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Week 19: Spring Mission Feeding

Eric Fitzgerald and Matt Swatzell

James: Thank you very much! It really is a joy to share this time with you. One of my television producers said that when I talk to these two men -- and by the way, he's been here for years talking to great Christians with great stories. He said, "I don't know when I was ever any more moved."

By the way, I'm James Robison; this is Betty, and *LIFE Today* is an opportunity to share life with you that will enrich your life. Eric Fitzgerald was a youth pastor and he had a child, and a wife that was seven months pregnant, and just suddenly, they get hit by a truck, and the mother, the wife, the little unborn baby, their lives are taken.

A young man that lived to help others, Matt Swatzell, was driving home as a firefighter; hadn't had much sleep and just fell asleep at the wheel and killed this woman. Well, the husband, the pastor, and the firefighter are here -- a miraculous encounter.

I want you to welcome Eric and Matt to *LIFE Today*!

Eric, Matt. I told you privately before we came out here, I really see Jesus in both of you.

When I look at you, Matt, you're a fine looking young man. You're like my grandsons and our son in the sense that you're the kind of guy people would be proud of. You were a firefighter, probably -- it wasn't like you were looking for some high paying job. You needed a job but I think you had a legitimate interest in others. The last thing you would want to do would be fall asleep at the wheel and kill some woman. Tell us what happened so our viewers will understand that moment.

Matt: So at the time I had just turned 20 years old so I started my career on the fire department when I was 19 so I had been on almost a year at the time. With the department we act as firefighters and E.M.T.'s and paramedics; so that particular day I was on ambulance, taking people back and forth to the hospital. So we had an extremely busy shift and didn't get hardly any sleep, and we work 24 hour shifts; so for the whole 24 hours, we were continuously busy.

So that morning, did our pass-ons like we usually would. I left like any other morning would leave the station. Actually, that particular morning I spoke to my mother on the way home and a couple of my friends just planning out the day, what we were going to do; we're going to hang out. So there wasn't any... like unordinary moment or thing that was going on.

James: So you didn't feel unnecessarily drowsy.

Matt: Right! I was tired but our shift change is at seven in the morning so who is not tired at seven in the morning when you wake up -- after not sleeping either? So I didn't feel a need that I was unsafe to drive. I didn't feel like I needed to pull over, and I was talking to people on the way home. I turned on the road that I live off of which our house at the time was like three miles away, three or four miles away; and about two miles down that road I just happened to nod off. I think it really only took about four or five seconds and that was enough time for me to cross the center line and meet the car head on.

James: What happened when you felt the impact?

Matt: When I felt the impact I heard the most God awful noise I've ever heard, and the metal and the glass breaking. It woke me up. And at the time my vehicle was spinning so I was spinning around and I knew that I had been in an accident. I didn't know what I had hit at the time. I thought maybe I'd rear ended somebody or that I just ran off the road and hit a mail box or something.

When I came to a stop, I tried to kind of get bearings as to what happened, and saw the other car that was involved. So immediately ran over there to see what I could do to help. I saw Faith, at the time was 19 months old, she was in the back seat, she was crying. I checked on her, made sure she was okay; kind of assessed June, a little bit and that's when people started showing up, and kind of diverted me away from the vehicle. That's when the other Fire and E.M.S. people started coming.

James: Were you alarmed at what you saw because you assisted people, that's what your job was. You'd been running an ambulance even that night before helping people. What was your assessment?

Matt: I knew that it was bad. I knew that it wasn't just going to be a normal everyday car wreck. I did not know that the end result would be what it was but I think I was in such shock too that it didn't sink in, the severity of the situation until later on at the hospital, probably an hour and a half later that I was notified that June had passed away and that she was also pregnant; I did not know that, as well, and that the unborn child didn't make it.

James: Pick it up, Eric.

Eric: Got a -- woke up to a beating on my door. My senior pastor at my church said, "Hey, man, get your keys, get your wallet. Your wife and daughter have been in a car accident. You need to come with me."

So I grabbed my cell phone, grabbed my keys and wallet, jumped in the truck with him; just en route, trying to get details. He didn't have a lot to give me. I knew my daughter was taken to the children's hospital in Atlanta and my wife was taken to Gwinnett Medical.

Upon arriving at Gwinnett Medical, you know you walk in and say this is who I am, where do I need to go? They kind of ushered me over to the counseling rooms, which I'm a pastor, so I know that's not a good thing. I walked in and actually the doctor had just sat down and my wife's parents were sitting there. He just explained due to the complications of the injuries and everything that had happened, she had some broken

bones, the steering wheel basically had been crushed in towards her abdominal area and then mainly it was the head trauma. But that just due to the injuries she sustained she didn't make it, and they couldn't do anything to save my son either. Upon hearing that and just trying to process it, I went outside and made a phone call to my mom.

James: Now you found out what happened and you found out what happened; what's going on in your heart? I know there was some legal complications that took you a little while where you weren't even allowed to communicate because they had to work through some situations. But what was going on in your minds? Were you wondering how it happened, thinking was somebody drunk? What process...?

Eric: That afternoon, the accident investigation unit officer came by the house and basically said, "Here's what we've got preliminary report wise. We're going to continue to keep you abreast of the investigation, let you know what happened. This is what we've got at this point." So they were very upfront, very clear about what took place and he was very open with me about the accident.

James: Did you have anger toward somebody that did this?

Eric: I didn't. He told me it was a 20-year-old kid. I say "kid" -- a guy just got off work and just basically fell asleep. It wasn't like somebody was running from the police or a drunk driver or something like that. I remember driving at times when I knew I was probably tired.

James: Did your heart go out, and your mind, beyond even your pain to think about wonder how he's feeling?

Eric: Absolutely! And actually, some of my students, I was a youth pastor, they came by the house the next day and we were having conversations. And just one of the things that came up was, "Hey, y'all pray for him too. There is no telling what he's going through; what he's having to endure in this moment."

James: What were you going through, Matt?

Matt: Every emotion that you can think of. I didn't know why it happened to me. I didn't know why it happened to Eric and his family. We were both good families. We lived our life for the Lord and like you said, like I was a helper. This is what I did for a living and here I am caused -- what the ultimate accident is.

I didn't know how to handle it. I was mad in a way. I was devastated. I didn't know what to do. I struggled for a while just trying to handle it myself, really. Then it was just one night where I gave up and I'm like, "God, I'm giving this to you. This is bigger than me. I can't do this on my own." So I kind of had to swallow my pride and just say, "God, you've got a reason for this?" There's a plan. We may not know what it is. I may never know exactly why but I have to just trust in him.

So that started the comfort; to start kind of forgiving myself because I blamed myself. This was nobody's fault other than my own. So then living with how's Eric going to feel? Is he going to hate me forever? What's that consequence going to come to one day?

Betty: Because y'all really didn't talk for quite a while. How long was it before you actually talked?

James: I don't think you were allowed to talk by law.

Eric: We weren't. Then even after everything is settled, life is going on, he's doing his life and I'm doing mine. It was actually about two years. It was actually the day before the two year anniversary that we first...

James: What happened?

Matt: Well, I -- when you do something to somebody, you want to apologize, you want to show your sympathy for whatever it is, no matter how big or small. And I hadn't had a chance to do that for two years. I hadn't let him or his family know, or June's family, know how sorry I was or get any type of anything.

So I decided the day before the two year anniversary of the accident I was going to stop and just get him a card. And I was going to take it by his house and just put it in his mail box and just say, "Look, I'm praying for you, for you and your family; just wanted you to know that."

So as I pulled up, a person from Eric's church, where he served called me. Because we kind of -- we had middlemen that we communicated through the process. So he called me and said, "Hey, I know that tomorrow is going to be a rough day for you; just calling to pray for you."

I said, "It's funny you called me. I'm actually here at Publix. I'm going to get Eric a card, just letting him know that I'm thinking about him, praying for him. And I'm going to take it by his house."

As I'm explaining all this to him, I said, "Man, I think Eric just walked into Publix."

And he goes, "Man, I've got to go. I'm going to call you back. I'm going to call you back." So he hung up on me and then called Eric.

Eric: So this guy calls me out the blue and I'm just coming by the grocery store to get some milk, after Wednesday night church.

[Laughter]

Said, "Hey, I know this may not be the best time but I just want you to know Matthew is out in the parking lot. I know y'all had been wanting to get together and just hadn't had a chance to make it happen. Do you think you could go out there and talk to him?"

I said, "You know what? I really do want to see him." I said, "I'll go out there."

So I walked out to his truck. As I came around the corner he's just standing outside just crying. I just walked up to him and gave him a hug. We embraced for a short time.

Then I said, "There are some things you want to say to me, there's some things I want to say to you. Why don't you go first?"

He shared with me just again how sorry he was and how he felt.

I said, "I just want you to know that I forgive you. I want you to know that I know it was an accident. I know it doesn't take away the end result but I do want you to know that I don't hold this against you."

I said, "More importantly, I feel like I need to say this. Don't let this define you. Don't let this be something that you can't ever get past. God has a plan for your life that's bigger than just this one thing. And so I just want to encourage you in that."

We ended up talking for like two and a half hours in the Publix parking lot.

[Laughter]

It was crazy.

James: What was happening to you when you were talking?

Matt: I would say that was the biggest relief I've ever felt in my life. For that two years, the burden that I wore around of guilt, and just not knowing what this day was going to be like, I had no idea. And for him to say those words to me, "I forgive you" -- it's unexplainable.

Betty: It's not anything you really expected; was it?

Matt: No, it wasn't because I even told him. I told him verbatim. I said, "Why don't you hate me? You should hate me." He said, "I don't." He said, "It's just God. I don't hate you, I forgive you. I forgave you from the moment it happened."

James: I don't know what all God's going to do with each of you. You both had such an unbearable -- unbearable pain. But out of that, I'm going to tell you both, you really

are special and you carried that load of having been the perpetrator, however unintentional. I just say this to you, Matt, because I can just tell you're a really special young man that I don't want to imply something special about my life but God's been really special in my life and I had a lot of hurt, and never believed that a whole lot really good could come out of me but it has. Don't you think God is going to do a lot of great things with Matt?

Eric: And he already has. Even after the accident and he would go to schools and talk with teenagers about driving and driver safety. He just saw it as a way to say, "And look, you don't think it can happen to you but I can tell you firsthand, it can." So even then begin to use that to help others. It's just been a blessing to see what God's done through this.

And really, the story isn't so much about forgiveness as much as it is about God's faithfulness. Throughout the whole thing God has just been faithful. He's just shown himself time and time again. We could tell you story after story of supernatural things that have happened in our life that just confirmed what God was doing in our relationship and it's just been amazing to see the healing that has come from it.

James: Are you still a firefighter?

Matt: I'm not.

James: What are you now?

Matt: As of six months ago, I stopped with the Fire Department and now I'm doing like a family business deal.

James: What kind of business?

Matt: It's logistics. So we just deliver freight and ship things.

James: Do you need some business?

Matt: Yes, sir! Always!

James: How would people find you if they wanted to use your business?

Matt: Right now I work for a company called Time Logistics; it is actually in the family.

James: Where is it located?

Matt: In Norcross, Georgia.

James: They can look it up in the phone book or e-mail? All right, check him out and pray for him and be a witness continually, both of you. Find ways together; would you all ever go somewhere to like some church or some big meeting and talk about forgiveness? Are y'all good to do that? How would they find you?

Eric: Facebook is a good way. You can actually --

James: Do you have an e-mail address at the church or something say to you? -- To Eric Fitzgerald?

Eric: It is Eric@TGCstaff.com. And T.G.C. stands for The Gathering Church.

James: All right. I'm going to put that on the screen there but also it will be on our web site, LifeToday.org. You say, "Where do I find this guy?"

Or you can call our phone center, they will know. They will have information. You want to know the name of that company in Norcross, and say, "I want to work with the company as long as I get to work with Matt. We want to do some stuff with Matt because Matt is our friend. We know Matt, we like Matt, and we want to do business with him but we want to deal with Matt."

Do you want to say thanks to God and thanks to these men for sharing their story?

[Applause]

I really do want to talk to you just for a moment about you and the Lord. We really feel sometimes like we may not communicate as effectively as we wish we could the love of God for you, but he said it very clearly on the cross.

But the thing is that God's really just trying to tell you how much he loves you and he wants to forgive you and let you know you're forgiven. You need someone to pray with you? That prayer line is there for you, 24 hours a day.

And even though in a moment I'm going to ask people to help save lives, the majority of the calls every day are from people perhaps like you who say, "I need a friend," "I need to know God," "I need to be forgiven" or "I need to forgive." Don't hesitate to call and ask for prayer, please. We want to be a blessing to you.

We're asking you all of you who are watching to help us take care of beautiful children. I want you to listen to a mother and I'm going to relate some things that happened that are miracles that you can make happen. I really, really request you watch this very prayerfully with great sensitivity because I promise you, you hold the key -- you hold the answer.

On the mission field

Announcer: This is an experience we pray you never encounter. A child fighting for his life; a young boy named Leo. The clinic staff has done everything within their ability to keep him alive. Now his mother, Ilda watches helplessly. She too has done all she can.

Open captions:

>> I cannot lose my boy. He is my youngest of two boys. I can't lose him.

Announcer: It's a case of malnutrition. We'd like to tell you it doesn't happen often -- that it's a rare occurrence but Leo's suffering and Ilda's heartbreak cries out from all

over Africa where almost half of child deaths under five are caused by malnutrition. Like so many mothers here, Ilda holds the hand of her suffering child, willing him to live but fearing he's slipping away.

Leo was 3 years old. He died from complications of malnutrition.

End of clip

In the studio

James: Oh, boy! For all of you who have ever lost a child or loved one -- and we did lose our youngest daughter over a year ago -- and so the pain is so much deeper even now.

But Betty and I have been right there in Angola. I want you to listen to me.

Betty, we stood there years ago in the height of the greatest death cycle, in a malnutrition clinic, not that one but another in Luanda, and we watched a baby die. Remember we tried to suction -- they didn't even have good equipment. This was 20 years ago. And then the baby died and you and Ann Pretorius were weeping with the mother and you just didn't get it fixed so you weep with them.

But because we came to you -- yes, you, viewers all over the world, people like you, they said, "We want to stop that." And we stopped the death cycle in those areas.

And in that very hospital where you were weeping with Ann, just like that mother we just saw weeping in that other malnutrition clinic just a few weeks ago where that baby died, one of the most famous pictures in the history of the world was taken at that clinic. And it was Princess Diana, Princess Di holding a little baby and it was chubby and healthy. Right there in the clinic where they were trying to suction because they didn't have any equipment, and we got them more equipment. We got them what we could to help.

And look what happened! And millions of lives saved -- millions of lives saved! And so Betty, when we go to our viewers and we say, "We can stop that, we want to get them" -- we're going to try to save them in those malnutrition clinics. That's the

last stage but we're trying to get them out in the fields and there is a terrible drought there, in Angola right now. It's probably as bad as the one 20 some odd years ago.

And we've got 100,000 kids that are really in trouble right now and so Betty, we can feed three, five, or ten children for \$30, \$50, or \$100 for months! So we ask you to make that gift. Give as much as you can. If you can feed ten children, give \$100. Where would you better spend \$100?

But because we've got 100,000 kids right now, facing situations where they're headed there, I'm praying that we'll have 1,000 people who will give \$1,000 and that will feed 100 children each -- that's 100,000 children. We need it now.

And then the other 300,000 that we've located and we have them in feeding programs, we need to continue that and that's where we need the \$30, \$50, or \$100 or whatever you can give.

Father, I pray everybody watching will give something -- as much as they can; in Jesus' name.

Would you go to the phone or go online LifeToday.org and make the largest gift you can? If you can give \$1,000 or more, do it! Please!

If you can give \$100 because I'm always going to ask you, \$30, that's three kids -- how big is that to those three kids? That's real big; so there's no gift too small. That's why I've even said, if you watch us anywhere in the world, how about letting us know where you're watching us and we appreciate you even sending some kind of little token gift. Say hey, thank you for what you're doing. But if you can help us \$30, \$50, or \$100 do it!

Put it on your bankcard. Go to the phone. If you want to write a check, make it to *LIFE* but call us and tell us you're mailing it, please! Or you can go online and make the gift. We have some special gifts to send you, a couple of books I've written.

Randy, our son has written to bless you, some gifts that you're really going to treasure and a beautiful glass sculpture, "The Blessing" because that's what you're going to be.

Please! Go to phone or go online. If you write a check, call us and tell us what you're putting in the mail. We really need to know. Thank you for doing it!

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.

With previous food reserves gone and Angola facing its worst drought and food shortage in 20 years, we desperately need to replenish our supplies for our feeding programs immediately!

Your life-saving gift of \$30, \$50, or \$100 will help feed and care for three, five, or ten children for the next three months.

With your gift of any amount we will send you this inspirational two book gift set, *A Dad's Blessing* by James Robison is packed with valuable fatherly wisdom and insight for dads of all ages.

Rise Above, by James and Betty's son, Randy Robison will show you how to soar far above the circumstances of life and go higher in your walk with God.

With your gift of \$100 or more to help feed ten children you'll receive our blessing bowls, a great way to teach your family about giving and a daily reminder of God's provision for hungry and hurting children.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,000 or more to help feed 100 children and you may request our 2014 commemorative glass sculpture, "The Blessing."

Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of clip

In the studio

James: Betty and I say thank you for your help. I want you to know that with no exaggeration millions and millions of lives have been saved. But did you know that as a result of the feeding outreaches in Africa alone, more than 10 million people have trusted Christ? Because when they see their love they want to hear about the source of love, which you've heard in these incredible stories of forgiveness. Forgiving and knowing you're forgiven -- it's awesome, isn't it?

Would you join us in saying thanks again to Eric and Matt? I love you guys! I pray God just really blesses you big time.

Thank you for watching. Thank you for being here. Thank you for helping.

By the way, if you get a busy, you call until you get through. We need your help! And we thank you for it!