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Annie: Hi friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun: The Seasons. I'm your host, Annie F. Downs. I'm really happy to be here with you today. We are going to answer a really important question as we kind of jump right into the winter season. And the question is, what do I do when winter is breaking my heart?

But before we dive into this conversation, I want to tell you about one of our incredible sponsors, [AG1](#). I absolutely can tell the difference if I don't drink my AG1 in the morning. That was today. And that's how much of a regular habit it has become for me. I love starting off my day on a healthier note. It truly makes me feel better. It's just easy to do.

While my tea is steeping, I add one scoop of AG1 to really cold water, I throw in some frozen lemon juice or a packet of hydration multiplier, and then I've covered my vitamins and minerals I need first thing in the morning.

AG1 has been a longtime partner of ours because I really trust their ingredients and the research they've put in. So this new year, try AG1 for yourself. It's the perfect time to start a new healthy habit.

AG1 is offering new subscribers, our friends, a free \$76 gift whenever you sign up. You'll get a welcome kit, a bottle of D3K2, I've just started that, and five free travel packs in your first box. So make sure to check out drinkag1.com/soundsfun to get this offer. Again, that's drinkag1.com/soundsfun and start your new year on a healthier note.

Intro: Okay. Today on the show, I'm getting to talk with, we get to hear from my longtime friend, Lindsay Sherbondy. You may know her as Lindsay Letters. She's a full-time artist living just outside Madison, Wisconsin with her husband Dugan and their two kids, Ava and Phoenix.

Their world was turned upside down in August of 2019 when Ava sustained a traumatic brain injury. As you can imagine, every day since has presented itself with new challenges and new beauty.

Today, Lindsay is generously sharing their story. And as we were thinking about who could really help us talk about the winter and tackle the reality of how winter can break our hearts, she was the person I wanted to introduce you to if you didn't already know her or bring this story to you if you did.

You know, the show is called That Sounds Fun, but I will give you a heads-up that this conversation is not fun. This is a hard conversation. But winter can be really

hard. No matter your hemisphere, no matter the temperature outside, a winter season, emotionally, spiritually, and your family can be heartbreaking.

After you hear Lindsay's story, if you want to know how you can help her and her family, just stick around, I will tell you that at the end of the episode. It was really an honor, I mean, an absolute honor for me and our team to get to hear this. I mean, we have just hung up with Lindsay and we all are just in awe of her and get to hear her talk about the brokenheartedness of what they have walked through with Ava. I think you're going to feel that too.

Remember we have a TSF Seasons guidebook, a place where you can take notes and do some deeper dive for yourself. If you have your TSF Seasons guidebook, we are going to be on page 11. If you want to get the guidebook, you go to AnnieFDowns.com/seasons. So this is a funny word. I don't want to say I'm happy to introduce you, but I am really honored that you get to hear from Lindsay Sherbondy today. What a generous conversation you're about to hear!

[00:03:54] <music>

Annie: Lindsay Scherbondy on That Sounds Fun podcast. It is about time, my friend.

Lindsay: I'm just so, so honored to be here with you.

Annie: I feel the same. Most people will know you on the internet for being Lindsay Letters, one of the most famous artists in our community. When did you start Lindsay Letters? What year?

Lindsay: In 2008. And I was just trying to reflect on what year I met you. What year did we meet? Do you know?

Annie: It's probably close to that. '09 or '10.

Lindsay: Yeah. I feel like I should know that.

Annie: I feel like I should know that. What years were y'all living here in Nashville?

Lindsay: I guess that answers that question. So yeah, I started Lindsay Letters in 2008 and we lived in Nashville when Ava was two. She's 13 now, 11 years ago. Well, whenever it was that I lived in Nashville, I definitely felt like a baby in my business and I didn't know what I was doing, but I guess I still kind of feel like that. But yeah, I guess it's been a while now. 2008 I started it officially and my website started in 2011.

Annie: Oh my gosh. Okay. So if y'all were here 11 years ago, let me reverse that math. So y'all were here in 2014?

Lindsay: Oh yeah.

Annie: Wow. I cannot believe it has been that long, Lindsay. I feel like we were just eating... What is that Mexican place?

Lindsay: Yes. Chewy's, is it?

Annie: Chewy's. I know. That is so funny.

Lindsay: So what happened was I was like, "Annie, would you please take the time to meet with me? I don't even know what I need, but I just..." You like dazzled me ever since I met you. And I know I speak for like literally everybody when I say that. It's so true. You captivate everybody.

As I've watched you flourish and grow over the years, I've been so happy for you in my heart because you are one of the most authentic and intentional people I've ever met.

Annie: Oh my gosh.

Lindsay: It doesn't take more than a second to know you in real life, to know that you're like... you are who you are, but you're even better. You really are. Things happen to you. And I think God blesses you in ways because you seek Him so consistently and so intentionally. Like you're just so intentional.

So when I watch you from afar, now I'm in Wisconsin, when I watch you from afar, I'm like Annie deserves, I know that's a weird word, but every bit of goodness that comes in favor because you just have such a heart for people and you want to intentionally serve God in that way. And so I've just been cheering you on ever since then. So even though it was just a blip of our life, I love getting to... I'm like, yeah, that's Annie. That's who you are. And I'm so glad that other people get to... not everybody gets to go to Chewy's with you. So that's a major flex for me, but-

Annie: We did a lot more than Chewy's, but that is very kind of you. And you did not need to say all that, but that is very kind of you.

Lindsay: It's been a pleasure to watch you really. You are who everybody gets to see that you are. And I'm glad that the world gets to experience you in that way. So it's been fun to cheer you on.

- Annie:** Thank you. You're very kind. Okay, Wisconsin winter is very different than Nashville winter. Tell me what it looks like outside your window right now.
- Lindsay:** It's gray. It's kind of depressing now because it's not even snowy. So this is the time of year where at least you can be cozy and it's snowy and beautiful, but now it's just cold with no snow.
- Annie:** How cold?
- Lindsay:** 21. It was 21 the day or two before yesterday and just kind of barren looking. But I was very perplexed by Nashville weather because if you guys got a hint of ice, everything shut down.
- Annie:** Yeah. It's happening this very weekend. Everyone listening to this, I've been trapped in my house all week.
- Lindsay:** Oh my gosh. No. I was like, what in the world? It was the weirdest... I have a very distinct memory driving to my office that I shared with Abel and just ice covering so many things. And Dugan was home with Ava, like the why shut down. Isn't the why supposed to never shut down? The why wasn't open. Nobody was on the roads. I felt like the rapture and I got left. I was like, well, I guess that settles that. It was so wild. And that happened several times.
- Annie:** Yeah. I mean, truly it is happening... between when we're recording and when everybody's hearing this, the three days in between, it is, that is my actual life. Our entire lunch today, Lindsay, at the office was talking about what groceries we're putting in our houses to be stuck in our houses all weekend.
- Lindsay:** It is wild. It's so wild. I mean, and Phoenix went outside to recess today. I don't even know that he wore a coat. My son who's nine. I don't know that he wore a coat.
- Annie:** He was outside in 21-degree weather.
- Lindsay:** Yeah. [00:08:54] I don't even know what the rules are these days.
- Annie:** That is impressive.
- Lindsay:** I don't claim that I'm built different. We don't have a choice. I don't want to go outside for recess.
- Annie:** You're like, he can, I'm not doing it.

Lindsay: I don't have a choice. I don't have a choice. And now we don't even have a snow days. That's a thing of 90s past. There is just virtual learning if we shut down, right? That's sad.

Annie: Do you know what I hadn't thought about that? I bet. I guess so. If school shuts down for y'all, everybody has figured out how to do it without you being there, without the kids being there.

Lindsay: Yes. Disappointing.

Annie: Right. Because part of the joy of a snow day is waking up and seeing your like County scroll across the bottom of the TV and the world goes nuts.

Lindsay: Yeah. I just saw now students get a text saying that they don't have school where we had to wake up and watch the weather channel ticker. But I guess for you guys, so they just cancel if it's chilly?

Annie: I think so. I think so. Listen, if it starts to sprinkle snow, we start thinking about if we're going to be home.

Lindsay: You're like, Time for the grocery order.

Annie: Yeah, that's exactly right. I mean, there was Mary, a salad left at the grocery store last night when I stopped by. I was like, Oh boy, this is not going to work for me.

Lindsay: Oh my gosh. Speaking of salads, you're one of my favorite follows for... every once in a while you'll drop a recipe that you're... And I'm like, whatever Annie's eating is what I want to eat.

Annie: Listen, once a year when I use my kitchen, I tell everyone.

Lindsay: Well, it matters. It really matters.

Annie: Thank you. Thank you so much. I am so grateful you decided to join us today. For our friends listening in the guidebook, we're on page 11. Every episode we're going to be answering a specific question. And today's is, what do I do when winter is breaking my heart? So for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere, it's cold outside. For those in the Southern Hemisphere, it is warm. But we can have our heart broken by an extended winter at any point.

Some of our friends probably know your story and some don't. Lindsay today, I want to give you this permission. I want to say this upfront. I just want us to hear your story. I don't want you to feel any pressure that you have to give us a bow on

the end of it or a solution or even any like "but God's faithful sentences", unless you really want to. I would just love for you to tell Ava's story and I'll interrupt you randomly and ask some questions. But as much as you want to, will you just back up and tell us Ava's story?

Lindsay: Yeah. I was just reflecting on that. This is really only the... I've only done this a handful of times. And of course it's not something that you want to rehearse. But because it's you, I just feel like it's having a conversation with a friend. So..

Annie: Thank you. It's very generous of you. And I will tell our friends listening, you and I have talked at length before we're here and have Marco Poloed a lot about. I mean, honestly, you were one of my first friends I told that we were doing this and you said, "I would tell my story in the winter." And I said, "The idea you would even be willing is more than we deserve." So thank you for being willing to do this today.

Lindsay: Yeah. So 2019, which is wild that that was so long ago now, because it feels like yesterday and also a million years ago. So it's crazy to be this far on this journey. I have two kids, Ava, who's now 13, and Phoenix who's 9. Ava was 7 and a half at the time. It was August and getting ready to go back to school and all the things. And everybody always asks, was she typically developing before this? And the answer is yes. I just forget to mention that, but yeah, not a single medical anything before.

My husband and I were at swim lessons with my son, Phoenix and I got a call... Ava had stayed behind to play with some neighborhood friends. We had a great neighborhood with tons of kids in it. She was always running around and she woke up that day, especially excited to play.

When I look back on it, I mean, I don't know... There was just... I promise there was something that looked different about her that day, but she just looked especially beautiful. You know, when little girls start growing out their bangs. Her hair was off her face and there's messy top knot. Every time I caught my eye with her, I was like, Oh, you're just the cutest. I don't know. Everything about the day is marked in my mind.

But we were at some lessons with my son, Phoenix, my husband and I both were, and I got a call on my Apple watch and I just heard my name, Lindsay. I mean, I'm so sorry, but you do know. Like, you know when you get a call and you can just tell that this is going to be bad.

And my phone dropped, my watch dropped the call. So I looked at Dugan, I was in the pool with Phoenix because he was little at the time. That was the rule. And I looked at Dugan and I said, "You've got to call..." It was another mom that had

called me. I said, "You've got to call her. I can't." Dugan, I see him... I'm with Phoenix in the pool. I see him pick up his phone and he bolts. So I did my best to make it through the rest of swim lessons. Like normal. It was his last swim lesson. I didn't know at the time. I had no idea what was going on.

But it turns out that Ava had... she was riding a golf cart with friends. So yeah, she's seven and a half at the time and another mom was driving and everything was normal. There was nothing, no wild thing or nothing was wrong. But she was on the golf cart with a bunch of kids and the... I say the story goes, but I mean, she just tipped off is the words that we heard. She just tipped off.

Ava's super dramatic. And so they thought that she was joking. So they looked behind and saw her laying flat on the street. They were actually just taking a little drive on the golf cart to our neighborhood playground. Ava had been on the golf cart so many times. It wasn't ours. But she was no stranger to being on the golf cart. And yeah, she just tipped off.

The mom ran up to her and saw that she was unconscious, put her over her shoulder, brought her to the nearest neighbor who happened to be a woman of faith, which is just so beautiful. Ava was unconscious immediately. She was still breathing but... So Dugan left and went to the neighbors. By then I had called five friends in the neighborhood and everybody met there. I was still getting together Phoenix. Again, I didn't know what was happening.

So they called the paramedics. Ava looked like how somebody looks that they are going to have brain damage and never wake up. When I asked Dugan about that time, I'm actually thankful I wasn't there. As weird as that sounds, but I think the picture of how her eyes looked haunted him for... probably still does. Like totally black and separate. That's what the woman that Ava was at her house, she said, "I just kept praying for her eyes. She looked like a girl that would never see again."

So anyway that's the timeframe that started the worst time of our lives and an immense tragedy for Ava. She lived. I'll skip to the end. She's alive. So that's the end of the story, but there's of course a bunch in the middle.

My best friend drove me to the hospital. It was the longest drive of my life. The paramedics had actually made it to the hospital in total record time, which is insane. So we're just very grateful for fast paramedics acting super fast because she didn't have a minute to spare. And what had happened is that she had tipped off the golf cart and hit her head in the exact wrong spot, just right here. She had a tiny scratch.

Annie: Oh my gosh. Just a scratch was all that was there?

Lindsay: No, yeah.

Annie: Oh my gosh.

Lindsay: I mean, she just tipped off. It was like barely anything. She had one little tiny scratch on her back of her arm. Like tiny. And then her ankle swelled up. It was strange. She could have just fallen on it weird or whatever. So she went into emergency brain surgery where they removed one hemis... one part of her... what's the word? I'm totally spacing. Her skull. It's called something, but it's escaping me.

So she had a part of her brain removed because when you have a brain injury, your brain swells and they need to make room for the brain swelling. So she then was put on a ventilator. Ava was in the surgery, I get to the hospital and the whole thing is like a terrible movie. I'm like, I know I'm going to vomit all over everything. That's how I felt. A pastor met us, and poor guy, but all I remember saying was like, You don't meet everybody. Tip: if a pastor meets you in the ER, it's bad. It's bad. Panic ensued. So just hours went by. Our friends came, we got put in this little room while we were waiting and then Ava's brain surgeon came in and just said, "Ava, has suffered a traumatic brain injury and it's really bad." And then he just kind of paused.

And I just felt like... I mean, poor... he is brilliant. Ava's brain surgeon is brilliant. And I'm sure he has delivered that speech so many times. You know, he just knew this is the cadence of how you do this. Until this point, we had just been pacing and saying like, it's probably just a concussion. Like, it's probably just X, Y, Z. And he was like, "It's really bad and the next 72 hours are critical."

So what happens when you have a brain injury... there's lots of different types of brain injuries, but the type of injury that Ava had, the concerns are swelling, that the swelling will compress onto your brainstem, and that you'll be brain dead and of course brain damage. So the next bunch of days was really just... I mean, Ava's chance of survival was zero.

Annie: Wow.

Lindsay: So it's crazy to look back at that. I know so many people, maybe even people listening. And so thank you if this is you who are just following us in this journey. I mean, I remember feeling like posting it would be like... that means it's really real, but I just felt... like I covered it. Everybody's prayers and good vibes and whatever. I just wanted people to be advocating for Ava on our behalf.

Certainly, that's not to say that people that don't have the community that we have that God is any less active in their lives, but it just felt like I want to be able to share this huge burden, like burden of prayer and I want to share what's going on.

So many people joined us in praying for her. And just when I look back at now knowing what I know about the medical community and what was going on, when I look back at those, even the times that we were joking and all the machines and just all the things going on, I'm like, wow, this was really bad. Like this was so bad. And it's just you don't know. It's like how many poles of machines are supposed to be there? How many... what all the things mean, like what this number means, you know? So yeah, it was like absolute hell on earth.

Ava started, while she was in the hospital at that time, doing something called neurostorming. And for anybody that's ever experienced it, it's an absolute nightmare. I mean, like convulsing, crying, what her version of screaming would have been, temperature high. Like she'd be super hot and then super cold, then something else-

Annie: And just her brain doing that?

Lindsay: Yeah, mm-hmm. Of course. I can't explain it in doctor terms so well, but neurostorming is something that brains can do after brain injuries. And it can look different for other people and it can last up to a year. And for Ava it did. I can explain more about that, but she, I don't know... A lot of people have been in those medical scenarios where it just kind of like, you're chasing this thing and then this thing falls and then you're chasing this thing and this thing falls. And that's just how kind of the next month went. And there was never a point where they were like, she survived, yay.

There was actually a point where her neurosurgeon came up to us and said, "I'm actually at this point afraid that she's going to survive and you're not going to be happy with what you're left with." And when you hear that, it sounds like he was making some sort of judgments on our character and our love for her, but he was not. What he was saying is, are you sure? She has got so much brain damage.

And of course she's hooked up to things to see what her brain activity is and there was little blips of activity but not a lot. Again, to kind of skip to the end of the story, so I'm not trying to tease this out, Ava... the end is she's nonverbal and largely doesn't move. So there's not a point where it's like, and then she woke up and we proved them wrong.

I mean, we did because she lived and she does do more than they ever said she'd be capable of. But at this point, he said, I don't think you're going to be happy with

what you're left with. And what he meant from the goodness of his heart was, what he was asking was like, what does survival look like to you? Is it a heartbeat? Is it brainwaves? Is it her being able to do the things that she used to do? And he said she will never, ever be the same. And when we really dialed into that, they said she'd be blind. She'd only ever be able to move her right arm if anything and she wouldn't know who we are and just would obviously never be able to walk again.

And yeah, all of it from hitting her head in the exact wrong spot with falling, you know, a couple of feet. So we were faced with choices and I think, you know, there's language out there like pull the plug or what that meant for Ava, like if we were going to choose to keep her alive or not in these moments would be she was on a ventilator. So that means you're on a piece of equipment helping you breathe.

So what she needed to stay alive was to be able to breathe. And so if we had said you can turn off the ventilator, that would have meant that we would have allowed her to go be with the Lord. But we just didn't have that. We just didn't have peace in that. So you can only be on a ventilator for so long. For kids, they make it longer, but really she wasn't exhibiting any sign of awareness or life. I think some things that we mistook for experiencing her moving was neurostorming, was like involuntary.

Another thing that happens sometimes after really bad brain injuries is that your body starts... like just the way all the things fire. Fire is wrong. And so you experience dystonia, which means like the Lindsay version is your muscles pull and don't agree with each other. And so you have really high tone it's called. That's why if you see somebody with a disability, you might see that their jaw maybe looks funny or doesn't feel in alignment or that their muscles are crunched or truncated. And it's just because those synapses aren't firing appropriately.

So what Ava did was be like these huge backbends that she'd get stuck in, like her arm out or her jaw stuck, and like in this backbend pose. It was awful. And she did that for like a year. But what happened was when we were faced with kind of like, is it time to extubate her or not? This is a lot. I'm so sorry. When I was-

Annie: Ma'am, do not apologize to us.

Lindsay: I don't mean it's a lot. It's a lot to take in. But when we were faced with that decision, Dugan and I both just didn't have any clarity. We remember calling in our best friends, our family of friends, and just saying, well, on earth? I'm like, is anybody picking up any signal from God about this? And nobody was.

Basically, if you stay intubated with a tube in your chest for long, pneumonia and all kinds of things happen. So it was time to decide to like, are we kind of had to

call it. It had been a couple of weeks. They were saying, there was no sign of really life for her other than this blip on the monitor, like a couple of blips for brain activity.

So we just said, well, we don't have actually any clarity about this. Oh, the options are either take her off a ventilator and let her pass away or to give her a tracheostomy, which means making a way in her trachea for her to be able to breathe. You've seen people on ventilators. Now it's post-COVID. So everybody kind of knows what these things are. But it was either, do you want to give her a tracheostomy or do you want to let her go? Those were the options that were presented with us.

So we, I guess feebly were like, could you extubate her and just see what happens? And then if she can't breathe on her own, we just intubate her again in a hurry and then circle up again? And so they said, well, let's not the preferred, this is a paraphrase, not the preferred method because once you extubate you risk. I mean, there could be inflammation. It might be hard to reintubate. So they said, you're running a risk that we can't re-intubate her. And so that's kind of the third option that we chose and Ava decided to breathe on her own.

So in that moment, it was like such a huge blessing. I remember, I mean, there were so many points up to this point... I mean, I'm ticked up, God, I'm just so mad. But even the fact that I think it's the cruelest thing ever for us to have to decide to make a decision like that. And I felt so frustrated, like, isn't that your whole job? I'm not speaking holistically to the kindness of letting somebody pass. I just mean for us and Ava in our very specific circumstance, I'm like, could you decide? I didn't decide any of this. So it feels like the wall's in your court.

But Ava decided to breathe. So at that moment, there was no more decision to make. We had kind of already had an out previously when our neurosurgeon had asked us, do you want to keep kind of fighting this? Do you want to keep trying to reduce swelling? Do you want to keep medicating? And I think that's when he was saying, like, now's your out. Now's an out for you. And we didn't take it. And then Ava decided to breathe. And so the ball was no longer in our court. And I'm grateful.

But I think if I had known what the next year was going to hold specifically, like, I don't know... I'm glad that it wasn't like, oh, shoot, I made you live and have to go through this because the next year-

Annie: Yeah. Because she chose it herself. She chose to breathe.

Lindsay: Yeah. Because it just didn't get kind of... I mean, it got way worse before it got better. So that's the first kind of chunk. Ava fell off a golf cart, sustained a traumatic brain injury, it was awful, but she decided to breathe.

[00:29:23] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends, just interrupting this conversation and tell you about one of our incredible partners, [Thrive Causemetics](#). It is no secret that Thrive Causemetics Liquid Lash Extensions Mascara is my absolute favorite. It seriously makes my lashes look so long. It basically looks like you have lash extensions, but it's just the magic of the mascara. It's amazing. I love it.

It lasts all day. There's no clumping or smudging or flaking. Amen to that. And at the end of the day, it is so easy to get off. It slides right off with warm water and a washcloth. No soap required.

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Sponsor: Listen, I know y'all love learning about tools that help us spend more time with God and I want you to know about the [Glorify app](#). If you haven't downloaded it yet, I think you're really gonna love it. It's set up like this. You start your morning by reading the Bible passage of the day, then dive into Glorify's daily devotional. Today was on Genesis 28 about our dude Jacob and being awake to God's presence. So good. After the Devo, then you can wrap up with an immersive experience called Daily Walk with God. It's like a guided meditation and prayer. It's really helpful, really cool.

Plus, Glorify also has sleep meditations you can use at night to help you wind down and put your mind and heart at ease. There really are so many options to choose from.

So right now, Glorify is offering my friends a free 14-day free trial when you visit glorify-app.com/ThatSoundsFun. Go right now to download the Glorify app. Again, that's Glorify-app.com/ThatSoundsFun, and you'll get to download the Glorify app for free. Glorify-app.com/ThatSoundsFun.

Sponsor: All right, if you're feeling all new year new you, it might be time for some new glasses too. You've got to check out [Pair Eyewear](#). Because not only do they have a ton of really cute options, but for every pair purchase, the [00:31:49] Eye Alliance provides a pair to a child in need. And I love that.

You just pick out your base frames, which start at like \$60, and then they have so many fun top frames to choose from. And they start at just \$25. So you can pick out multiple and change them out based on the season or your outfit. And you get free shipping on all US orders. You can also save by using your pre-tax FSA and HSA dollars.

I got the twain base frames with three different sunglasses top frame options, and I am so happy about it. But you need to go look at all their collections. They have everything from Sparkle to Marvel to Disney. You're going to love it.

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Okay, let's jump back into our conversation with Lindsey.

[00:32:52] <music>

Annie: I mean, Lindsay, when we're thinking particularly about a spiritual, emotional winter, this is happening to you in August, September, October, but in a spiritual, emotional winter, how do you keep going? How do you get out of bed?

Lindsay: I think at this point, you know, when it happened, there was so much adrenaline at that point. Early on before we then left the hospital, they were kind of like, "There's nothing else we can do," Ava had just started kind of doing her crying. She cried all day, almost every day for a full year. And it was the worst sound I have ever heard in my life. I mean, it's still. It would spiral me right back to those moments.

And that was something that hadn't been happening yet. She was just kind of starting to like wake up when we left the hospital after about a month and a half. And then we went to rehab, and that's when I would say that devastation really set in. At that point, we're just running on hope. And like at any moment, I remember laying in the hospital and Dugan would attest to this too, that we would just wake up and I'd look over in the bed and really expect her to just miraculously be better, be moving, be... Of course, everybody is flooding you with stories of hope.

I think this is where the confusion with, I don't know, even modern Christianity, but the Bible even starts for me is where it's like, I wish it just said, I will decide and I'm gonna decide what's best. And you don't know because you're so small in a world you won't ever comprehend. So you have to trust me. You have to trust me and it's gonna be so hard, but I'll be with you.

But where it gets hard for me is this balance of begging, like being even encouraged to pray and ask and hope for something different that's not your reality, while finding contentedness. And I don't even mean joy, but finding some way to deal with your current reality. Like, how do you hold both?

And I think that's, what's been so hard because if scripture was different or if God's instruction for us was different, if it was just like, this is what I've given you now, without saying, but also be hoping and praying and asking, like seeking to me and seeking me and seeking me for the miracles that I'm capable of. It's just like that's where this devastation in how I thought God's provision would look really like started.

And so all the stories of, or people, so many people writing in with dreams of Ava and just like words from God. I said it exasperated, but I don't mean... I believe that they heard that and received that. But I'm like, when I get mad at God, I don't just get mad at Him for not healing Ava, but it's all these subcategories of protection and provision that I feel like He, to me would have been like so easy, even though there's no scale of ease for God, but like so easy for Him to do that He didn't do. And that to me felt careless.

So one would be, God, if you gave somebody a word that she was just gonna wake up in the hospital and start talking and that wasn't gonna happen, could you have just protected us from receiving that? I think Dugan and I, he'd be fine with me sharing this, but he really felt like she was going to like Talitha Koum, get up, like so fast.

Annie: I remember.

Lindsay: And that started just a really hard tension in our marriage. I mean, it would happen with any two people that love each other that are hearing different things. But I'm like, could you have intercepted those things for us? I believe that Dugan is so entwined with the Holy Spirit. I don't think he got a misread, but I'm like, isn't this the whole point of the Holy Spirit in us to be able to... like discernment and just... like what was that about? It's kind of like, we live in a human-broken world and Ava fell off a golf cart and it's awful. It's awful. She deserved so much better. She deserved the world. I hate that this is our reality.

That would be like the result of a broken world. But the way that God in my mind sometimes has neglected to intervene in some of these moments that would have made the journey so much more tolerable is the really personal, excruciating part. You know?

I think people would look at this scenario and be like, it's such a bummer that He didn't heal her. No, I absolutely believe, as I reflect on it and do this algorithm in my brain, He could have. He could have. He could have stopped her from falling off. He could have healed her. And I believe either he couldn't or He chose not to. And really whichever of those things are true, we land in the same place, you know?

I believe God when he says He will make anything work for His glory, you know, for those that believe in Him. And I believe that Ava's doing that. I believe that she's gonna help more people find hope and healing and truth that I will ever find. Then I believe He's doing something miraculous through Ava that I will never see the side of heaven.

And I've believed that since the beginning. But what has felt so hard, and I know that so many people can share in this brokenheartedness, as you say in your study, that was the perfect word, is what I call shrapnel to the thing. It's all the ensuing things that feels like you just didn't show up for me like I thought you would.

And it doesn't mean that I thought you'd heal her. It means that I thought that you would protect my marriage better. I thought that you would protect Phoenix better and help him to not feel so scared, you know? I thought that you would help me to be able to have the most effective conversations in the hospital.

I did a lot of relational damage. I was so angry. Like so hard to regulate myself. Gosh, God, I'm seeking you at every moment, why didn't you fix that for me? Why didn't you intervene for me? It's all of those things that felt so disappointing and still feel if I think about it.

But so as far as like five minutes ago, when you asked, how do we keep getting up, I think that in that moment, those things weren't a reality. Like we just kept going because we didn't know... That kind of felt like that was the bottom. And we didn't really know that we hadn't hit the bottom yet.

Annie: Have you now?

Lindsay: Yeah, I think we did. I hope so. I hope so. But I would say that I wanna be thoughtful about how much I would publicly share, but Dugan and I both did an unhealthy job of managing our brokenheartedness. For Dugan, that would be, you

know, wanting to... I think that there's two types of people maybe. One type that bury and hide and disassociate and one type that just like, everything is outward. Dugan went inward and his tendency and the thing that he's got to fight against is numbing out, you know? And mine is just the opposite. Mine is like literal outrage at everybody.

So I think that as Ava cried and cried every day, you know, there definitely reached a boiling point where I just felt so abandoned by God and so unseen. It just felt like everything was falling. I didn't have trust in anything. And it was because we were both just so deeply brokenhearted. I think that it's just a real challenge. It's a challenge to be brokenhearted alone and it's also a challenge to be brokenhearted and brokenhearted differently.

And that's one of the beautiful things when you have a community is that then your community too, like your closest people are also brokenhearted. Like I became a huge fan of fringe friends after this. It changes how I show up for people. I think sometimes we think like, I'm not their best friend, so I can't come. It's like, well, my best friends needed a casserole too. They were on the floor too. They were in a huge mess too. Now when I feel like I'm a B squad friend to somebody, I'm like, if they're in a tragedy, their friends are in the tragedy too. So it's not like, oh, their best friends are the people that are gonna serve them. It's like, oh, it's my turn. Like I get to come and serve them.

Anyway, I think that we did a hit... I hope that we did. I hope that we did hit rock bottom. But you know what healing looks like. It's like you're up and then you hit a patch and you're up and you hit a patch.

Then we got home from the hospital after the first bit of Ava's rehab, we got home from the hospital after the first chunk of time, she went to the hospital in August, we got home in December. And then we were back in by March and we spent the next... we've actually been hospital-free, thanks to God for the last year now. Like no unplanned admission. But for that first chunk of four and a half years or whatever, we spent over 450 days in the hospital.

So we were just back and forth and back and forth and back and forth so much for all kinds of things that were ensuing side effects of her brain injury.

Annie: Is some of it now that y'all have more skills to manage and to help her at home that you didn't have four years ago?

Lindsay: I think we've got more tools. Ava's been, she's gotten a trach since then. So now she has a ventilator at night. The way that I could describe... Although we do have, we're very smart.

Annie: Yes, y'all have learned a lot.

Lindsay: A lot of it at first was breathing stuff. Sometimes I wonder if maybe, although Ava could breathe on her own, if she couldn't breathe well enough. Some of it was as a result of medications that she was on. She had crazy about pancreatitis as a result of a medication. A lot of having a hard time eating. Like she can't eat by mouth, but keeping food down.

I like to describe a brain injury such as Ava, again, I'm not an expert, this is only my one experience with it, but almost... like a brain injury like what Ava has is almost like a ALS or MS or a sort of progressive disease, which was surprising to us. I think it's something that her team knew and this is their... while Ava was definitely a very complex case, I would say that one of the worst injuries and one of the most complex people that lived. Certainly, there have been worse brain injuries of people that didn't survive. But super, super, super, super complex. Like any kind of random thing that could happen has to some degree. But it's like a progressive disease. So even though it's not a disease.

So I think that, you know, when we first got her diagnosis of brain injury, Dugan and I were like, naively, like we can do having a child with a disability. We can do a wheelchair. We can do that. But it was the intense medical complexity that we were surprised by. But it comes in chapters.

The first chapter I would say would be the devastation and then the crying. And that's really when the bottom hit. Then of course, I ended up in septic shock randomly.

Annie: And this was all during-

Lindsay: That is a part of the story that is...

Annie: I mean, y'all got to finally go on a vacation and you end up in the hospital in Mexico.

Lindsay: Yeah. That's again just where I think that was the winteriest winter. It was just awful. I think that that was the end of Dugan's rope, really. I remember looking over at him in the hospital and he just was visibly gone. I don't even think he could fully comprehend how, you know... just yesterday I was like, I'm so glad I didn't die. I'm so glad I didn't die. I was like, great.

But I had to come out of a coma and relearn. They were like, "Ava smiled." That was one of the only times she had smiled that year and I missed it. But then when

they were like, "Ava smiled," my brain and my fentanyl coma state, like post-coma state, had thought that she was healed. So waking up and having to re-experience the fact that she wasn't healed, she had just happened to smile and I missed it. And then she didn't smile again until... her first real smile was a full year after her accident.

Annie: How much is she able to communicate with you now, Lindsay?

Lindsay: She smiles every day. She smiles every day. She definitely knows and loves her people. She started recently doing a cute smile where she sticks out her tongue. It's the sweetest thing you have ever seen. She definitely knows who we are. She communicates in blinks. It's not like a perfect formula, but the same way that you're nodding without thinking it right now, she can conversationally blink.

I mean, she can move her arms or her foot, she can move her foot, but she really can't. I mean, if she really, really focuses, she can move her right arm and her leg. She's doing a school at home through the school district and she just did hockey. So they worked really hard so she could twist her wrist to hit a button and then hit, launch the... It's really cool. But her movements are minimal.

I told her like, "I'm gonna go talk to Miss Annie about you," and she just gave me all these flutter blinks. I mean, it doesn't take but an hour or I guess less of being a conversation, I should say, with Ava where you would be able to pick up on how she's engaged with you. So I would say she's definitely engaged on her engaging days.

But then that's the second thing about another one about brain injuries is her sleep-wake cycle is wild. I mean, she worked really hard for hockey, but she'll be cashed for the next hour. I mean, it just takes a lot of work.

Although I know you don't need me to put a cherry on top, I think that Ava is happy that she's alive. You know, I think that if I wanted to quit God, and I mean this in all sincerity, like cross my heart, I wouldn't be able to because there's something about Ava, like you just... like she has seen God, she has communed with Jesus. Like she knows Him. I'm not even joking.

She was not like, yeah, Dugan was a pastor and we were in church and... like we're Jesus people, but she was not like a Jesus kid, I guess to say. She's a wild. She's absolutely wild. But there is something about when we even say the word "Jesus", or my mother-in-law reads a certain scripture to her every time before she leaves, Ava just blinks along with it. She smiles from ear to ear every time she hears Jesus or her scripture. I'm not joking. I could not make it up. So I'm like, you have to know something that I don't know. You have to. And I won't ever know.

And I think that's probably true of a lot of... I know it's not true of everybody and I know that we get Ava smiling and so many people's stories don't end like that. And I don't know why. I do know that God's close to the brokenhearted, maybe not in the way that I would expect, but I know that Ava knows who He is and delights in Him. At the end of the day, I'm like, I don't know. There's something there about that. And I don't know what it is. It doesn't make any sort of earthly sense to me, but it's true.

[00:51:48] <music>

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Sponsor: Well, y'all are very kind. You compliment my hair a lot. So number one, thank you. You are the kindest. But number two, I need you to know it's because of [Prose](#). It has been a game-changer for me. The fact that they customized my shampoo and conditioner for my exact hair needs has made all the difference. So the health and shininess you're seeing in my hair is truly thanks to Prose. Y'all have to give it a try.

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And now let's go back and finish up our conversation with Lindsay.

[00:54:24] <music>

Annie: This is the picture I'm having in my mind. Lindsay is like in the middle of the winter, you cannot control what's happening outside, but it feels like the story you're telling us is like "but we do have a fireplace". And so we do have a fireplace and we do have wood. I cannot control what's happened outside, but every now and again, there's a fire in our fireplace that is keeping us a little bit warm.

Lindsay: Yeah. I would say that Ava's smile is definitely like the manna. Again, I lament for people. I mean, we've gotten some messages like, how did you get her to smile? We still aren't there. And I'm so deeply sorry that that's not true for everybody, but her smile really is like... it was hard to keep going when she was crying all the time. Like, why did you even let her? I think we've asked a lot, Why did you even let her survive? Why did you? It's hard to get to decide what makes a life a life, but that was not one.

But on the other side, now out of the hospital and with Ava being as smiley as she is, it's so easy to like... she's got contagious joy. Not every day, all day, but yeah, I would definitely say like a very, very hot, beautiful fireplace.

Annie: You know? She's also 13. You're about to walk your child through puberty in this.

Lindsay: Yeah, it's funny. I didn't notice, but we were at a concert in the park, a Taylor Swift cover band. One of her friends that she hadn't seen in a long time came up to her and I said something about Ava and wiped some lipstick on her face. And her friend goes, she rolled her eyes at you. And I was like, I know, it's wild. Like for somebody that can't communicate, she has still figured out how to like, kind of like mom, me, you know?

But I think it's interesting you say that about the fireplace because it's like going through anything this changes your level of what you need in order to be happy. I don't know if there was something in the water maybe, but so many of us that grew

up in the 90s, we all had this feeling of... it's like great expectations for us. We couldn't measure up, you know?

And I was really afraid that I was gonna do that for Ava. I was afraid that I wasn't gonna be able to like, before her accident, love her for exactly who she is or I was gonna put unfair expectations on her. I think it's really beautiful to see like, wow, it's really actually super easy to just love somebody for where they're at.

Now the caveat is that she's not like mouthing off and swearing at me. Again, it could be more a sweet girl that's has a high level of physical need, but is smiling at you. I'm not saying is the hardest thing ever to deal with. But it is interesting. Like, Wow, this is... we tell her every day we couldn't possibly... like you're perfect just the way that you are. We couldn't possibly need... like you're perfect. You're just everything we could ever want in a daughter.

Annie: Lindsay, this has been incredibly generous of you to tell your story today. I remember when Jess Connolly called me the day or it may have been the week of the accident. And watching you and Dugan live so honestly has impacted a lot of us, so.

Lindsay: Well, can I say that a teaching that you gave, you know what I'm gonna mention, but a teaching that you gave so long ago has marked me and stuck with me. And do you know the one I'm talking about with the anthropology. Do they...?

Annie: Yeah.

Lindsay: Yeah. Now this feels more mainstream. I do think that you pioneered this kind of movement, but I feel like until I heard your teaching about this, the whole Christian schtick was kind of like, if you believe it, He can do it. You know, like God's gonna answer your prayers. You just have to be patient enough or consistent enough or whatever enough.

And you were the first person and a female, no less, of course, that stood up on stage and said, what if He doesn't? You know, what if He doesn't? I've thought about that so often. And that was way before Ava's accident. I've thought about that so often. I think that was a foundational piece for me to realize that the unfortunate truth that Him creating a life that I want is not indicative of how good He is. And so it made me feel like... I don't know, I think it just brought so much freedom in sometimes He just chooses not to.

And nobody really wanted to say that. Nobody wanted to... it's not cool to say that. It's not fun or... you know, especially in the new year, it's like, you're gonna do it, be it, believe for it.

Lindsay: Until I am no longer on this earth, or she isn't, I will always believe for God's sovereign healing for her. Always. But if He doesn't do that, that doesn't mean He's any less good, you know? And I think that you were hearing that from you first really was really a helpful tool to have.

Annie: You're very kind. All right. I love you. Is there any other parts of the story you want to make sure to get to say?

Lindsay: Do you feel like you're okay? Do you feel like that was...?

Annie: Oh gosh, yes. That was so generous of you, Lindsay. I mean, that was just... it was beautiful. There's a thousand things people are going to want to know, more things. There's a thousand rabbit trails we could have gone down. But I think you told the story that people need to hear today.

Lindsay: Well, it wasn't funny at all.

Annie: Don't worry. In the intro, I will warn everyone that this isn't... we didn't laugh a ton. No. But Lindsay, what you've modeled so beautifully is what we all have experienced in different levels of traumatic is the life I decided I wanted is not the life I got. What in the world do I do with that life? But more than that, what do I do with the God who gave me that life?

Lindsay: Yeah. Well, I think, succinctly I would say, I knew that we were going to be talking about winter today, but when you said the words "when you find yourself brokenhearted in winter," I feel like I wish that you would ask me that a couple of years ago, because to actually call it out as brokenhearted already feels like such a balm for me. It's even a different word than grief, or it's even like, what do you... I anticipated, what do you do when you find yourself in the winter?

But I think that even just identifying I am brokenhearted took me... I was like, I'm an activist. I am angry. I am whatever. And as an eight wing seven to say, I am brokenhearted, when I say that word, and when I read it, something in me dissolved. Like, yes, I am brokenhearted.

And so I think that as people do this study I think even that word will be medicinal and healing because sometimes in my anger and in my jealousy and my dysregulation and even in my activism, for me to stop and be like, this is grief. But I love "brokenhearted" even feels more tender than grief. Grief feels like sad, but brokenhearted feels like... like I do a picture of a heart, you know. It feels like it's so tender and pretty and cute and perfect and beautiful and you broke it. You know, it's broken.

I guess my only answer is to learn to live with being brokenhearted. And you might be brokenhearted forever. It won't ever be easy for me to see, I'm sure, a mom and a daughter shopping together, you know. But like to identify that feeling is, this is what a heartbreak feels like. It just already feels easier to deal with than anger or than burying.

I think that that's such a helpful tool to people. And I think the sooner that you can recognize something as heartbreak and to learn to set it down instead of throwing it out or burying it will be a helpful tool that I wish that... I mean, there's no point wishing, but I'm glad I think I can feel on the other side of it now because I can recognize that easier.

And so it doesn't have to be now, but I think it'd be interesting to hear how you do that. I mean, you've just launched this book. I remember hearing about TJ and there's a... you know, when something devastating happens in your life, you can try and bright side and be happy and spin things however you want to be positive or fun or whatever. But when it's just like actually not, how do you do that? So I guess it'll be interesting to hear you answer that someday.

Annie: It'll be interesting for me too. I'll be watching right along with you.

Lindsay: All right. Thank you so much, Annie, for having me.

Annie: I just love you. Thank you for doing this.

Lindsay: I love you too.

Annie: Listen, go back and tell Ava that she is our favorite girl, that we are cheering for her and love her and blinking right back at her.

Lindsay: Okay, I will. And next time you have me on, let's talk about lipstick and fun things.

Annie: Okay, great. We will totally do that. Send love to Phoenix and Dugan as well for us.

Lindsay: Okay. All right. Thanks so much, Annie. Take care.

Annie: Love you. Thanks for doing this.

[01:05:32] <music>

Outro: Well, friends, my thinking is that you are ending this episode, just like me and our team listening into this episode with some awe over Lindsay and Dugan and their

honesty and what they shared with us today, some grief over what they've experienced, probably a lot of feelings about where this relates to your own life.

One of the things that we do so well is support our guests on the show. I bet you need some new art for your house today. I bet you need something from Lindsay Letters. Wouldn't it be fun if we got to bless their family today with some finances? Because we bought a lot of art from Lindsay Letters. It is Lindsay with an A. LindsayLetters.com is how you get to her website. There's stuff on sale. There is stuff that is not on sale. There's new art. There's art you're going to love for your house. Why don't you go get some? Why don't you go get some today? I'm going to as well. That is my promise to you. I'm going to get me something new.

But if you want to go check out LindsayLetters.com or LindsayLetters.co, that's how you can find her on social media as well. Go get you a little piece of art today from Lindsay. And if you want to, you can head over to her Instagram. Be thoughtful, be loving, be encouraging, be all the things that you are to her and her family today. You can leave comments on the TSF Instagram for her. You can leave them on my Instagram post today about the episode, or you can go straight to her, slide into her DMs. Whatever you want to do. We get to bless her family today.

I encourage you to do that in whatever way you want to today. Again, her website with all of her beautiful art. I have a huge piece already hanging in my house. It's Lindsay with an A, L-I-N-D-S-A-Y, LindsayLetters.co or LindsayLetters.com. It'll get you there too. What do you do when winter breaks your heart? I hope you will think about that, process that, talk to God about that today.

If you missed the first episode of our winter season with Pastor Mike Kelsey, you're going to want to go back and listen to that. It's Episode 951.

Make sure you're following That Sounds Fun podcast on Instagram. That is where we're going to continue some of this conversation. We'd love to hear from you. That is a great place to be, particularly this year as we work through winter, spring, summer, and fall.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, all over Lindsay Letters' website right now. Anywhere you need me, that's where you can find me.

I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home, do something that sounds fun to you, and I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me, well, if we've been stuck in our house all weekend like we think we are, it'll probably feel good to get out. So today what sounds fun to me in the middle of our snowy winter in Nashville is a little walk outside.

Y'all have a great week. Remember, most weeks this year, we will only have Monday episodes, so we will see you back here on Monday with some of our favorites, Drew and Ellie Holcomb, and we're answering the question, what are the blessings of winter?

Make sure you share this episode with people in your life that may need to hear Lindsay's story. Man, we love a story with questions at the end, don't we? We do. It just makes me feel seen in my life, too. So share this episode with people that you love. Head to lindsayletters.com, find you something that you need in your house. And we will see you back here on Monday with Drew and Ellie. Y'all have a great week.