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Week 51
James and Betty Robison
Ashley Cleveland

James: Wow! What a privilege to share this time with you. I'm James Robison. Betty and I welcome you to LIFE Today. This guest has written a book titled *Little Black Sheep*. Her name is Ashley Cleveland. She is a Grammy award winning musician. She and I have a lot in common in that we both know we're broken and we're broken up and God still likes us. You like me. You're going to like her because you just get to know her.

But you know, she and I had an alcoholic family member, and we had a lot of hurt. Hurt doesn't just necessarily go away. And she understands addiction. And her story is phenomenal and her gift. That's why it's been recognized.

So I want you to welcome a broken sister, a broken friend. Welcome Ashley Cleveland to LIFE Today.

Ashley, we're glad to have you.

Ashley: Thanks for having me.

James: You don't seem to be too troubled by the fact that you had been broken. You still feel like you are broken. Why are you not troubled by that?

Ashley: Because I really feel like – I mean, it depends on which day. Some days I'm really troubled because it's not like my brokenness doesn't leak. And sometimes it leaks publically, and sometimes I say or do something that I really don't want to say or do in the worst possible time and I can see. And I can see – But the truth of the matter is I think the brokenness is the best part about me. I think it's the best thing I have to offer you, or anybody else because it's the place that, number one, is aware of my tremendous need, so it keeps me really tied to Jesus all the time.

It's also, you know, my family, my parents were both alcoholic but they were both incredibly beautiful accomplished people. So there was a great emphasis on performance. You know, and leading with your show foot, kind of. And if I'm broken, I'm not worrying about performing or leading with my show foot. I have an empathy and a love for other broken people, which is, you know, I feel like I kind of am on the low road of the gospel. I'm a broken person, here to be with other broken people.

James: We've got a lot of company because most people are broken.

[Laughter]

Ashley: I've discovered that!

James: The tragedy is they don't know they're broken, or they've given up in their brokenness. They've found a sense of hopelessness in their brokenness. But I don't hear hopelessness in your brokenness.

Ashley: Not at all! I've a lot of joy.

James: Now, tell me about some of the pitfalls, the stuff that caused you to maybe feel like damaged goods. Or, where do you get this "little black sheep" mentality? What is this? I mean, this little sheep being pulled up, I guess out of a pit of despair or something. I don't think – They're not hanging. He looks like he's –

Ashley: He's being rescued! Or she's being rescued!

[Laughter]

James: He or she. You were the little black sheep, though. You were the one I was saying out of step.

Ashley: Yeah, in this instance, I'm the little black sheep. But, you know, I kind of think all of us want to go our own way. So, who's the little black sheep? I kind of think there's more of them than self-identify. Let's put it that way.

James: Yeah! Too many of them did it like Sinatra said, "I did it my way!" And their way is usually not the best way, period.

Ashley: Well, in my case you can count on that. My best solutions led to alcoholism and drug addictions. So that was my bright idea.

[Laughter]

James: Lower than the other one.

Ashley: My family was something of an alcoholic dynasty. My family came off the rails very early in my life. My parents divorced. My father was gay. And this is back in the late '50s, early '60s, when that was something you couldn't – you know, he was very secret about it. So he lived a very compartmentalized life where he had this life over here and this life over here. So I grew up in a family that was, on the surface, as I said earlier, very accomplished and beautiful, but underneath there were these rivers of silence and secrets and things that didn't make any sense to me.

And then, you know, eventually, I certainly fell into a very deep addiction. And I did not expect to live. I didn't even think I wanted to live because I didn't really know how to live. And I also, you know, I'm from the south, I'm from Tennessee and in Southern culture ...

James: I'm glad you told us. We couldn't have picked up on that.

[Laughter]

Ashley: In Southern culture everybody goes to church because it's part of being from an upstanding family. It's kind of a social identification.

James: It's kind of sad, really, why many people go.

Ashley: Yeah, but having a real, a true encounter with Jesus Christ is really not high on the list of objectives.

James: No, not for a lot of religious people.

Ashley: No! So, I didn't know who the Lord was. I thought the Lord was just as into performance as my dad was. You know? I thought that's what he was looking for.

James: That's where Betty lived most of her life of misery.

Betty: Do everything right and God won't get you!

Ashley: Exactly! So, I wasn't up to performing well, but I found I could perform badly really well.

[Laughter]

James: So, were you a performer while you were all messed up?

Ashley: When I found music that was like a lifeline to me because it was something I had a natural gift for and I couldn't even really figure out how I knew what I knew. I just – it was a complete gift.

James: It was actually a gift from God. People have gifts from God, they don't know every good and perfect gift from above and he reigns on the just and the unjust. If you could just realize, even businessmen and entrepreneurs because you don't realize you're creating all this stuff that makes you successful out of the stuff God put at your disposal, created in his image you can do all this. If you just realize who it is, and get that divine connection back in place. Now, all of the sudden you had a gift, but you were messed up, you were done, you were a black sheep, you needed to be rescued. What happened?

Ashley: Well, I was playing music, but I was also drinking and using, and I was completely out of control. What happened was I got pregnant. And I was not married and I was so terrified that I became immobilized in that. I didn't want to hurt the baby, but I didn't feel like I could have the – I mean, I just didn't know what to do. So I didn't do anything. And I just stumbled through this pregnancy and had – and knew nothing about recovery, knew nothing about help. And I had a lot of support from the church but not many of them knew about recovery or getting help for addiction.

So, I had terrible slips in the early parts of my pregnancy. I was so afraid that the Lord would punish me by giving me a baby with birth defects. I mean, I didn't know. I was very – I was just terrified and I felt that all of the failure that I had dragged through life would come to its end with this event in my life. And it would be the absolute worst thing that had ever happened to me.

But I went through my pregnancy and my mom did it with me and when I had the baby I had a cesarean section and I was by myself in a recovery room. And my mother had seen my daughter and came in and said I've seen her and she's so beautiful. And my mom left, and I was laying there and it was as if the Lord parted this curtain and just leaned down and said to me, "You see! I'm not who you think I am." And I was so overwhelmed by his kindness to me for no good reason. None. And, you know, it was a number of years before I fully recovered but to me that was the beginning because I thought clearly I don't know who God is. But if this is an indication, where else would I go.

James: And you've committed your life to him at some point right in there, and you've been pursuing him and then he began to open doors and let you not just not perform but let you, I'd say minister, wouldn't you say?

Ashley: Oh, yeah! He gave me more than I would have ever had the courage to ask for. He gave me an incredible husband. He gave me a family. I have two more children. He gave me something to do with my life, not only through music, but you know, I have a real heart for broken people and I have a real heart for addicts and alcoholics.

James: Have you established a ministry for them?

Ashley: Mmm hmm.

James: How would people find out about it if they want to know.

Ashley: Well, I just, you know, I don't have an official ministry. I just minister to people one person at a time. You know?

James: That's great! Because everybody can have that ministry.

Ashley: The book is part of that.

James: That's the ministry all of us should have. Just because you pray for someone to get well, you don't need to go buy a tent and start a healing ministry. You just need to keep doing what you do. People have an idea that a ministry means I've got to start some organization. No, you just keep releasing the river of God's love. That's ministry. That's what God's looking for.

Ashley: Well, I also feel like he's called me to walk with people. You know? To really give of my life and substance but part of what I wanted to do with the book was say to the church alcoholism is an illness. It includes plenty of moral failure but at the heart of it, the power of choice is not there. People have lost that.

James: Wouldn't that be true of any addiction?

Ashley: Absolutely!

James: Would it be true of a sexual addiction?

Ashley: Absolutely!

James: Pornography or some kind of drug?

Ashley: In my opinion, yes!

James: And I agree with that! And you are going to sing a song that you wrote and the title is?

Ashley: Little Black Sheep

James: Would y'all like to hear that? I would really love to hear it! From a little black sheep!

Ashley: Yeah!

[Ashley sings "Little Black Sheep"]

Now the boy told the shepherd
There's a fearful storm
So I went out to the fields
To drive the flocks home
And I counted every lamb
Into the keep
Yeah, all except for one
That little black sheep

Little black sheep
Little black sheep
In the howling wind
With no relief
In a cold, cold world
Nothing sounds so sweet
As the voice of the shepherd
To a little black sheep

Oh that little black sheep
She ain't nothing but trouble
She's not worth much

And she'll cost you double
Shepherd says he knows
But he won't sleep
He's going go out and find
That little black sheep

Little black sheep
Little black sheep
In the howling wind
With no relief
In a cold, cold world
Nothing sounds so sweet
As the voice of the shepherd
To a little black sheep

Oh that little black sheep
Was the wondering kind
But the shepherd brought her back
Every time
And mama say, "Child,"
When your pride starts to creep
You best remember
We all just little black sheep

Little black sheep
Little black sheep
In the howling wind
With no relief
In a cold, cold world
Nothing sounds so sweet
As the voice of the shepherd
To a little black sheep
As the voice of the shepherd
To a little black sheep

[Applause]

James: I don't think I can describe how important that the shepherd to somebody who feels down, out, like a failure. I've felt that way, a lot of times. Like, I just know I've disappointed myself and had to miss the mark and fall flat foolishly, whatever,

and just feel – I guess the thing that just jumped all over me while you were singing is just thinking about the shepherd and his voice and his love. I'm overwhelmed by it. And I sense that you are.

Ashley: Yes, I am! And you know, how often are you going to have a shepherd that's a lamb too?

[Laughter]

James: Oh, boy!

Ashley: So he knows what our human frailty feels like.

James: He took it all for us. Didn't he? Rejection, pain, separation, loneliness. He really does understand. And I know you understand. And you tell the story and it's wonderful. And the Little Black Sheep a memoir. It's Ashley's continuing story; it's her journey. Into greater fullness and fruitfulness and continuing brokenness before the Lord, yielded clay, broken up ground to be more productive, no longer fallow. We all need that!

Father, I pray it for all of us. I really like painless shaping. I'm just not real fond of the grinding process. But I do want to be shaped. But I really want to be in your arms. I want you to pick me up. And I want you to pick everybody up. It feels like that they don't have anybody. And I ask you to do it.

If God's touched your heart, and you're watching this today, you've identified with Ashley's journey, maybe her song, maybe her message, but God's reaching out to you and the telephone number there is a prayer line, it's always there. If you don't want to call now, call later, but call and say, "Look, I just need this shepherd. And I want to get in his arms." And you can call and somebody will help you. I'll send you a simple little introduction to "Knowing God as Father." It's a real little study guide, kind of shares my own journey, similar to Ashley's. And then tell you some steps on how to get started thinking like a child of the father, and follower of the shepherd.

I just want to say thank you so much, Ashley. We reach out to broken people. By the way, let me tell you, get this in the bookstores. Get her music. Go online and find her online. And just find out where she's going to be. Maybe you can get her to come to your area and share that journey.

Ashley, we'll let our viewers see something that in many ways is as moving as what you just sang, because it's images of reality. It's like, a picture says more than a thousand words, and then actions speak louder than words. These pictures, I promise you, they'll move you to the right kind of action. So look closely.

Subtitle:

>> A picture is worth a thousand words.

Subtitle:

>> Action speaks louder than words. Mission Feeding saves lives. It's yours to give.

James: Boy, I don't ever want to reach a time in my life that those images don't move me beyond my ability to even adequately describe. Betty, my mind is just racing back over those little images. That little boy that was just covered with that skin that's just – that old skin disease, like the skin is rotting off his little emaciated body.

I can't even tell you, because I've done it so many times and so many places how much I wanted to just pick up that little boy and fix him. And love that never fails is what fixes it. All he needs is some nourishment. And there was a little child there so weak and reached out and took somebody's hand and I thought boy, I would like to be that hand.

I don't know what you see when you see Jesus on the cross, his hands extended. But I do see him saying, "I love you this much." And I see him extending his hands, nail pierced for me, to my hurt, all the pain. I find him as the one person who never looks beyond my need. He never looks beyond my pain. He sees both and he meets it.

Betty, we can help those children. We saw the missionary handing that little bowl. We're the ones that provide the bowls and we put the food in it for the missionaries and relief workers.

Betty: And something that really stuck in my heart as I was watching along with you was at the end, the statement said, Mission Feeding saves lives. It's yours to give. We have it right here, in our hearts, in our hands, the opportunity to save the lives of these precious children. They don't have a chance, many of them, if we don't reach out and love them and give them hope.

James: And I believe with all of my heart in this season of giving, God gave his great gift to us, the gift of life. The life that we fully experience by freely sharing it. I believe you're going to do it. This is the last week now, that we're going to have this opportunity. We need to hear from everyone of you. Some of you have already made a gift. Betty and I have. We're going to give again. Betty and I always give the largest gift we can possibly give at the end of the year. We know that we need to take advantage of year-end giving and take advantage of the blessing that we're allowed to have to have that credit, which anything you can get from the government you can call a blessing. You just need to thank God for it! So you can make that gift.

We pray that you'll make the greatest year-end gift you've ever made. Here's the beauty, it'll be doubled! We've got a group of friends that said they'll match everything you give. Which means \$100 normally we're able literally to feed ten children; now we can feed twenty. \$1000, we can feed 100 children; now will go to 200. So whatever you do, it's effect just double the number. \$30, \$50, or \$100; 3, 5, or 10 children suddenly becomes 6, 10, or 20. It's doubled! Because somebody says I believe so much in the program and mission outreaches, we'll match your gift.

Would you go to the phone right now and take your bankcard and use it like a check? That's how you always use it, like a check. Or you can go online, lifetoday.org and say I want to make a gift today. If you write a check make it to LIFE, but call us please! Let us know you're mailing it because this is the last week. We really need to hear from you and we need to let the missionaries know we are going to be there. You're not going to be empty handed. We know your heart's full. You're going to have the where withal to meet the needs of those children.

Would you make that call? Please do! By the way, if you get a busy you be persistent. You be determined! No one is going to stop me from helping. My actions are going to speak a whole lot louder than any words. Would you do it? Thank you so much for making that call. Thanks for giving life!

Begin video clip

Announcer: In remote and impoverished areas of Africa, families are suffering, facing death by starvation, and those hit the hardest are their children.

Life's Mission Feeding program is there able to feed and care for over 400,000 children in crisis areas of Angola, Mozambique, and Sudan. But our food reserves are gone and we desperately need your support to replenish our supplies at more than 800 feeding centers immediately. As an answer to prayer, a group of LIFE's friends have set a

\$550,000 end-of-year matching challenge for Mission Feeding. This means your gift today can have a double impact!

\$30 to help three children will be doubled to impact six children! \$50 to help feed five children will be doubled to help save ten children. And \$100 for 10 children will be doubled to help feed and minister to 20 children.

With your gift of any amount we'll send you Christine Caine's powerful new teaching series *Moving Past Your Past*, on audio CD along with her book, *Can I Have and Do It All Please?*

With your double impact gift of \$100 to help save the lives of 20 children you may request both the audio and video series. And as a bonus, we'll send you Christine's latest book release, *Undaunted*.

Finally, please consider a double impact gift of \$1,000 to help save the lives of 200 children. And you may request our 50th anniversary bronze sculpture, "Brotherly Love." This is the last week. Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of clip

In the studio:

James: I treasure all of the bronzes that we've offered. We've got them all. There in our family room on display because we love the message. This one by Robert Summers, perhaps the greatest sculptor alive today. He does them in love for us, to say thank you. This brother feeding his little brother the food that you give him. Get the bronze, it's a commemorative bronze this year, celebrating our 50th anniversary of marriage and ministry. And made it another year. We're heading onto 51 now. Are you going to stay with me, right?

Betty: I am! I'm here.

James: We want you to make that gift and get the bronze and get the material from Christine.

The book, *The Little Black Sheep* I really pray you'll get it, in the bookstores. I want you to join Betty and me in saying a great big thanks to Ashley Cleveland.

Ashley, you blessed us! You're a sweetheart! You're a broken sweetheart!

Ashley: Thank you!

James: Thank all of you so much for letting us share this time with you. We are honored that you would give us this opportunity. Thank you so much!