

9/13/17
Week 38: Christmas Shoes & Smiles
***Wednesdays in the Word*: Sheila Walsh**
Jeremiah Johnston #1

In the studio:

Sheila: Hello! I'm Sheila Walsh. Welcome to *Wednesdays in the Word*. I wanted to just say thank you to those of you who write little notes or you'll mention how one particular program or perhaps a verse of scripture really touched you and I just want you to know I get them and I really, really appreciate it.

And I usually do *Wednesdays in the Word* by myself but I got to hear a guy last year who has left an indelible imprint in the life of my husband and myself. He is brilliant. But he has written this book, just one of many things he's written called: *Unanswered: Lasting Truth for Trending Questions*. So would you please welcome my guest Dr. Jeremiah Johnston. Welcome!

Jeremiah: Thank you, Sheila. I have to say what an absolute honor it is for me to be on your program because I've admired your ministry for years. It is truly an honor. I've been counting down the days for this time together. So thank you!

Sheila: Thank you! One of the things that I noticed first of all about this book in particular is that when I was in seminary I took an apologetics class but this is like apologetics for the church. And that's what I really appreciate. It's questions that people within the church are asking. What kind of research did you do before writing this?

Jeremiah: It's really fascinating because you're an accomplished author and I didn't sit in a room and want to dream up a trendy book that would be relevant to audiences. It's really my wife Audrey. She came to me when we launched our ministry, Christian Thinkers Society. She said, "Jeremiah, we need to make this interactive. I want you to take questions live from the audience." She said, "I'll ask them, so that's my job, your job is to answer them -- no prerequisites, no preparation."

I was really concerned at first because I thought what if no one texts questions? I was amazed. Keep in mind we do events at churches of all denominations across the spectrum and people were not shy about the questions they asked. Then we began to notice it didn't matter the denomination, the questions, there were certain recurrent questions that were trending, if you would, at all of our events. We realized that most pastors are reticent to speak to some of these

issues. You're not comfortable to walk into a bookstore and ask, where is that aisle of that issue? So that's how it came together.

Sheila: And as I looked through the book and we're not going to get to everything that's in here so you're going to have to get your own copy but the ones that we're going to hone in on today in particular, I think are huge. Let's start with God on mute; when it seems as if God is silent. As I read your story, for you and Audrey, this was not an academic exercise. This was something you walked through.

Jeremiah: That's right. We couldn't get pregnant for five years. Anyone who has struggled with infertility knows just how personal that can be. When you struggle through the silence of God, when you're really going through it -- and bear in mind no Christian is perfect, we're just forgiven. But at the same time when you're walking with God, you have an expectation that the Lord is going to hear these prayers that we're asking and here we are in ministry, we're in the trenches serving God and we can't get pregnant.

And to make a long story very short, when you go through the silence of God, Sheila, I know you've written about this too, you begin to almost -- your theology can change in the way that the enemy -- because you begin believing those lies. And it's like the disciples in John Chapter 9, verses 2 and three, when the boy who's born blind, "Teacher, who sinned, this boy or his parents that he was born this way?"

Parenthetical note: In Judaism, if you had a child born deformed, handicapped, you were a social outcast. God was not with you. Verse three, Jesus said, and you know the passage, "Neither sinned but that the power of God could be manifest among you."

So we began to notice that it didn't matter if it was Abraham who suffered 25 years of God's silence, Joseph, 13 years, Moses, 40 years -- you could throw Jesus in, 30 years before he started his ministry. God was preparing them.

So we learned some invaluable lessons going through the silence of God but yeah, it felt like he unfollowed us for awhile.

Sheila: You say in this book that God's silence is real, biblical, personal, common, and not always bad. I thought those were really helpful distinctions because I talked to a woman a few weeks ago who said, "I've been praying for my husband to be healed from cancer and he died. I just want to know what did I do wrong?"

Because I think sometimes people feel we're going to believe, "if you have faith even like a mustard seed," and sometimes we'll take all these scriptures and all they do is they become a lead

weight in our soul. What do you say to people?

Jeremiah: I always remind people that are in that difficult situation because we're all there. I think of the father in Mark chapter nine. Think of that, Jesus is walking down the transfiguration mountain, perhaps the greatest miracle before the resurrection, perhaps his body is still glistening. There is a crowd around him but yet we see this father who is in desperation. He doesn't see the glistening, powerful Jesus. You see that his boy is overcome with a demon. It is the only demon, uniquely enough that the disciples were unable to cast out in the entire New Testament narrative. That father looks -- and he's suffering. Your disciples can't even cast him out. Verse 22 looks at Jesus, "If you can do anything, Jesus, will you do it?"

Do you remember what Jesus says in verse 23? I love this about Jesus. He's almost talking a little smack. "If I can? If I can? You're speaking to the one who holds the universe in his hands. But the father says, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

Here's the theme of the book and the series and the tour, it is okay to have an unanswered question as long as you're genuinely seeking truth and the answer.

Sheila: One of the things I loved is you talk about -- First Peter 4:13 where you say: But rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ.

I'm thinking of somebody watching right now who is at their most raw, at their most vulnerable. There is something so redemptive in what Peter writes there, redeeming our suffering, participating with Christ. Is that one of the things that you think falls into the, is God mute?

Jeremiah: Absolutely! And that's such a great verse, Sheila because it's important that our viewers understand when we read the New Testament, when we read the stories where people are suffering, more often than not, this suffering does not immediately cease. What do we see? We see a God who is with them, with us in our suffering. There's not this miraculous escape like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I wish there were and yet God is teaching us... I love what Henry Blackaby wrote because I studied the silence of God because unfortunately, there is really not an aisle in the book... here's the silence of God section. People have not really written about this issue and yet so many Christians face it. Henry Blackaby who you know, authored the *Experiencing God* Bible study and yet the man who authors experiencing God says, "I often myself struggled with the silence of God."

Think about that. Experiencing God on the one hand, silence on the other. He said, "First I go through my sin checklist. And if I was okay there, then I knew God was taking me deeper and I should do whatever it was he last told me. I should stay there and be faithful."

So you're not alone. You're not a second rate, second tier Christian if you feel like God is silent to you at this moment, he's not and his silence is not equated with sin. He's taking you deeper.

Sheila: I think it's interesting, you talk about how Joseph was trafficked as a teenage boy, knowing that God had placed this tremendous vision on his life, this dream for his life and that all of the stuff that happened. I'm always fascinated when it says, "And God was with him." I'm like, well, that's not what we think is going to happen when God is with you. But you talk about, it took all those years.

But we live in such a quick fix society and church that we want immediate answers. But for God's redemptive purpose and you brought up a Psalm, I didn't even remember that Joseph was mentioned in that Psalm where they're recounting the works of God. And you see that this wasn't an accident, it was part of God's plan.

Jeremiah: That's exactly right. And it's almost cryptic at the end of Genesis 40 in the story you just mentioned. It actually says Joseph is forgotten in prison and yet, on either side of that passage, "But God was with him." God wanted to take Joseph out of Canaan from transformation to triumph. And he did it through this apparent silence but yet God was with him the entire time. There is a story for us in that.

Sheila: One of the things I love is that you -- when silence is real, you say saturate yourself in the Psalms. Why?

Jeremiah: That's interesting. Jesus did that, I think. When I think about that epic moment, the cry of dereliction where we hear Jesus in his native tongue, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!" "My God, my God, where are you?" What is the next thing Jesus begins to quote? Psalm 22; he immediately goes to the Psalter. One Bible scholar said, "All 2,461 verses in the Psalms is a promise from God." Another Bible scholar actually stopped on his 27th reading of God's word and he said, "I'm going to count up all of the promises in God's word. I wonder how long it will take me." It took him a year and a half. Guess how many there were, Sheila? 7,437 to be exact. Someone said, (skeptics) "How do you know there's that many?" He said, "I counted every single one." We can stand on those promises even in the midst of silence. That's what Audrey and I did in our story.

Sheila: I love the way that you connect and I never connected these phrases before, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" You connect it with, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." There is not a -- it is like trusting in the midst of silence. I think that's a huge thing.

Jeremiah: I think so. I don't think we have a choice as followers of Jesus. You made such an interesting statement. We do live in this immediate, on-demand culture and that's why it's

important we become Christian thinkers.

So many of us, we get in a problem and we want a sound byte, a tweet, instead of substance. That's why I love watching Sheila Walsh, *Wednesdays in the Word* because you are distilling substance and we need many more teachers like you who are actually giving us the word of God. A big question deserves an investment of our time. We need to be readers and thinkers. We need to do what Jesus said in Matthew 22:37: Love God with all my mind.

Sheila: And that section of your book where it talks about the church and mental illness really resonated with me. My father committed suicide when I was five but we never talked about it, even within our family. I don't think my whole family ever sat down once in my whole life and talked about it. And then I was hospitalized for depression and it just became this thing that -- in fact, one of the senior vice presidents said to me, "Don't ever tell anybody where you were because it will ruin your ministry." I said, "I'm not trying to save my ministry, I'm trying to save my life, dude!"

Why did you write on this? Was this something that you heard over and over of people saying, "Please talk to this?"

Jeremiah: This is -- and thank you for your courage to share your story because it continues to minister to millions of people. It is the number one question after receiving now close to 10,000 texts and questions. It was 4,000 when I wrote the book. It remains the number one question: What do I do about suicide, mental health, at the intersection of my faith? I'm not talking about people outside the church.

The problem is there has been such silence on this whole issue and guess what? The Bible has a lot to say about how we think and how to think well. But unfortunately, just because we become Christians and follow Jesus does not mean that our mind is somehow immediately okay. We're still -- sin has hold of our body. We're breaking down until we get that resurrection body. I was amazed that not only was this the number one question but I'm also very burdened, like the person I just hate hearing these analogies, don't share it, stay silent, stigmatize.

When I was pastoring, a family set up an appointment with me and asked my permission to join our church. Well, you don't have to ask my permission. We want to get as many people in the church as we can to fulfill the great commission. They said, "Well, we were asked to leave the last church because our daughter has bipolar and she was told that she is just demon possessed."

It is like what C.S. Lewis said in his war time best seller that really made him a household name in America, a book that he dedicated, *Screwtape Letters* to J.R. Tolkien. Tolkien was none too pleased to have a low brow book, and you think about how many people. He said there are two

and opposite errors. One is to have an unhealthy fascination with the demonic but the other is to ignore its existence altogether.

So all of these questions, be it suicide, be it mental illness, there is a biblical answer and we need to give people hope. When you think that the Apostle Paul who's been called the Job of the New Testament, and Second Corinthians one uses a Greek word found only one place in the entire Greek New Testament, he actually says in Chapter 1, it is the word *apokrima*: I have the sentence of death within me. I don't even want to go on living.

This is the Apostle Paul. He had so many problems people didn't think he was an apostle. This is the man who gives us more New Testament than any other writer next to Luke.

Sheila: I love the fact that you talked about that little town of Olney, near Oxford.

Jeremiah: Oh yes! You know it! [Laughing]

Sheila: Yes! But tell them the story of what you discovered when you were there. I think it's just remarkable.

Jeremiah: Well, I have a friend from Scotland, Michael. He said, "Jeremiah..." He gave me a list of sites that Audrey and Lilly Faith and I, we ended up having a wonderful, beautiful little girl, we went to visit these different Christian sites and one of them was this little out of the way town. And William Cowper is how it looks. He said, "No, no! It is Coo-per. You say William Coo-per, a great poet." Benjamin Franklin would often quote William Cowper.

Well, he spent seven years in St. Albans insane asylum. He was considered having paranoid schizophrenic, perhaps; they didn't quite know the terminology back then. And yet in the little town of Olney, lo and behold, John Newton came to knock on his door and became the local pastor. And John Newton realized that this man was so gifted and yet had so many needs and challenges. And instead of ostracizing him, as our church does today, stigmatizing him, letting him suffer in silence, he knocked on his door, and he said, "You're gifted. You write poetry. Let's write hymns together."

Most people don't realize that on New Year's Day, I want to say 1773, they go to their men's Bible study. Picture this. Showing up at the Bible study and William Cowper and John Newton, "We felt particularly inspired. Let us read what we've written." And they begin reading "Amazing Grace" to that men's Bible study on New Year's Day.

Most people don't realize the only hymns in which "Amazing Grace" in its original rendition appears, had a co-author, William Cowper, a man who spent years in an insane asylum. I think

we need to figure out where we are in that story. This week right now are you a John Newton? Do you have someone in your life and you need to go put your arm around them and say, "Let me help you through this. I'm not going to judge you. I'm not going to be a Pharisee." Or perhaps you need to hear that you're William Cowper. You are gifted and God can use you in the middle of the mess.

Sheila: I love that part where you say that Newton didn't just offer a pastoral visit but he engaged his services. He saw his creativity. Because a lot of people who struggle with mental illness are very creative people. But I think there's something about that, that profound sense of walking side by side.

What would you say to pastors who say, "I don't even know how to start broaching this subject at our church."

Jeremiah: The first thing I would say is number one: You have to start talking about it. Lifeway did a recent survey, 70% of pastors never mention the subject of mental illness from the pulpit. And yet globally, one person dies every what 40 seconds by their own hand? This is an epidemic, Sheila, as you know. 48% of the people watching your program right now will at some point in their life struggle with a personal mental illness. 25% of our viewers right now are struggling with one of the mental challenges. And yet, we almost feel like it is a sin to say "mental illness" when we walk into the church; like we're a second rate, second tier Christian and that is not so.

So my ministry to the pastor is, we have to speak about it. We can't be silent. There is a biblical plan to transcend, any bodily issue that we have: Moral, physical, spiritual. There is a biblical plan. But when we don't speak to it, when we're silent, that gives a platform to people who do what in our world we call eisegesis. They pull a text out. And like when you and I spoke at Tulsa, a woman walks up to me and she said, "My husband was a pastor for more than ten years. He took his life and I'm told he is now in hell." I had an opportunity to say, "You know what? The scriptures don't teach that." Romans eight...

Sheila: It's not the unforgivable sin. No. Wow! I think that one of the things that I appreciate so much about your ministry is that you're shining the brightest light into the darkest corners of the church. I think that is huge.

Jeremiah, thank you. We have not come close to even the first couple of layers of the depth of this book which is why you have to really get this book and Bible study for yourself.

But one of the things I love about the privilege of that we're given, the deeper that we dive into the word of God, the more that we understand that we are accepted as we are but then we don't

stay that way. We're not just sitting here 'til God comes and rescues us and gets us out of here. We're here for a purpose. And we have this unique opportunity to serve Christ fully in our time. We get to do that with a really, I think it's probably one of my favorite projects that we do all year. When I look at the shoes I have in my closet, I think, oh gosh! What were you thinking when so many children around the world are actually just hoping and praying for their very first pair of shoes? And we can be an answer to that prayer right now. Would you watch this?

On the mission field:

Announcer: Sharing God's love is both our privilege and responsibility at *LIFE Outreach*. Those of you who make the decision to support our mission work have empowered us to put words into action. In areas where precious children have already perished, many lives are now being saved because you chose to do something about crisis situations like contaminated water sources and a lack of food.

With all that's been done this year, at Christmastime we like to go even further by providing corrective surgeries for children with cleft palates. And there's something else that brings a smile to children's faces.

Sheila: You've helped us change the lives of children all around the world but we thought in this season, wouldn't it be cool to do something really special? If you look at this darling little one here in Angola, he is like every other little boy or girl I've seen. He has no shoes.

Announcer: This coming Christmas, we want to give children all over the world a pair of their very own shoes.

Sheila: Look at this face! Don't you just think it's the most beautiful thing in the world to be able not to just put shoes on her feet but to be able to protect her from diseases, from all sorts of things as she steps on the ground? It's just -- we want to keep these big brown eyes as big and brown as possible.

Announcer: Help us make this Christmas one these children will never forget by giving them a gift that protects their very lives. Help us provide Christmas Shoes & Smiles.

Sheila: Thank you so much! Thank you for putting shoes on the feet of such a beautiful little girl. Thank you!

In the studio:

Sheila: You're probably thinking, what are you talking about Christmas for already? It's a wee bit early. Well, that's very intentional because we need to get the shoes and then get them to the right place in time.

Now think about it. Think about how much money you and I waste at Christmastime for presents that we don't really need, for things that are just excess -- how much extra food we eat. That's why Weight Watchers just lives for January the 1st because we've all just gone nuts over the holidays.

I suggest that we draw a line in the sand this year and say, "No more! This is not just going to be just about us. This is going to be us remembering what Christmas is really all about. That God took on a shoe size to let us know how much he loved us."

I think of all these children I got to meet who have never worn shoes in their life. Here's how doable it really is. These darling little shoes, they last really well. The thing I love about them is the kids can wear them in the water too -- and there is so much waterborne disease. But these cost \$3.60 so if you send in \$36, we can send ten shoes; \$72 lets us send 20 pairs and \$180, 50 pairs.

Now if you're able to do \$180 we're going to send you -- these are our little Christmas shoes. We do a new one each year. In fact, this year's one is this lovely little crystal one. So for any gift at all we'll send you this. I have these all over my tree. The other thing that I've seen Christ do miracles through is when a child is born with cleft lip and palate, they're looked on as cursed by God in their culture and they have no future and they have no hope.

But we've begun to work with some amazing doctors and they are willing to go over and they'll do these surgeries. It costs \$500. I mean over here it costs so much more. But they sacrifice their time. And for \$500 they're able to do a corrective surgery.

That's what Barry and I have decided this year we're going to give each other for Christmas because trust me, I don't need one more sweater. But the thought that I could put a genuine smile for the first time on a child's face? So please, if you and I join together we could live differently. We don't have to be stressed by the holidays. We don't have to look at all of the pile of stuff and think, where are we going to put it? We can reach out in the name of Jesus and make a difference in the lives of children all around the world.

So whether you could just do \$36 and we'll send ten pairs of shoes or whether you can do more, whether you could do two corrective surgeries for \$1,000, if we all do something it will make

such a difference in the world. And how much more beautiful on Christmas morning to wake up thinking, Lord, thank you that you blessed me to be able to reach out to children I might never meet until I see you face to face.

So please, would you go to your phone now? Call that number on your screen. Thank you!

Begin video clip

Announcer: Poverty is a killer and because of it children needlessly suffer; not only from a lack of food and clean water but also from a lack of things we take for granted such as a healthy smile or a simple pair of shoes.

Far too many children living in poverty have never owned a new pair of shoes. And while that may seem minor in light of all their needs, walking with bare feet puts them at risk of life-threatening infections and disease that could lead to crippling consequences -- and even death.

By responding today you can help immediately secure and begin shipping Christmas shoes to 150,000 children around the world just in time for the holidays. Your gift of \$36 will help provide ten pairs of shoes. A gift of \$72 will help provide 20 pairs. And the gift of \$180 will help provide 50 pairs of Christmas shoes for children in need.

With your gift of any amount, be sure to request this beautifully crafted crystal shoe ornament, a treasure to place on your tree each holiday season. With your gift of \$180 or more you may also request this keepsake boxed set of LIFE's Christmas shoe ornaments.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,000 or more to help provide over 275 pairs of shoes or two children with corrective cleft palate surgeries and you may request our "Determined Eagle" bronze sculpture. Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of clip

On the mission field

James: Well, we literally stopped by the road where I say we knew we would bring them shoes and I'm confident that we will because children like these need shoes -- all over the world. It is amazing. You may say, "Why would they stop and let you take a picture with them?"

Well, the truth is they stopped because I just got out and sat down here on the road and smiled at them. And they came over and started sitting down by me.

Then we explained to the parents through our missionary interpreter that our plan was to come right back to this area, this village and bring shoes. So that is our intention. But it is going to take you making that possible.

I'm asking you to give as many pairs of shoes as you can to put on these beautiful, beautiful feet of these beautiful children. Thank you! Thank you for your help!

End of clip

In the studio:

Sheila: Thank you so much. Please keep calling.

And you went from nothing to tremendous blessing. You talked about your struggle with infertility and how many children do you have now?

Jeremiah: Be careful when you have an unanswered question. Be ready for the answer. We have five kids, Lilly Faith, eight, Justin, five, and then, we had triplets. They're just over one years of age, our little Texas cowboys, Abel, Rider and Jackson.

Sheila: May the Lord be with your wife!

Well, for any gift at all that you send today I'd love to send you this book, *Unanswered*. There's also as you see on your screen a Bible study. You'll also find out where Jeremiah is taking his *Unanswered* tour on the road. But I just want to say for today, thank you so much for gifting us with this. Loved it!

Jeremiah: Thank you, Sheila.

Sheila: See you next time! Thank you for being with us.