

Episode 250

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Occasionally, when a new book comes across our path, I like to invite the author of the book on. Today's a unique book, one that caught my attention unlike anything else. Let me give a little background. Joining me today is Tilly Dillehay, the author of My Dear Hemlock. That title may not tell you a whole lot about the book, but we'll get into that. When I became a Christian, the youth pastors discipling me gave me a copy of The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis and encouraged me to read that book. I found it extremely interesting, and it's really opened my eyes to the reality of how Satan and his demons would seek to deceive me, lead me astray, tempt me, etc. I've read it a few times since then, and every time I pick up on some things I didn't catch or at least didn't remember.

Shea Houdmann

Well, My Dear Hemlock is a very similar theme, but written specifically to women, how demons might attempt to tempt women, deceive women, lead women astray. That's why I found it extremely interesting, and I'm surprised, honestly, that no one thought of this idea before. Tilly, welcome to the show. Let me lead off with a question. First, tell our audience a little bit about yourself, and then second, what led you to write My Dear Hemlock?

Tilly Dillehay

All right. Well, I am living in Middle Tennessee in a very rural town. I'm married to Justin Dillehay. He's a pastor, and we have four children who are all under the age of ten who I'm homeschooling. I'm the author of three books. This is my third book. It just came out late last year. Your little story about your experience with Screwtape is such a familiar story. I think I read Screwtape as a teenager the first time. A lot of people, I think, are handed that book as young people in the faith. It's been such a helpful book for so many people, including myself.

Tilly Dillehay

I think it was three or four years ago that I was sitting down to write just a straight article about something. I think it was something marriage-related that I just wanted to have. I wanted to have a way of making very vivid and having really vivid illustrations in this piece. I think that's when I first thought, what if I were to fictionalize this and use this device that Lewis had used so effectively of having a demon talking to another demon giving the other demon advice about how best to tempt a patient.

Tilly Dillehay

It's a very interesting thought experiment, I think, to look at your life, look at what you're dealing with, and to ask yourself, what would Satan want in this moment? What would he want to see me do? What would he desire that I be thinking in this moment or in this season? I think from there, it was such a useful device that I enjoyed taking it and approaching a bunch of different topics with it. I didn't think of it being a full book at the time, but it just grew into that.

Shea Houdmann

I've found the same to be true in many ways. Very few people who've ever done something that God has used in amazing ways have started out with this grand vision. It's like, oh, I'm going to do this amazing and write this amazing book. I'm going to launch this crazy website. It's more like, I find this interesting. I want to say something about it and see what God wants to do. Then God takes it and explodes it beyond anything we can ask or imagine.

Tilly Dillehay

Or he kills it. That's something else he does sometimes.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely.

Tilly Dillehay

Or it just goes straight into the ground. I think it is true that it's the things that really interest you that you pursue because you feel compelled to say something that is meaningful to you. That's where I think the best work comes, for sure.

Shea Houdmann

Like the old saying, find something you love, find a way for God to use it. You'll never work a day in your life. I've got questions. We have a book, but it's like a compilation of articles from the website. I've never actually done what you've done, like writing a book from scratch. I've written a lot of research papers, but not a book.

Tilly Dillehay

That sounds harder than writing a book.

Shea Houdmann

Every author I've spoken to has described it as like a labor of love. It's a labor, for sure, but seeing people blessed and encouraged by it is powerful.

Tilly Dillehay

That has been really sweet with this project to hear the feedback. I was pretty insecure about this project, honestly, when I had my first draft. You talk about it being a labor of love. I was pregnant while I was writing this book, so I had a due date for a book and then a due date for a baby just the next month right

afterwards. It's not even the first time I've done that, honestly, the pregnant with baby and book at the same time.

Tilly Dillehay

I think when I had finished this project, it was such an unusual project and such a, I guess, eccentric in a lot of ways. It wasn't kind of thing that just anybody would have published, I don't think. I was definitely not sure about it. I wasn't sure if it was going to be truly helpful to people. It has been really a blessing to hear from women that it seems like it's connecting, that some of the things I have observed in other women and also experienced myself, that people are, they're recognizing these things.

Tilly Dillehay

There's a lot of stuff about marriage in the book, a lot of stuff about marriage and motherhood and aging and just some of the really unique temptations of womanhood, which is, yeah, again, this is the reason to take that, kind of steal this really effective thing from Lewis and use it to apply it to some things that he wasn't able to write about. He wasn't, I don't think he was married either when he wrote Screwtape or else I'm sure there would have been a lot of marriage stuff in that book as well. I've been blessed. It's been a really good experiment for me as well in my life.

Shea Houdmann

Let me go off of what you just said. What were some of the key points? I don't want you to give away anything in the book, but specifically, what have you found are some of the different ways that demons attempt to attack, lead astray women versus men?

Tilly Dillehay

Yeah. I mean, I think one of the big, the sort of central themes in the book is that demons take women very seriously, like the threat of what women have to offer is a very serious threat in this demonic kind of world. But the threat is not, the dangerous woman in their minds is not the kind of woman that we would necessarily picture in today's world. A lot of the strengths that a woman brings that I think are a major threat to the enemy are the strengths that are unique to womanhood, which is the strength of a living kind of flexibility in her ability to see where there's a need and move to fill that need, the ability to bring life. The demons hate humankind, so their beef with Eve goes back to the beginning. When a woman brings life and nurtures it and builds a home and loves her husband and her children, these are things that are real, builds a hospitable environment to bring other people in where they may hear the gospel or just be nurtured. These things are antithetical to what a demon wants to see. So I guess that was very important to me to show that the strengths of a woman are not necessarily what we think they are.

Tilly Dillehay

And then a lot of another really central theme I think through the book is just contentment in marriage and in the life that God gives. So that a woman who is totally happy to live in her house that she was given, doing the work that God gave her to do in that home, loving her husband, caring for children, that this is, a lot of women don't know how to be just happy in their lives. And that if she were to learn that, if she were to learn how to walk in obedience and grow in gratitude for the life that God gives, she would be victorious in a way that is truly lasting, you know, through generations. So I don't know. I don't know if, I know that this is a very specific kind of life that's described in the book. The woman that we meet in her maybe early twenties when she's a new Christian, maybe a newlywed, you follow her into middle age in this book. And it's a very specific life, you know, she is, she's not single, she's married, she has children, she's not out in the, in, you know, running a company or whatever. So it's a very specific set of circumstances, I guess, but one that is common, I think, to a lot of women. So.

Shea Houdmann

You touched on it earlier. And one of the things I appreciated about it was what you talked about marriage and how the demonic world tend to attack a marriage specifically through the wife. What are some of the key points that you brought out there?

Tilly Dillehay

Right. Yeah. So one of the very first letters that I wrote, and it may have been the first letter, was about marriage. It was a new marriage and how a wife comes into the marriage and begin, and the demons are saying, if you can try to get in early, you can get her to start believing that she actually, that her husband is very, very fortunate to have snagged her and that she married down. Because basically he's this normal man who's working a normal job and just wants to live that life and come home to her, is providing for her. You know, he's a good man that's being described in this book, but he's a steady, ordinary man. And there is something about the life that she had before or about the world that she lives in with social media and just comparing her life to other lives where she's very vulnerable to this idea of there's some bigger and better life out there that I'm missing out on by living this small and ordinary life with this man. And just that being a real vulnerable point to get in on, for the demons to get in on early in her marriage.

Tilly Dillehay

And then there's other very just ordinary things that the demons talk about, like courtesy in marriage, how the humans speak to each other when they first walk in the door, you know, after a day at work. Like that's how you either

build a marriage or build hatred, basically, is in those small things. Other things in those early chapters about young marriage, like get her to think a lot about his spiritual development rather than her own, to be worried about what's going on with him rather than to look to her own, you know, spiritual affairs, basically. And get her to wait until everything about him is to her satisfaction before she pulls out the one thing that is praiseworthy that he just did, take out the trash or, you know, come home after a long day working to support the both of them. Whatever those things are that you see that you can call out in praise and thanks to your spouse or to anyone else in your life, really. Get her to wait until everything she sees is to her, meets with her approval before she praises those things that she does see. And just a funny thing about human nature that we're worried about over praising people and we don't seem to be as worried about being overly critical of people, you know? So, yeah.

Shea Houdmann

The segment about how easy it is for wives to get into, I don't know if it's the right term, like nitpicking, being overly critical. I've seen that in so many marriages, so many questions we receive from men. It's just like, I feel like I can't do anything right. And for just to think through that and like, this could very well be like a spiritual attack. This is how Satan is seeming to drive a wedge between a husband and wife to stir up bitterness and strife and those things. And we tend to think of things like that as just, it's just an interpersonal conflict. But the demons care.

Tilly Dillehay

They care about that stuff.

Shea Houdmann

We do not wage war against the things of this world, but against powers, principalities, spiritual forces. And just to remember even in like these little day-to-day battles, how many of those are actually spiritual conflicts that we're not aware of, or at least not as aware of as we should be.

Tilly Dillehay

Right. And that was something that Screwtape, I mean, that Lewis did so well. And Screwtape was, he made it so clear. He always brought the battle down to the interior, the life of the patient, of that one person, or of his thoughts and words with one other person or two other people. It was always normal Christian living stuff that he was writing about, rather than like big wars and movements of politics and things like that. Because yeah, the way that you speak to your husband has lasting effects for not just for you, but for your children and for your children's children, for many people who know you, these things matter.

Tilly Dillehay

I mean, if there was one thing that a woman were to bring, to take away from this book, the idea that you can praise your husband intentionally and daily, and just bless the heck out of him by using your words to edify, such a powerful thing. It's a skill that, it's so sad to me when I see a woman who's been married 30, 40, 50 years, and still has never learned that, and really doesn't even seem to understand that her critical spirit has driven him to distance himself from her, that that's real.

Shea Houdmann

One of the other things I found really interesting, closely related is a wife and mother with her children, some of the spiritual attacks that can go place there. What's maybe the biggest thing that you think most women don't realize is actually a spiritual issue, possibly spiritual attack versus just normal difficulties in parenting?

Tilly Dillehay

Well, I didn't get to really write that much about parenting. I felt like I have about one or two chapters that I can really spend on this. The thing that I chose to pursue, which there were others I probably could have chosen, but I chose to pursue the idea of authority in the home. I did that because I saw that as one of the great burning issues in parenting today, and the thing that I've struggled the most with, I think, in my parenting, which is just being a mom and understanding that establishing loving, consistent authority with your children is one of the great gifts that you can give to them. It's one of the best things that you can do to make your home a delightful place to be, not just for you and your children, but for other people who enter in as well.

Tilly Dillehay

It's hard. It can be really hard, I think, for a woman to see that because my personality is probably pretty similar to a lot of ladies. I don't love confrontation. In my toddler years with my toddlers, if I could circumvent, get around the confrontation to help them to be happy without making a stand and saying, no, you're going to have to obey now. If I could get around that, I would because I don't really enjoy that. I don't enjoy being the authority in my home, but realizing that this was something, again, that the demons really care about this. They can see the chaotic effects of a parent who never learns to communicate authority with their child. Again, this is loving authority. This is one of the ways we love our children is by setting boundaries for them and holding to those boundaries. I guess just observing the world at the moment, I feel like that is one weak point in what my generation of parents don't tend to understand how to do that. You haven't seen it modeled.

Shea Houdmann

Great point. I love how you even said earlier in the episode, it's like, my dear Hamlock is describing a specific woman who is a wife, a mother of not women who are in the workplace, obviously face other different temptations as well, but can't cover all of them in this book. Maybe you need my dear Hamlock two to come on and maybe address some of the other ones. But no, I think my dear Hamlock is going to speak to a lot of women and help them to, like we've been talking about this whole time, open their eyes to the reality of the spiritual conflict that's behind some of the things that we have going on in our day-to-day lives.

Tilly Dillehay

One of the advantages of fictionalizing these Christian living types of things is just that it gives you the liberty as you're reading to say, okay, this is one woman's kind of story. This one applies to me. This one really doesn't. I'm not feeling convicted in this area reading through. You can spit that out. The thing that's not really applicable to you or useful to you, you keep reading, you move on to the next. I like that. It gives you a little bit more, I guess, freedom to read through and not feel like everything's being directed at you personally. Yeah.

Shea Houdmann

One of the things I really enjoyed about My Dear Hamlock was the humor. Two examples that I remember just really made me laugh because it's something I've experienced fairly recently. One, basically the demon inhabiting the roll of tape. We were trying to find where the tape begins and I was packaging up a box recently and it seems like I spent way too much of my life trying to find the stinking end of the tape. Why is it so difficult? Then also the wheel on a cart at Walmart. Why is there always that one wheel that just squeaks and makes you constantly-

Tilly Dillehay

Pulls left.

Shea Houdmann

Yes, constantly. It's frustrating. It's embarrassing. Why can't it just work like it's supposed to?

Tilly Dillehay

You have one job. Walmart shopping cart. Yeah, I know. Obviously, I'm not necessarily saying, oh, yes, I believe that demons are involved when you can't find the end of the tape, but it was a fun little way to make jokes about things that seem bad enough to be demonic.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah. For sure. Exactly what you said. We're actually saying that I think demons probably have better things to do than inhabit a roll of tape or a wheel

on a shopping cart, but how many little things like that that just add a tremendous amount of frustration to a day for whatever reason might have a spiritual component that we're not-

Tilly Dillehay

They could. Yeah, I think Lewis has been one of those writers that's opened my eyes to the idea of demons and just Satan himself too, but demons being petty, petty things that like rejection of God's reality, it makes you stupider. It makes you more petty and it where you would do something just because it's wrong, which we've all had that experience, I think, in sin where you're like, I just did something wrong and I didn't even have a reason for it. I just did it because it was wrong. So how much more in the life of a demon whose entire existence is outright rebellion against the one true God, you can imagine it would make them smaller and more petty creatures rather than more... You might not have this big, this big, magnificent opponent. You might have basically a toddler throwing a tantrum or someone who's willing to spend time ruining a Walmart grocery cart experience because they're just petty like that. So yeah.

Shea Houdmann

Tilly, let me ask you this closing question. What do you hope this book will do for the women and men who read it?

Tilly Dillehay

I hope that it will do what it's done for me, which is to raise my awareness of the spiritual element in what I'm doing every day, just to remind them that what they think matters and what they're feeding on in their minds and their spirits matters and that the demons they do have an opinion about your life. They do really care to see you not active in prayer. They really do care how you speak to your husband and your children, as we were saying earlier. They really don't want to see you finish well in your life. So they want to distract you and make you think that the battle is over here when it might be really over here. So it's something that I feel like I live a little more aware of after having done this thought experiment of writing these letters. So I guess that's my hope is that women understand that they're in a battle and it's an important battle and they should fight.

Shea Houdmann

I can't speak for C.S. Lewis nor would I ever claim to, but I think I've read enough of C.S. Lewis. I think he would be proud of this book. He would see it as a fitting companion to the Screwtape Letters. I honestly think, why didn't I think of that?

Tilly Dillehay

That's pretty high praise.

Shea Houdmann

Different perspectives. So I think if I were to summarize both the main lesson of Screwtape Letters and My Dear Hemlock, I mentioned earlier, but Ephesians 6:12, for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Far too often we Christians are ignorant of the spiritual battle that goes on around us. We tend to minimize it. Some people will overemphasize it, but far too often it's not recognizing it at all, not recognizing that in the daily battles we face, seemingly mundane events, that there's a spiritual component to that. Being able to, a little curtain look behind the scenes of here's how the demonic world might be attempting to use this to lead me astray, to pull me away from God, to cause me to lose faith, to cause me to react in ungodly ways, to make poor decisions, all those things. And My Dear Hemlock does a great job of just giving like a peek of some things that women and men should be aware of that may be going on behind the scenes. And just starting to think that way, I think is powerful.

Shea Houdmann

So again, high praise for My Dear Hemlock. And I know it's been out for a few months. Hope you continue to hear a lot of really good feedback because it's a much needed book. And I love it when someone has a creative idea or God gives them a creative idea and then they follow through with it. They don't, oh this is too hard. Like no, I'm confident God's going to use this book and continue to use you through it. So keep doing what you're doing. And we'll include links to where My Dear Hemlock can be purchased in the show notes at podcast.gotquestions.org and also in the description field when this video goes live on YouTube. So Tilly Dillehay, thank you for joining me and thank you most of all for writing My Dear Hemlock. Again, excellent book. It's highly recommended.

Tilly Dillehay

Thank you so much for having me.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Questions podcast with Tilly Dillehay on her new book, My Dear Hemlock, sort of a companion to the Screwtape Letters. If what we talked about today interests you, I highly encourage you to pick it up. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.