**BARGAINING (done)**

**Clark:**  Previously on Living and Effective

**Langberg:**  Bargaining, it's, "If I this, than you that."

**Clark:**  Here's Diane Langberg, practicing psychologist and the author of Suffering and the Heart of God.

**Langberg:**  People sometimes do it as part of grieving in the sense of, "Well, if I just do this, then these things won't happen to me anymore, or something that I want in place of this will happen." It's another way of trying to avoid the full blown truth of the loss.

**Clark:**  I'm Richard Clark.

**Smith:**  And I'm Joy Beth Smith.

**Clark:**  The Christian Standard Bible and Christianity Today present Living and Effective season two, a podcast about what happens when the Bible and humanity collide.

Joy Beth, do you ever yell at the TV?

**Smith:**  Absolutely.

**Clark:**  Why?

**Smith:**  I get really upset on a regular basis about anything from the Bachelor results, to-

**Clark:**  And you yell at it in the privacy of your own home?

**Smith:**  I yell at books, I yell at the TV-

**Clark:**  You yell at books?

**Smith:**  All the time. You don't?

**Clark:**  No. Because I'm just reading, it doesn't hear me. I grew up with my dad yelling at the TV. He would watch the news and just say, "Oh, give me a break," and stuff like that.

**Smith:**  I don't sound like that when I'm yelling.

**Clark:**  What do you sound like?

**Smith:**  "Oh my gosh! Why did you give the rose to that girl?"

**Clark:**  Oh, okay. So, you are making arguments.

**Smith:**  Yeah.

**Clark:**  All right. So, I have a theory about why we do that. It's because when we're reading a book, or watching TV, or doing something that is very isolated and passive, and in that moment we're sort of craving for some form of interaction, even if it's not with a person. If it's just with ideas, or characters, or a game show where you try and win a marriage for some reason.

**Smith:**  Don't say that like it's a wild idea.

**Clark:**  Well, it's clearly a wild idea. I don't think I have to say it like it's a wild idea. So, TV doesn't require interaction, but we sort of insert ourselves into interaction. Imagine you're watching TV, you're just sort of passing away the time. You're desperate for your life to change, but you've sort of given up in that moment, or you're on autopilot, and this guy pops up and literally invites you to interact.

You know, I bet a lot of people were like, "No way," when they saw Peter Popoff on TV again after just being utterly exposed as a fraud. The next thing they know, he's back on the airwaves. And Popoff's particularly shameless in that he never really paid lip service to something like that or showed regret or repentant like other disgraced televangelists have done. He just picked up where he left off. He started repeating the same promises with the same delivery that he always had.

But imagine you don't know who he is. Imagine you're not gasping that they let this guy back on TV. You don't know him. You're watching TV, you're just sort of passing away the time and you're desperate for your life to change, but you've sort of given up on that moment or you're on autopilot and this guy pops up and literally invites you to interact. The nature of a Peter Popoff television show is interactive. He gives you a way to very specifically take control of your life.

Here's Mark Oppenheimer.

**Oppenheimer:**  Popoff again, he was always more of a late night, high up on the cable box figure, but millions and millions of people flipped past his show at one point or another.

**Popoff:**  Powerful. I just feel the yoke. I feel the heaviness. I feel the holy ghost doodads flowing up and down my spine. Amen. I want you to touch my hands on the television screen. Come a little bit closer. (crosstalk) .

**Clark:**  This is more stuff from Popoff's infomercials.

**Popoff:**  I want you to (crosstalk) .

**Clark:**  It's pretty clear he wants to give the viewer a deeper connection than they might get from the typical late night TV watching experience.

**Popoff:**  ... to you. There's no distance in prayer. I'm going to send this powerful healing virtue transfer. I believe it's going to be transferred into your life. Here it comes. Touch my hands. Come a little closer and agree with me. Father in heaven, you see everyone who's watching who has pain. That man with prostate cancer, the woman with pain in her feet. My God, let your healing anointing and power throw out over the airwaves right now in their lives.

**Oppenheimer:**  The key thing when he comes back after about 10 years away, Cree, is that he's not looking for a white audience anymore.

**Popoff:**  Oh, I just feel that holy ghost vibrations moving up and down my spine and through my arms and flowing to you. I could just sense it right now. Bandages being broken. Heaviness is rolling away. I can see the supernatural debt cancellation taking place right now. You're going to get good news from your credit (crosstalk) .

**Oppenheimer:**  Previously taking advantage of the integrated nature of the Pentecostal community, hee always had people of all races at his revivals, but he would principally targeting the majority white culture that we live in. Most of his money was probably coming from white people.

**Popoff:**  Ideas that God is going to give you that will produce instant cash. I know that. Get ready. Get ready. Get ready.

**Oppenheimer:**  When he comes back in the late '90s, back onto TV, he starts buying a lot of time on BET, which is a black channel which is the major black cable channel, Black Entertainment Television.

My theory on this is that he just figured out they were far less likely to have known what happened to him on Johnny Carson. You know, I went to one of his revivals, as I talk about in my GQ article. I didn't get the sense that there were people who were just Popoff loyalists, who just were there because they'd always been following. The people I met were at the revival in Washington, DC, where I did talk to a lot of them. None of the people I talked to, none of them, were ready to sort of sell everything and follow Popoff. They were people who'd seen his TV show, who figured that the miracles they saw on TV and the testimonials they saw on TV had to be valid because those looked like good, honest folk and it was relatively well produced and it looked like honest TV, and they just believed it. You know, they figured why not. Why not come?

**Clark:**  You can kind of understand why people show up to these Popoff events, right?

**Smith:**  Absolutely. I think it's almost similar to watching The Bachelor and then they invite you to a casting. Have I gone to a Bachelor casting? Sure.

**Clark:**  Okay, that's crazy.

**Smith:**  It's not.

**Clark:**  You went to one?

**Smith:**  Yes.

**Clark:**  Why? Explain.

**Smith:**  Because you hope that maybe, some chance, you'll be a person cast and you might have your life changed and find love.

**Clark:**  And it would change your ... It's a way ... Oh my gosh, this is amazing. Okay.

**Smith:**  Did I make it to the third round? Sure-

**Clark:**  For you, single is a great way to live, but for you it's a struggle.

**Smith:**  Yes.

**Clark:**  And you want to be married, right?

**Smith:**  Yes.

**Clark:**  It's something you desire for yourself?

**Smith:**  Yes.

**Clark:**  So you're watching this show about marriage.

**Smith:**  Yes.

**Clark:**  And they're like, you can do something about that.

**Smith:**  Yes.

**Clark:**  And your response is what?

**Smith:**  Done. Let's go.

**Clark:**  Why did that appeal to you so much?

**Smith:**  If we're just speaking frankly, it's the thing that you feel like you have no control over and that you have tried desperately to fix but can't. It feels outside of your realm of control. It feels outside of your own influence. It’s basically like standing in line with 8000 other people and there’s someone at the front of it who’s giving away lottery tickets. And you know that everyone in that line hopes that they will win. But why can’t it be me?

**Clark:**  Why not me, yes.

**Smith:**  Some level that desperation drives you to do what seems like crazy things because those crazy things work out seemingly for some people so you do this wild adventure and you take the Instagram post and you just make a joke of it, but there's a little piece of you that hopes that your lottery ticket is a winner.

**Clark:**  And in a way that act is heroic, from my perspective at least. Like you could wallow or you could do something to make it happen. This is like your way of taking control and trying to make it happen one way or another.

I think I've mentioned this before. I submitted a prayer request to the Peter Popoff website. It was just, "I would like to have an interview with Peter Popoff," and I got several responses back. I've got an email response, I've got now two letter responses sent to my office mailbox, and the last one I got illustrated this really well, I think.

So, in this letter, Peter Popoff says, "It's not unusual for God to send those with hard cases to me. No disrespect to anyone, but in my spirit I feel you've tried to get help before, but to no avail. Many are not anointed to deal with difficult cases. Perhaps this anointing is so strong upon me because I've personally overcome some of the same challenges you are now facing in my own mind. Richard," he calls me by my first name, "Richard, in my prayer time, God showed me some of the hard things you're now dealing with. God gave me this word for you. 'Fear not, my son, the hard things you are now facing will soon be a thing of the past, for during the next several months, I will use my servant to lead thee into deliverance, and reveal unto thee the steps of faith that will break all evil holds in your life and release miracles of love, success, new health, and joyous living unto thee.'

"Richard, now in Jesus' name, open the envelope that has the miracle spring water in it. Before you use it, lay it next to your bed tonight only. I believe the angel of the Lord will trouble this water as you sleep at night. Yes, this is a harvest of a great income. After you use the miracle spring water exactly as I direct, take the small sticker, write your name on it, and put it in an empty container. When I get it back, I'll know that you've acted in faith and followed the instructions of the man of God. I'm asking you to plant a holy consecrated seed for a great harvest offering of $19. No, I don't want you to send 39 or 99. No, send exactly $19, because one is the number of the Father and nine is the Father's number of new birth. Send it back to me along with the empty miracle springwater packet. When you return the page inside the sealed envelope to me, I'll send you the remainder of the seven secret prophetic events." And then it goes on for a while about what those are.

I guess I'm not going to get an interview with Peter Popoff, because I don't think I'm going to send him $19.

Now, I don't think most people believe that wholeheartedly, but I do think that people think it's worth a try. I get it, you're desperate. Here's one possible solution, $19. Send it to me and I will solve this problem. I've read your prayer request and I believe that God wants to give it to you."

I guess I'm not going to get an interview with Popoff because we're definitely not giving him $19. There's that sort of appeal to people to people who are trying to take control of their lives. In a way that's really human and natural. On this point Costi Hinn, who was previously involved in Benny Hinn’s prosperity gospel ministry, actually gets right to the heart of it.

**Hinn:**  Richard if you and I are really honest even as Christians, in our most weak, human, frail, even sinful, lustful state, what do we really want? We want comfort, right.We got to be honest. We want comfort.

**Clark:**  Yes.

**Hinn:**  I want a paycheck, don't you?

**Clark:**  Yes.

**Hinn:**  I want to make sure I can pay that mortgage. I want my kids to have food. I want my wife to be taken care of. I don't want my kids to be sick. That's not what we want at the very core of who we are.

I was in India a couple months ago spending time with some pastors and one of my favorite things to now, of course, after having gone to these countries and exploited people, I like to go there and spend time with them and the pastors and I were in a room together and this man pipes up and he says, younger pastors 29 years old, and he says "So, I got a question for you, Pastor N." He said, "So what do you expect us to do?" He said, " Well, you're telling us all this about the prosperity gospel. What should we preach? What do you expect form us?" And I could tell he was upset and I said, "Well preach the true gospel. Be faithful and let God determine the rest." and he starts crying and through instead of now an aggressive voice it was this pleading and he said, "But you don't understand. They'll leave our churches."

And all of a sudden the room, you could hear a pin drop and he's a pastor of a conservative Baptist Church in India. He said, "If I don't preach some prosperity gospel, at least a little bit, they'll leave my church. People don't want to hear it. They're tired of it. They don't want to hear the real message. They're don't want to hear that there's challenges. These are poor people. They want the hope. They want to be told it's going to be okay. They want to be told that God is going to give them things so you expect me to just let people go walk out the door because how will I have a church? There will be nothing left."

This old pastor who was quietly sitting in the corner just burst out and said, "You be faithful." And he looked at the young man and again through tears he said, "You be faithful. You let God decide. He will bless your faithfulness. You'll face Him one day and He will be pleased with you because you were faithful."

**Clark:**  I relate to that. I don’t know about you but I’m constantly trying to my bargain my way out of pain. You can see the moment he stops being angry and starts bargaining with Costi .

**Smith:**  I see bargaining throughout all of my life. Bargaining with people, bargaining with God. It's funny because I don't consider myself a particularly contentious person. I went to India and bargaining is a large part of their culture and I actually hated it. I didn't want any part of that.

**Clark:**  Right.

**Smith:**  But it's actually been through this podcast for him like I do that just regularly and especially through singleness of just wanting desperately to figure out what the formula is. If it's not, okay, fine Jesus, you can take the husband and the picket face and the kids, but I felt like there were these conciliation prizes that you were ensured if you didn't get that big thing that I had been promised then it was like okay you get to jet set as a single and you get to have this sophisticated single life, but again it was sort of like, Oh no prosperity gospel round two.

**Clark:**  If not this then this.

**Smith:**  Yes.

**Clark:**  And the way that he says, "Can we just get a little bit" prosperity gospel is actually really convicting. I love how blatant he is, at least in that story, he's blatant about it and I think some of them ask him that question. Oftentimes I'm asking that question and just not saying it, right.

**Smith:**  Well I like that he equated it to hope.

**Clark:**  Yes.

**Smith:**  Because he was like they live in poverty, they need a little bit of hope and I was like, yes, we do. We do need a little bit of hope.

**Clark:**  Yes.

**Smith:**  But at the end of the day that's not actually hope.

**Clark:**  Right.

**Smith:**  Well it's just a false hope.

**Clark:**  Yes. I read a lot of self-help books.

**Smith:**  I'm sorry, that's not funny.

**Clark:**  The reason is not because I want to be more and more aware of what's bad. The reason is I want to know that I'm going to improve over the course of my life and that my life is going to improve as a result. I’m trying to level up.

**Smith:**  If I can only get better. If I can only become the best version of myself.

**Clark:**  Exactly. And I mean, that kind of hope is a powerful idea. It's something that's very Christian in its origin. But sometimes, hope itself can become a type of idol that blinds us to our reality, whether we want to improve ourselves or just save ourselves from death. This idea, by the way, is something that Todd Billings says is actually surprisingly common. he told me about the differences in expectation and anxieties at the end of life for the religious and non-religious.

**Billings:**  Those who tend to have the most anxiety are those who are not really sure where they're at, religiously. There is one exception though that I've been puzzling with to that sociological trend that is when it comes to heroic measures. There have been several studies that say that committed, primarily Christians, are over three times as likely to ask for heroic measures at the end of life than those who are less religious or less committed.

**Clark:**  And what do you mean by heroic measures?

**Billings:**  Aggressive treatments at the end of life which have virtually no chance of having any healing properties.

**Clark:**  Yes.

**Billings:**  The doctors talk about it as a sort of lottery ticket chance.

**Clark:**  Sure.

**Billings:**  They always have, or just about always have, priests for side effects such that if a person can't communicate with her family. It's someone who is in their last months of life-

**Clark:**  Yes.

**Billings:**  And it's to give them really extreme treatment. This has been a thing I've puzzled about for several years and the medical community is puzzled about it because they did a study on it and it's the sociologists who they took a survey. This is at the Dana Farber Cancer Center and the reasons that people gave for this were theological. The reasons were, I want extreme measures because I want to give God another chance to give me a miracle. I want to give God another chance to heal me. Some reasons had to do with every heartbeat belongs to God so I want as many heartbeats as possible.

**Clark:**  Sure.

**Billings:**  This category of treatment is very very clear overall does not extend your life. It increases dramatically the pain and the suffering of the patients and their families. Those who have heroic measures, their families are much much more likely to have major depressive episodes like six months after the death. Partly, because they weren't able to get closure. I've seen this again and again as I've been immersed in the cancer community where the only faithful response when somebody is very near death is pray for a miracle. Pray for a miracle.

At one point a family member was updating people and said pray that he becomes a grandparent and his kids were my age. I mean the age of my kids, under 5, but it was just a few days later that he went into hospice and a day later he was dead. So clearly he was dying. He was very close to death and I'm sure the doctors were honest with them at that point, but at that point what faith was saying for these Christians. These are brothers and sisters in Christ. I'm not doubting that they're Christians, but what faith was saying was don't believe what the doctors say. The Doctor is saying that he's about ready to die, but what we need to believe is that he's going to become a grandparent. He's going to live for 30 more years.

**Smith:**  When Billings was talking there at the end, he used the word faith and he was like, their faith compels them to basically ignore everything that they're hearing, ignore the monitors, ignore the doctors, ignore the beeping of the heart devices and let your faith tell you the impossible basically which is that the days length that you know that the doctors have told you that you have left with this person that you just really love, that is not true and that you're to pray for grandparent hood. It's admirable in a small way and it reminds me of the heroic conversation we had earlier of doing something that seems impossible and against all odds.

**Clark:**  Right and that kind of approach is a specific type of bargaining that both the person suffering and the people comforting that person often experience. People bargain on others' behalf. That's just a thing that happens and that may seem like a kind thing to do, but in some ways it can put unnecessary pressure on the person that's suffering. Especially, when they try to come to terms with the inevitable.

**Billings:**  I had a stem cell transplant six years ago this month. They said if I made it five years with a partial remission of this transplant that would be good. It's hard to say what sort of life expectancy is for someone my age because most people are in their 80's when they're diagnosed with this, but there are definitely people who are my age when they're diagnosed who die within a year and then there's some who live a decade or more.

**Clark:**  Wow.

**Billings:**  The fact that I've had six years does not mean that I have a weaker form of the cancer. Every time I talk to my oncologist, he reminds me of that. He says "I've had patients who have had a long initial partial remission and then when it comes back nothing we threw at it makes any difference." And then he usually has to clarify because I've seen this happen with my cancer quite a few times. "So they're dead within the year?" And he says yeah, they're dead within a year.

**Clark:**  So a minute ago Todd was referencing the type of prayer request that was awkward for him, that another young dying man might live to be a Grandparent. But back in our first episode, even Timothy Brown, Todd's friend and seminary president said something very similar about Todd Billings.

**Smith:**  Yeah.

**Clark:**  I hope he grows-

**Smith:**  Sweet Tim.

**Clark:**  To be a Grandpa. Here's the clip again.

**Brown:**  Lord, if it is your will, take him as a very old man, enjoying the gift of Grandchildren. I mean, I pray that every day.

**Clark:**  But also, of course he would. Any good friend would want that for his friend.

**Smith:**  Of course.

**Clark:**  And what's so striking to me is how admirable that hope is and how vulnerable it is to express it out loud, when you know it might not be real. I don't think he's fooling himself. But even Todd references Tim at one point and says, even Tim struggles with some of this.

**Billings:**  That's a lot to take in, but it's actually easier for me to take in than for some of my loved ones. And even for Tim Brown, who you talked to.

**Clark:**  I think all of us, beyond the entitlement for ourselves, sometimes really start struggling to trust God with other people's lives, especially when we see them in an unjust situation.

**Smith:**  And I think it would be unfair of us to question the faith of Tim in this situation to say-

**Clark:**  Right.

**Smith:**  Tim doesn't understand the goodness of God as much as Todd does because he's not accepting the fate. I think what we might see is something like Todd is staring it down.

**Clark:**  Exactly.

**Smith:**  Himself. And so he has to come to a realization of it in a different way.

**Clark:**  Totally different perspective.

**Smith:**  That's right. The point of view really does help you metabolize the truth in a way that someone who is not experiencing it wouldn't understand.

**Clark:**  Yeah, totally. Now Todd finds himself essentially trying to come to terms with this new reality, all while surrounded by people in a totally different reality. At one point I heard him describe this experience as feeling like an ex-pat. You've left one country and gone to another and all of a sudden you don't fit in. Your background and the preconceived notions you have about life are just totally different.

**Billings:**  Their tendency is to pray that I'm the exception in terms of the statistics. To basically kind of assume that I will be the exception in terms of the statistics and I'm okay in some sense with him praying that. I'm not a prayer police, but if I'm going to live responsible as a parent and a spouse, I can't assume that I'm going to be the exception. In day to day life many of the people who are around me and who love me, they assume that I will be the exception because it would be too much for them to take in. I've come to be patient with that.

**Clark:**  Why is it that death, something that each of us is guaranteed to experience and encounter so difficult to come to terms with.

**Billings:**  Even into the 1940's you had 80% of deaths taking place in homes in America and so most children would have had the experience, many children, of being hospice workers for their grandparents. Now we've taken death, put it in institutions out of sight. We've turned it into kind of a spectacle for Netflix and political debates, but it's not something that applies to me or to you.

**Clark:**  All the opportunities and privileges that I have have caused me to see death and lack as exceptions to the norm rather than fundamental realities of human existence. As a result, whenever I come in contact with them I start looking for other exceptions. If I'm going to suffer or if someone close to me is going to suffer aren't I owed something in return? Isn't that the only way this makes sense? But biblically that's just not the way it works.

**Billings:**  I strongly resist the idea that God gave me cancer so that I could bear witness in the particular way I did in the moment, book, that sort of thing.

**Clark:**  Why do you resist that idea?

**Billings:**  Well because I think there are biblical reasons for thinking that we simply don't know why God allows. God does do good things through our weakness and through even terrible things that happen.

**Clark:**  Yeah.

**Billings:**  But it's not a justification for why what happens. I mean the whole Book of Job takes place on these two levels. On the human level where all this disaster is happening then on the divine level on the divine council. We never get a good reason. We never get a good, human reason why this has been allowed by God. We know its been allowed and Paul in the thorn of the flesh, he never gets a reason besides the living Christ says to him that, "My power is made perfect through weakness." And that not answering his prayer of taking away this thorn in the flesh is helping to show this to Paul, but again it's not the sort of reason that we're looking for.

**Clark:**  When I was talking to him I was glad he brought up Job because it came up in my mind too. There's that moment that everyone thinks of when they think of Job where God literally comes down and sets everyone straight. I don't know a more uncomfortable book and probably one of the most uncomfortable moments is when God comes down and says, "I'm not here to tell you why I'm doing this." There's whole apologetic discipline situated around answering the question why do good things happen to bad people and God comes down and says, "You can't know," It's that simple, and Job says, "I don't have any more questions. Thank you, Sir." You know what I mean? It's so funny even Job's friends did this where they show up and they say, "Okay, well we got the answer to this."

**Smith:**  Yeah.

**Clark:**  "We have figured this out." And they have about four different reasons for why this is happening. Job has his own reason, which is God hates me basically. So, everyone has their reasons, what is that impulse. What causes us to continue to do that?

**Smith:**  The desire for clarity is pervasive. It's so much of our life, but it is something that is unshakable in me. I couldn't turn it off even if I wanted to.

**Clark:**  The impulse to seek answers isn't unnatural. It's probably one of our most visceral instincts, but it's often exploited by people like Peter Popoff who build new worlds and peddle alternate realities where anything is possible.

Sometimes I like to think about what my life would be like if I had a winning lottery ticket. My debts would be paid, my family would be taken care of, I'd have nights and weekends currently lost to freelance and side hustles .

what if my dad's death and my own mounting financial struggles are just the beginning of something great. What if this is the start of a beautiful story I'll tell one day. One that has a redemptive ending.

What if the price i’m paying now is really just the cost of a winning lottery ticket that will pay off extraordinarily in the future?

Diane Langberg talked to us about the delicate process of unearthing these bargaining impulses in ourselves and in others."

**Langberg:**  I would tend to say, "So help me understand your thoughts about God, and your life, and what you've expected from Him." So I would want to explore it with a lot more depth because sometimes when you do that with people the light goes on without you telling them. But it also affords opportunities to say, "Well, what do you think about this? Or, why do you think that happened if what you're saying is true?" You're not saying don't believe that, it's wrong, here's the right way to think. You sort of musing out loud. When you take a harder approach and just instruct somebody that what they're thinking is wrong and here's the right way, if they don't agree with you it's broken the relationship or they won't trust you anymore so that breaks it. So, it has to be done very carefully and slowly.

**Clark:**  Yeah, this is not going to surprise you, but I just keep thinking of Job's friends.

**Langberg:**  Yes. The best thing they did for him was shut up. They couldn't stop talking and explaining it all. Yeah, and God commended the fact that they shut up. Part of what you're saying is this happened and I don't like it so if you do this for me then I'll do that. So, there's acceptance in it that's sort of like tiny, little, green grass coming out.

**Clark:**  So I turn to the bible and cash in verses that I hope prove that the Lord really does want a good life and happiness for me. I'm able to do all things through Him, who strengthens me or I've come so that they may have life and have it in abundance

and we hope it works so that some of this pain or despair or the suffocating sense of loss is alleviated

**Clark:** even just a

little

there's

**Popoff:** no distance in prayer.

**Clark:**

On the next chapter of Living and Effective Season 2