doing something and we're so aware of the truth, and then we act on that truth. And it's, you know exactly what we felt like doing in that moment.

Most of the time, there's this unfortunate reality of I have to do what I know and trust is the healthy thing and trust that my feelings will eventually follow. But there's a discipline component to that that unfortunately is hard. But that's the way your brain works.

[00:25:56] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends! I wanted to take a quick pause for my conversation with Nicole to thank our sponsor for today. Our sponsor for today's episode is an awesome company called [Prose](#). Now, most of you have heard me sing the praises of Prose, the world's most personalized haircare. But for those who haven't, I wanted to tell you about the incredible results I'm seeing since using my customized Prose products.

Prose has given over 1 million consultations with our hair quiz. And that's how the process started for me. The quiz was so much fun. It felt like one of those magazine quizzes I used to love. It was easy but also in-depth. They asked me so many questions that I wouldn't have thought to answer. Like, how much does your hair shed? Or is your hair oily, the ends are just near your scalp?

So I did the hair quiz and I placed my order. In just a few days later the package showed up on my doorstep. I have a pre-shampoo mask, shampoo, and conditioner. I've been using these products for a while now and it's made such a difference. My hair feels silky soft and looks even shinier.

And the other thing I love is that you can continuously customize your formula to help you tweak things depending on your lifestyle changes or even changes in the weather. Prose is also focused on providing clean and responsible products. Every product is free of parabens, sulfates, phthalates, mineral oils, GMOs and is always cruelty-free.

Also, if you're not 100% positive that Prose is the best haircare you've ever had, they will take the products back no questions asked. But I have a feeling that won't be an issue. Guys, Prose is the healthy hair regimen with your name all over it. You can take your free in-depth hair quiz and get 15% off your order today. Just go to prose.com/girlsnight. That's prose.com/girlsnight for your free in-depth hair quiz and 15% off. Prose thank you so much for sponsoring our girls night. We just love having you.

Sponsor: Hey friends! Our sponsor for today's episode is an amazing female-founded company called [Olive & June](#). Now, I don't know about you but I love having my nails done. I just feel more put together when I have a fresh manicure, especially in spring and summertime. But to be honest, I rarely do it.

A few times a year I do treat myself to a salon mani-pedi. I always walk out of the salon having spent like \$100 and I usually end up chipping my newly painted nails as soon as I get in the car. So then I go through a period where I decide I'm just going to do my nails myself. But no matter how hard I try, my nails always end up

looking like they were painted by a 6-year-old. Anyone else? That's why I'm so happy to have found Olive & June.

Olive & June founder spent a year doing and re-doing and re-doing and redoing her own nails, identifying all the reasons it is impossible to make them look good on your own, and then she fixed it. She created their Mani System that helps you achieve beautiful salon-quality nails for just \$2 a mani. And the polish truly doesn't check. It lasts for seven days or more.

The Mani System comes with all the tools you could possibly need for salon-quality nails all in one box, includes the poppy which is this thing you put on top of the nail polish candle to make it easy to grip. And that way you can paint your nails on both of your hands. This is a game-changer. With a poppy I can finally keep the nail polish on my actual nails instead of getting it all over my fingers.

You could also customize Your Mani System box with your choice of six polishes. I love the variety of colors they have. I am obsessed with their color called Pink Sands. It's this gorgeous white, pink neutral color that I can't stop wearing. Friends, I love this company so much. I actually enjoy painting my nails now and the end result is seriously so beautiful.

Not only that. Their Mani System is going to be my new go-to gift for all of my closest people. I just gave a box to my mother-in-law for her birthday and to my friend Kelsey. They make the best gift. Friends painting your nails can actually be fun and affordable, all because of Olive & June.

Visit oliveandjune.com/girlsnight for 20% off your first Mani system. That's oliveandjune.com/girlsnight for 20% off your first Mani System. Olive & June thank you so much for sponsoring our Girls Night. We just love having you.

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Stephanie: Okay, that is so interesting. The thing I've been thinking about as you're talking about those paths are... and I've talked about this in different times, but for most of my life for the first, I don't know, two decades of my life, longer than that, I feel like my internal monologue was really, really negative and really, really critical. Like, I absolutely was my own worst critic. My thoughts about myself, my thoughts towards myself were just constant. And I'm really critical.

One, it's hard to do anything in life when you're your own worst critic.

Nicole: Sure.

Stephanie: It's like going on a date while having an earbud in your ear with someone being like, "Yeah, that was dumb," or "You look terrible," or "You chose that outfit?" or "He's bored. He doesn't want to be here." Something like that. It's really hard to have a conversation when that's happening in your head.

Nicole: I can imagine.

Stephanie: But I really worked really hard for a long time to start thinking new thoughts. It really started when I started wondering what God actually says about me versus what I say about me? Or I started paying attention to like, what is it that I think about myself? Because I just had never really examined my thoughts about myself. So I did.

And I looked at what those were versus what God says and was like, okay, so I can either trust myself and or random things that people have said to me throughout the years or conclusions I've come to that may or may not be true, or I can trust God and practice believing the things that he says are true and practice being kind to myself.

And it's crazy, because it took a lot of intentional time of pausing, listening to my thoughts, and correcting them. But now and for the last really like, I don't know, seven or eight years, longer, I'm unconsciously or subconsciously think really kind of things to myself. My inner voice is really encouraging and affirming and gentle.

Nicole: Wow.

Stephanie: I'm a way better friend to myself. And it took a really long time for that to happen. But it is crazy that I'll notice a thought where it's like, "Hey, you worked really hard today. You know what? Let's go take a shower," or "let's go get a snack," or "I think it's time to go take a nap." I hear the things happening in my brain are just a lot kinder than they used to be and really makes a huge difference.

So, as you're describing these paths, I can see the one that was so well worn. I just immediately went to negative thoughts towards myself or about myself. Like it took a lot of hacking away in the woods, but now there's a lot of brush over this grown-up on that old path. The new path is pretty well-worn. And the more I walked down it, the easier it is to find it.

Nicole: That makes me so happy.

Stephanie: I really like that. I think that celebration can feel like a really frivolous thing, especially when so much is going on in our world. It feels like there's constantly so

much going on. But just every day, it's like, how can anything else happen? But then it does. Why is celebration important? And why is it not like silly or... I don't know, like escapism? "I'm just gonna bury my head in the sand of good things and..." Like it feels irresponsible almost.

Nicole: No, I think celebration has been very misbranded as either a little bit like dessert. Like nice to have but not essential to our emotional and spiritual growth. And if we take it a step further, it could even be considered to be escapism in some people's minds. The difference between celebration and escapism is not so much found in the behavior itself with a few obvious exceptions.

But often I can look at somebody engaging in a certain activity and not even know is that celebration or is that escapism? A much more helpful question diagnostically is, what am I looking for by pursuing this behavior? Because escapism is a reaction to pain that seeks to disengage from our emotional experience and our relationship with God and other people.

Celebration is a discipline, it's an action, it's a practice based on truth that actually helps us engage more deeply with our emotional experience and with God and other people. There's a deeply connecting relational component to it. So this is a practice that actually helps us cultivate more joy and connection in our lives, and not something that is either, yeah, kind of nice to have but doesn't really do much or worse destructive like escapism is.

Stephanie: Can you give me some examples?

Nicole: Of celebration?

Stephanie: Yeah. Or celebration versus like... You said that it could be the same action, but it could have two different purposes behind it.

Nicole: Yeah. Take a nap, which is not something that we might immediately think of as celebration. But I know that when I take a nap and I'm in a healthy place, what I'm celebrating... I actually wrote a post on this not too long ago, because I was in such a burnout, exhausted place. This was about a year ago, actually.

I was like, at the tail end of my edits for this book and I just texted my agent who's a good friend, and said something desperate to her, like, "I am so, so exhausted." And she just replied, "How can you celebrate today?" And what celebration looked like for me in that moment I realized was celebrating that this is not all on me, that I am not alone, that God is going to do with this book what He's going to do beyond my efforts, that He is working through and beyond my work. So acknowledging

and celebrating that truth meant for me, letting go and going to sleep and allowing my body to rest.

Conversely, sometimes, usually, when we're escaping, we're assuming it's based on an assumption that there is absolutely nothing I can do. So I am just going to go to sleep to turn down the volume on my emotions and just hit the pause button. It doesn't grow me, it doesn't further my emotional processing, it doesn't heal relationships. I wake up in the very same place that I fell asleep. Not physically, of course, but emotionally and relationally. It's checking out my emotional experience and in my relationship processing. So that would be an example of same behavior looking for two very different things.

Stephanie: One of them is to hide and the other one is taking care of yourself and recognizing that you don't keep the world turning. And thank God you don't. Okay. Okay. That makes sense. I wouldn't have thought of taking a nap as a form of celebration. And you said that celebrations sort of been poorly branded. So how would you define celebration? I love how you said earlier. It's not a reward. It's not a-

Nicole: Reaction.

Stephanie: It's not a reaction. And then there was one more, wasn't there?

Nicole: Well, I think we wait for a reason to celebrate, which is often either a reaction to good news or a reward for an accomplishment.

Stephanie: Okay, yeah.

Nicole: And instead, I would define it as a rhythm that we practice that helps us experience and cultivate more joy in the life we already have.

Stephanie: Oh, I love that. So what are some ways that we like... Because, again, I wouldn't have thought of taking a nap as one of those things...

Nicole: We tend to think of it as merely a party or, you know, the way that we would... The first image that comes to mind around celebration is usually some sort of festivity. And I don't want to diminish that. I just don't want our definition to be limited to that. So that is a valuable part of celebration. I am very thankful for the friends in my life that are gifted in party planning and hospitality and make that a part of their celebration.

I think, though, that when we limit it to that experience, we're missing out on the everyday practices that are accessible and doable and simple, and are available to us in seasons where we don't feel like rejoicing. So my favorite practice that I think

is a really good on ramp if you're just kind of diving into the practice of celebration is a practice called savoring.

And what's wonderful about savoring is savoring celebrates the ordinary. So all those dynamics in the brain that we talked about earlier, savoring is our counter practice to carving a new neural pathway and cultivating something new. And the way that you do this is you just take one snapshot from your day. I love to practice it in the moment as it's happening because it makes me more aware as I'm living that moment.

Some people prefer it as a reflective exercise at the end of their day. I don't think it matters. Whatever you prefer. But you take one tiny, tiny snapshot. I mean, for me, sometimes it's the way the sun hits my son's blonde hair as he plays in the backyard or the weight of my daughter on my chest when I'm rocking her to sleep. Just tiny moment.

And you just ask your five traditional senses what they're going to remember about that moment. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you taste? And what do you feel? And that celebrates that moment in a way that you can carry it forward and recall it later. It secures that moment in your brain instead of allowing your brain to dismiss or discard it.

Stephanie: So the more we celebrate, the more we notice the sunlight on his hair, or the feeling of her weight on your chest, the more we recognize those things, the more likely we are to continue to do that?

Nicole: Yeah.. I think it's very related to that old adage that you find what you look for. I give a bit of a metaphor on this in the book. Sea glass is a through-line in the book, because it's a practice that my family started at the beginning of the pandemic. And what started as a way of getting some energy out in the only spaces and places that were open in Connecticut, it has become our family's favorite way of disconnecting from our responsibilities and connecting with each other.

As I look back... And we keep them in jars. And you wouldn't believe, I mean, thousands of pieces. I wish I could show you right now. But as I look back on those jars in that large collection, I see the way that God has woven friendship and community and laughter into our family in a season that none of us would have written had we been given the pen this way. And I see God's faithfulness to us in this season.

So now when we look for sea glass, we find it more easily and we find more pieces than we did when we first started because our eyes are trained. So that's the metaphor that I have for celebration. This practice of celebration, helps you see joy

and experience joy more deeply in the life that you already have. It's not about waiting for something to change. In fact, sometimes it's simply a practice that helps you remember a God who doesn't change.

Stephanie: I may have said this on the show before, but shortly after college, I did a trip for a year where I backpacked to a bunch of countries around the world and did volunteer work. And it was a wonderful experience. But it was also a pretty uncomfortable experience because I gave up everything. Like my mattress, I gave up a towel that wasn't a tiny little quick, dry towel. I gave up showers. I gave, I mean, all kinds of things that I really took for granted.

And I had this moment where I caught myself out. I was like halfway through the trip, I think I was in Uganda at that point, and I just loved Uganda. We had such a good experience there and such a wonderful family that we lived with. But I caught myself daydreaming about home and what I couldn't wait to do when I got home.

I'm glad that I kind of caught this moment in my head because I was like, "Wait a minute. I have been dreaming about doing a trip like this for my whole life. This is something that very few people get to do and I'm actually doing this right now. Like, I'm going to waste it by mentally not being here. I'm going to like mentally relocate myself to what coffee drink at home I'm missing." So at the time I actually ended up... I was reading Ann Voskamp's *One Thousand Gifts*-

Nicole: Oh, great.

Stephanie: I mean, the whole premise is that she just wrote down a thousand things she was grateful for one by one. So I kind of took that challenge and I got this little notebook and just started writing down things, I was grateful for it. I'd write the same thing down like a bunch of times, you know, if it was something I experienced every day, or it was the little things, it was huge things.

It was like everything from like 10 extra minutes to sleep in the morning to powdered coffee, because we didn't have like normal coffee there for a while. I was grateful for that. Or to like God's grace or my family. It's like big things, tiny things. And it really was this super practical way of staying in the moment and really seeing the good things in the moment.

I had this sense as I was doing it that if I continued to look forward, if I continue to be like, "Okay, well, when I get home, I'm so excited about this," well, then I'd get home and then I would be kind of dissatisfied with where my feet were at home, and I'd be working on to the next thing. I was like, "I'm gonna miss my life if I do this this way.

So I love that. Like that was the first time really and the most practical tiny bit by tiny bit like intentional practice I've ever done of being really grateful for the really specific small things that were happening in my actual life right now. And it made such a difference.

The joy I felt was so... I just was consumed with gratitude constantly, and I was showering out of a bucket. Those two are like... I just never would have thought that I could feel that way while missing out on so many things that... Like a nice shower is a great thing that I normally really celebrate.

Nicole: For sure.

Stephanie: But I was constantly looking for things to be grateful for, and I was finding them.

Nicole: I love that. You bring up another practice that I think is worth mentioning, the practice of Thanksgiving. What you said is absolutely true. Gratitude does increase our joy. And what I found so interesting was that Thanksgiving, actually expressing that gratitude, either to God in our prayers or to another person if that's applicable, that doubles the joy that we would glean from gratitude.

So if you're really thankful, or I should say grateful for a friend in your life, that will increase your joy for sure—to notice and name that. And if you sit down with them or write them a note and say, "Here's the difference that you make in my life. I just want you to know how I've grown and changed because of your presence. And here are all the things I appreciate about you, and how you make my life better," that doubles the joy that we would have experienced if we had just felt that in our heart, which is still significant, for sure.

But I had always used Thanksgiving and gratitude interchangeably. And it was so fun to think about if I feel this, where's the opportunity to share it and express that either, again, to God in my prayers. I think going back to what I said earlier about how do we engage with God deeply in the light of our joy, I think Thanksgiving is the practice we've been given to celebrate that gift with the giver or to another person. And hopefully it increases their joy hearing it as well.

Stephanie: So it's not just that you're spreading the joy by telling your friend how much they mean to you; it doubles it. Is that like a neuroscience science thing?

Nicole: Yes, yes, it must be. In the studies that I looked at, it was shown that Thanksgiving, actually expressing that, and again, I'd always use those terms interchangeably, but actually expressing the gratitude we feel in our heart doubles the joy for us regardless of what the experience is like for the other person.

Stephanie: That is so wild. That is so wild.

Nicole: I know. It made it kind of fun to think, well, where's the invitation to share it? I've certainly experienced the increase in joy when I've been able to do that.

Stephanie: That's so cool. I think a lot of times it's really easy to feel like if this thing was different in my life, then I would feel more joy. My life would be better if it was a little bit more like this. And you know, we all are going through different hard things. Like we're collectively going through so many hard things, but then individually, we all have really hard parts of our stories.

There are things that can be changed and they can grow and can... There's some truth to, you know, this is a really, really hard thing. And when this is over, that'll be great.

Nicole: Yes, for sure.

Stephanie: Like, let's get through this. But there's something really beautiful to knowing that we can increase our joy without any of our circumstances changing by just noticing the good things that are happening and taking the time to celebrate them. But then also that you can supercharge it by not only recognizing the thing you're grateful for but then saying it, expressing it. That is just a really cool, untapped theme.

Nicole: Yes. That's how I felt when I read that. Also acknowledging that Thanksgiving doesn't mean that you are ignoring or diminishing the pain. I think toxic positivity expects joy to cancel pain or ignore it. And joy is just able to trust God's goodness and promises in the midst of pain. So don't be afraid that expressing Thanksgiving is somehow abandoning that you're very real hurt. It doesn't extinguish it, but it does change it when we're able to practice that.

Stephanie: I'm glad that you brought that up, and you kind of touched on this earlier, but it is hard to celebrate when things are really hard. I mean, it's hard to celebrate when you have a heavy heart. But also it's hard to... I don't know. I found out I was pregnant in March of 2020. That's a weird moment to celebrate. Or finding out that you, you know, getting engaged when your best friend just gets her heartbroken or something. Sometimes it's more of our joy doesn't match up with-

Nicole: Sure.

Stephanie: ...the rest of our lives or our joy doesn't match up with the people around us, or it doesn't match up with kind of a cultural moment as a whole. How do we celebrate without being insensitive?

Nicole: I think when it comes to the question of how do we celebrate when we can't rejoice, because if I'm saying celebration is a practice that's available to us in all kinds of seasons, I also have to acknowledge not all kinds of seasons feel very good. They're really hard sometimes. Life is not always wonderful.

And what was really helpful to me on that question is one of the things I did was really look at the feasts and festivals outlined in the Old Testament. And these were celebrated for different reasons and in different ways. There were different traditions around each one. But one through-line was that they were celebrated in rhythm.

The Israelites didn't celebrate when it was convenient or because they had a good enough reason to do so. They celebrated because it was time. That rhythmic quality was about remembering God's goodness, and not making it a reward for their own. Like I said earlier, sometimes we do get to celebrate our circumstances changing. And we absolutely should. It's beautiful when that happens. And often celebration looks like remembering as it did for the Israelites. Remembering a God who is good and does not change.

The invitation to celebrate with those who are experiencing joy I think is a particularly tough one, especially if that dream steps on the toes of our own. You know, that person is celebrating a dream or a breakthrough that we would love to have for ourselves. I hear Paul's command to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn, but I really wanted to understand what that looked like practically.

One story that was really helpful to me is found in Deuteronomy 3. And it's when Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness. He's been doing this for years. And the scripture says they are so close to the promised land that when Moses goes up on this mountain to talk to God, he can actually see it in the distance. And of course we know that while he's been their leader this whole time, he's disobeyed God earlier in that journey and is told he's not going to be the one to enter the promised land. He's not going to get to lead God's people in.

And I love his honesty in this moment up on this mountain talking to God. He begs God one more time. "Can I please be the one?" And God gives an emphatic no and says this is the end of the conversation. But what I'm really challenged by is what he says next. He says, "I want you to commission Joshua." Essentially, I want you to pour courage and prepare Joshua for the dream that you would love to have for yourself.

That really kicked my tail, because I think if we're honest, and we can all probably think of a time where we have either privately heard about someone's joy and found

a way to accept their joy. And usually this looks like some sort of comparison. Like will they have that but I have this? Like we sort of posture as a way to feel okay and accept their joy.

But what this story showed me is that truly rejoicing with those who rejoice and celebrating other people, there's an active component to that. Either pouring courage into them with verbal encouragement or actively preparing them for that journey. Maybe it's making a connection that would really help further that dream for them, or physically helping them prepare committee to pray for them on a regular basis, whatever it is.

What I found, this goes back to the feelings following actions, when I have gotten my hands dirty, and actually actively celebrated somebody, my feelings follow. All of the sudden, I don't have this scarcity mentality that somehow their joy takes away from mine. I have more eyes to see God's provision in my own life and more of an expanded imagination for what He might be doing for both of us and freely celebrate my friend.

Stephanie: I love that so much. You know, we kind of touched on this at the beginning. I love that you said study shows that rehearsing or practicing disappointment, rehearsing bad things happening, it doesn't prepare you. I just need that reminder a lot. I can't lessen my future pain by trying to feel some of it now.

Nicole: Yes, exactly.

Stephanie: That's one thing. But when you've lost something already and you're given something similar, it's really hard to not be afraid that you're going to lose it again. And this could be a relationship, like we said, this could be a pregnancy, this could be a job. If you've been fired from your dream job before, and you get another one, like, how do you not go to work every day worrying that it's going to happen again?

Nicole: Yeah, hyper-vigilant for signs of that same thing. I've walked through this dynamic in lots of different kinds of stories with clients and people in my personal life. And then personally, my husband and I have had five miscarriages. And we have a diagnosis that actually means that when we get pregnant, I have a less than 50% chance of actually getting to meet that little one.

So that's my best example or experience that I've had of that in my own life. And I say that just to share what you said is real. It's really hard to tolerate the hopefulness of a new opportunity or the joy of receiving that gift of a new job, a new relationship when you've been burned so badly by life's pain.

I think of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth, when they received news that they were going to be parents of John the Baptist, she receives that gift readily. She trusts God as her celebrator. And while she's my model, I just so relate to Zechariah who wants proof before he's willing to trust the promise because he's known so much pain. And I totally get that.

And just an encouragement to someone who finds themselves in that boat right now, sometimes I've been asked, "Do you think I need to demonstrate a certain level of hope or a certain level of trust before God is willing to intervene in my circumstances?" And I love the honesty of that question because I think maybe some of us say that out loud. But I think a lot of us have at least thought that at some point.

The truth I want to press into your palms is that God's faithfulness is not dependent on your faith. That His goodness is not a function of your goodness. There's simply so much joy available when we are able to take Him at His word and trust His good gifts.

And so the research is clear that to answer your question, the best practice for tolerating that vulnerability of joy, whether it's a pregnancy, or a new job opportunity, or a new relationship, whatever that might be, even a whole season that feels better than life has been before. I know a lot of people are like, "This feels too good to be true when they're in that place." The best practice is the practice of Thanksgiving. That helps you tolerate the vulnerability of joy.

I can't really tell you why that that's the practice that seems to keep us in the ring in that vulnerable place of joy, but that seems to be the practice that's most helpful.

Stephanie: Tolerating the vulnerability of joy is a phrase I never would have put those words together in the same sentence.

Nicole: Yeah. Me neither.

Stephanie: That's so real. That is so real. And I love that. Thanksgiving. That is-

Nicole: That's your go-to.

Stephanie: Okay. We can do that. We can do that. I am so grateful for your work and for your vulnerability and for your story. I love what you do. And I love that you're teaching us how to practically celebrate our lives today. No matter what our circumstances look like, that there is not only something to celebrate, but there's value in the celebration. So really thank you. I totally did not prep you for this, so I hope this is okay. Would you pray for us?

Nicole: Absolutely. It would be my honor. God, thank you, that like David who went wild with celebration, dancing exuberantly, thank you that same celebration is available to us because we recognize that we have been a recipient of grace. God, I pray that you would help us to receive your celebration of us as your precious creation, as your cherished children.

Certainly, it requires courage to look at the extent of our weakness and where we fall short, and our brokenness. But most of us underestimate the courage required to stare into the expanse of our belovedness. And I just pray that you would invite us to do that and stand with us in that place. And that as we receive your celebration of us, that we would follow through on your invitation to celebrate each other from that same place. That your celebration of us would be an outpouring. And that we would celebrate each other's joys and that we would sit with each other in both our sorrow and our celebration. And I pray for every woman listening that she would know that you rejoice over her today. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Stephanie: Amen. Thank you.

Nicole: You're so welcome.

[01:03:45] <music>

Outro: You guys, isn't Nicole amazing? I just love this conversation. I am so glad I got to share it with you. Don't forget that if you ever want to find the links for anything we talked about in our Girls Night episodes, you can always find those over in our show notes. Just head over to girlsnightpodcast.com, and you'll find links for everything, including links for Nicole so you can pick up her book and follow along with all the great stuff she's doing.

All right, friends, that's it for today's episode, but we have so much good stuff ahead this season. And with that in mind, now is the perfect time to make sure you're subscribed. Subscribing to the show is the best way to make sure you never miss an episode. We won't send you an email or anything. It'll just make sure your phone downloads the latest episode when a new one is released.

And I did want to take a quick second to ask you a favor. If you enjoyed this episode or if you've been a Girls Night fan for a while now, would you take just two quick seconds to leave us a rating and review on iTunes? Those reviews help out our podcast so much. And it really would mean the world to me. So if you'd take two quick seconds to do that, I'd be so grateful. All right, friends, thank you so much for joining me for Girls Night. I'll see you next week.