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Week 48: Fall Mission Feeding

Sheila Walsh

Ruth Graham #1

Sheila: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh and I'm so glad that you have tuned in to this particular episode.

I wonder if you have ever struggled with forgiveness. You might be in a situation where you are like, do not even ask me to forgive -- that's ridiculous. That would not be fair. What they did was wrong. Or maybe you're in a place where you think, I can't forgive myself.

Well, I think today's guest is going to bring some much needed light into any dark spaces. So I just want to welcome Ruth Graham. It's so great you're with us.

Ruth: I'm so happy to be here.

Sheila: And this fantastic book, it's called, *Forgiving My Father, Forgiving Myself*: An invitation to the miracle of forgiveness. I love to read so I usually get to read a lot of books but I have to say this one, I read literally from cover to cover because I knew I didn't want to miss anything. But I wonder if you'd take us to the beginning. You start with this incredibly compelling account of an encounter you had with a man in Angola Prison.

Ruth: Yes. Ruth Graham and friends, which was a ministry that the Lord had given me, with a team of professionals, psychologists, pastors, teachers; and we were invited to go

speak to the prisoners at Angola. And Angola Prison, as you know, is a place where people go for life. They don't get out of Angola; they are hardened criminals, most of them. And I didn't know what to expect. I'd never been in a prison. While we were there, the warden Burl Cain asked if I would go to death row and visit the prisoners there, that our team would go. I said yes because I felt like I had to, but I was scared to death. I thought, I have never been in that kind of a situation. And what did I, as a middle-age white homemaker, have to say to these hardened criminals? And I just said, Lord, you're going to have to take over.

So as we walked through the gates and they clanked closed behind us, and the keys rattled on the guard going the other way. We faced a corridor of cells and concrete floors. So our footfalls echoed. We divided up so we could speak to as many prisoners as we could. And the first prisoner I spoke to stuck out his hand. A little brown hand and he said, "I'm Michael." We talked a bit. I asked about his family.

Sheila: Did you take his hand?

Ruth: Of course! Of course! I knew I was safe. I knew I was safe. Burl Cain would have had it no other way. But I just -- he had deep brown eyes and a warm smile. And he said, "Can I sing you a song?" I thought, oh my goodness! So he stood back and he took a deep breath and sang a cappella, "It is Well with My Soul."

Sheila: On death row?

Ruth: On death row. I knew it was well with him. I could see it in his face and his appearance. Then when we finished and I began to leave he said, "Oh! I have a gift for you." I thought, what does this man on death row have to give me? I want to give him something. But he went and grabbed under his pillow and there was a little woven cross that he had woven out of the threads from his bedsheet. He handed it to me and it's at my house now, always a reminder to pray for those men in Angola.

And we left, said our good-byes and I thought that was the end of it. And about three weeks later... while I was there the national press picked up the fact that I was at Angola and carried it nationally. I got an email from a lady and she said, "Did you really go to Angola's death row?"

I emailed her back and I said, "Yes."

She said, "Did you meet so-and-so?"

And I said, "I don't know. I met a lot of men, I'll have to ask."

So I called Burl Cain and he said, "Yes, you did."

And so I emailed her back and said, "Yes, I did."

And she emailed me, and she said, "Is he a believer?"

I said, "Well, I've got to check with Warden Cane."

So I called Burl Cain back and I said, "Burl, is he a believer?"

He said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, he's scheduled to be executed this month." I thought, oh my goodness.

So I emailed this person back and I said, "Yes. He is a believer. Why are you interested in this young person?"

And they replied, "He murdered my granddaughter in a gruesome way." I thought, oh my goodness!

And she said, "I take no pleasure in his impending death. But I want to know he'll be in

heaven with me."

Such grace! I can only picture... because he was executed later that month. I could only picture him stepping into heaven and seeing a little granddaughter there welcoming him as a brother in Christ. Just a powerful illustration to me of the miracle of forgiveness. Only God could do that.

Sheila: What did that do to you? Obviously, you are Billy Graham's daughter. You probably heard the Bible since you were...

Ruth: Before I was born.

Sheila: Read to you. Yes! But what did that particular story and the story of the grandparents, how did that impact your own life?

Ruth: It did because I had always looked at forgiveness as a way to get healthy emotionally. I thought that it was... We've been told it is a gift we give ourselves. It's a letting go. And at that point, I realized that forgiveness was so much more than that. It really was much more than that and I wanted to know more about it. I wanted to have an experience of that kind of forgiveness where I was changed, where I was transformed like the grandmother and the prisoner.

Sheila: You tell an interesting story that I think a lot of people will relate to of when you were young, and something happened and you ended up getting in trouble for something you did not initiate. Because that's something I've heard from my son when he was growing up, "Mom, it is not fair!"

What do you say to people who say, "You want me to forgive but it's not fair"?

Ruth: It's not fair! It's not fair! I agree with you. It's like in the store, if you break it, you have to buy it. When we forgive it's like, it's broken but we didn't break it but we have to

pay for it. This doesn't seem fair.

But then if you look at the crucifixion. Jesus knows how unfair it was. He was bloodied beyond recognition and beaten -- and really was beaten until he was raw, and then nailed to a cross. While he was being nailed to the cross he said, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." That was unfair but that is holy, that is sacred territory. That is just -- that is more than healthy emotional stuff. It is holy. I think that's important for people to realize.

Sheila: I think that's a powerful statement: Forgiveness isn't fair, it is holy. But you make another statement in the book that I found personally really helpful. You talk about the fact that people will say that time heals wounds but if you don't deal with the wound and you just bury it, you bury it alive. What do you mean by that?

Ruth: It comes back if you don't deal with it. Sheila, forgiveness is a lifelong process. We can say, "Oh I forgive" and go on but within a couple of months emotions will come roaring back and we think, we really didn't forgive them. We begin to beat ourselves up again. But you know, emotions never tell the truth.

Sheila: Oh that's true. They don't have a brain.

Ruth: That's right! So they just are. So we have to get rid of the emotions. We can feel them, but we don't have to live with them. I think it is important to know that. But forgiveness is a lifelong process that takes time. I have worked through forgiveness on so many different levels, so many different levels and found that when we forgive that's the doorway by which the Holy Spirit can enter that decision and enable us to truly forgive. It is not going to happen overnight, it may take a lifetime, but it will happen.

Sheila: How can you tell when you have actually forgiven someone? Are there kind of internal signals that will let you know that you actually have forgiven?

Ruth: Well, it's maybe easier for me to tell you how we can tell how we haven't forgiven. When we see the person who has wronged us and that's the first thing we think of. Or when their name comes up, we want to tell people what happened. Where we can't get rid of what they've done to us. That's a sign that we haven't forgiven. I think when we have forgiven then we're able to be around that person, we're able to talk with that person, we're able to bless those people, pray a blessing on them. And if we're not able to do those things then we need to go back to the cross and say, okay, Jesus.

Sheila: That part of your book, honestly, people, I want you to know this is one of the best books on forgiveness I've ever read. But that really got to me because I thought of a person who really wronged me a long time ago and when I began the process of forgiveness I would say, "Lord, I forgive them, but you know I don't mean it." That was me just...

Ruth: Praying through clenched teeth.

Sheila: Absolutely! But you're right, it is a process. And to me, it is more about faithfulness than emotion. You give a few really helpful things on what forgiveness is not. You say it's... And I'll let you pick up whichever one you want to talk about. You say, "It's not natural. It's not easy. And it's not necessarily, it's not forgetting what happened."

Ruth: We don't forget what happened. My husband was unfaithful for a number of years and our marriage ended in divorce. I haven't forgotten that. To be perfectly honest with you, I was very bitter and very angry. And it wasn't until after his death that something else happened to me wrong and I was weeping and asking the Lord to forgive me. I said, "Lord, please go back to Ted and tell him that I ask his forgiveness." And I know that's not theologically right.

Sheila: Oh, I don't know, I like that.

Ruth: But I thought, God can handle that. And I had to leave it there. So I'm trusting that the Lord did tell Ted that I was very, very sorry and ask his forgiveness.

Sheila: One of the things I found fascinating, you talk about the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation because forgiveness is to do with the one who was offended against but reconciliation, what is that? That demands a change in the offender.

Ruth: Yes, forgiveness is unconditional. Reconciliation is conditioned on the changed behavior of the one who has done the wounding. And if you're the one wounded, you're the one that knows the change. You can't have someone, "Oh he's changed. Oh he's changed." Or he can't come and say, "Oh he's changed. You've got to know that and sense that in your bones. And with counseling, with a pastor's help, then if you want to try to reconcile take it very slowly and very carefully.

Sheila: I'll have to be honest, I was a little surprised when I opened the book to chapter four and began to read. And there I was in all my glory! I mean I'd love you talk a little bit about that. But honestly, it made me kind of heartbroken for you. And you don't present it in a way but it just -- tell me what that was all about.

Ruth: Well, it was interesting because when I got the book and I started reading it I did not realize...

Sheila: This is my book that James and Betty sent to you.

Ruth: Yes. And I had no idea that that wound was there. I began reading and I began to cry. And I thought, Lord, what is this about? And I was so emotional that it took me weeks to write you a note. But mother treated you so well and was so gracious and so loving. And she loved you -- until the day she died she loved you. And I felt like she loved broken people but she didn't want a broken daughter and she certainly didn't want her broken daughter talking about it. She wanted it all covered up. It really was hard. It is very hard.

I thought, well, she gave that to Sheila, why couldn't she give that to me? And she had died since then. So we never got to talk about it. But I know mother loved me, she just did not know how to relate to me.

Sheila: Do you think some of that was a generational thing or a personality thing?

Ruth: I think both. I think mother was very good at relating to young people, but I think it was a personality. She and I -- this is a terrible thing to say, I was very much like my father and maybe that drove her crazy, I don't know.

[Laughter]

And I was more honest. She used to say, "Even a cat knows some things need to be covered."

[Laughter]

So I thought, well, but I have found Sheila, when I've told my stuff, now I'm not telling my siblings' stuff and I'm not telling my mother's or my father's stuff -- I'm telling my stuff. This is not a tell-all book. But I find that when I tell my stuff and I make myself vulnerable, that's when ministry takes place.

Sheila: You talk about making wounds sacred which I love that. I have a chapter in a different book on celebrating your scars as tattoos of triumph. What do you mean by making your wounds sacred?

Ruth: When we give them to God and we say, God, I don't like this. I'm hurting like mad. I don't know how you're going to make anything out of this. But I give it to you to use for your glory.

I remember after my divorce from Ted I was so wounded and so hurt and I was acting out and everything was a mess. And I had a rebound marriage that was just a mess. I remember saying to God, if you can ever use this mess for your glory you are welcome to it. Never dreaming he would -- never dreaming he would. But he has. After I wrote *In Every Pew Sits a Broken Heart* it had such an impact and people related to me in a different way. I'm very grateful. God's called me to be vulnerable and I have not -- people have not always liked it.

Sheila: No. I totally, honestly relate to that. I remember when I went back on the 700 Club after spending a month in a psych hospital, and I basically went on to say good-bye. And they said, "Don't tell people where..."

Now this was not Pat. Pat was really kind to me. But the producers said, "Don't tell people where you were, or they'll never trust you again."

When I said, "I want to share about this."

They said, "Well, it's your funeral."

But in that week, ten days after, I had over 5,000 letters from people saying, "I've never heard anybody tell my story before." But you're right. To me that's real ministry.

Ruth: That's right! That's where the rubber hits the road. We want company along the journey. And when somebody knows that they have experienced the same thing and they've walked this journey with us. And that's what I wanted to do in this book. I wanted people to see the journey that I went through. And what was right, what was wrong, what was ugly, what was messy, and what was biblical and what wasn't biblical. And I wanted to say, all right, come along with me.

Sheila: I loved when I got to the part where you talked about your dad's funeral because I was there that day. I was so blown away by what you shared at your dad's funeral.

Would you tell us that story and what that must have been like that day as you were driving back to Montreat?

Ruth: Well, I was driving home. I had entered a rebound marriage, ill-advisedly against my parent's suggestions and counsel. My mother called me from Seattle, my father called me from Tokyo and said, "Why don't you wait? Let's get to know this man better." But I was so hurting, and I wanted someone to take care of me. I really wanted somebody to take care of me and to make the pain go away. So I entered into this second marriage and within 24 hours I knew I was in big trouble. I stuck around for a little while and then I became afraid of him. And I thought, no I'm not going to stick around for this. And I left.

I knew I had to go talk to my parents. It was a two-day drive and fears multiplied with every mile. What was my life going to be like? What was I going to say to them? What were they going to say to me? I didn't know what my future life was going to be. At that point, I was willing to work at McDonald's and smell like French fries for the rest of my life.

Sheila: Been there!

Ruth: And so when I round up, you've been up to the house and it is up on a mountain side. And I round the last driveway, last bend in the driveway, my father was standing there waiting for me. And when I got out of the car he wrapped his arms around me and he said, "Welcome home."

There was never an "I told you so" there was never any blame or shame. My father was an incredibly forgiving, gracious man. I told that story at the funeral. I didn't want to. I told the Lord, I don't want to tell this story. I'm tired of telling it. But the Lord said as clear as a bell to me, "I gave you your story for my glory. And I want you to tell the story." So I did.

Sheila: And the world's press was there that day. I remember just seeing the banks of...

But honestly, for me personally, it was the most powerful part of the whole tribute to your dad.

Ruth: What it showed what my father was like, that was his essence.

Sheila: Yeah, and how much he loved you. It is interesting. We started by talking about your experience in Angola Prison but there's another Angola that you are very familiar with as we are here at *LIFE Today*. You've actually been in Angola with mission feeding which is a huge passion of ours.

Ruth: Wonderful, wonderful trip that we had. And to see those children line up with their little red dishes and stand in line in the hot sun and the flies and stood for hours waiting for their gruel really. And realizing that was probably the only meal they'd get that day, maybe that week. What a life line that is! So important and so critical to those children. And their little bellies are hanging out and their blond hair, and you don't think of an African with blond hair -- that means they're malnourished. These children desperately need that.

Sheila: And it is something that we are committed to here at *LIFE*. So let me show you a little bit of how you can make a difference. Would you watch this?

On the mission field:

Announcer: Mandalina is weary. For years she has battled an enemy that thrives in the environment she calls home. Despite her most desperate efforts to protect them, five of her children have lost their lives.

Open Captions:

>> The sickness that has taken my children is hunger. I had to sell everything in my house just to help my children survive. But we are still struggling, and we have nothing left.

Announcer: The most recent victim in her home was her four-year old daughter, a dearly loved girl whose greatest joy was helping her mother. Mandalina clings to those memories even as her grief threatens to overtake her.

Open Captions:

>> She was so young, but she always wanted to help me with everything. I remember us cooking and cleaning together. I cry when I think of her. All we have left is suffering and hunger.

Announcer: In the face of such a relentless enemy Mandalina continues to fight all the while caring for her children who have fallen ill because of malnutrition again and again and again.

Open Captions:

>> The future is so dark.

Announcer: This shadow of death has loomed over Mandalina's family and so many others like them for far too long. With your help we can provide a daily bowl of food for all the children in Mandalina's village. The darkness can be rolled away and a bright future can be revealed.

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: The thing that struck me most intensely on my last trip to Africa was sitting with these mothers and realizing, there is no difference between this mother and between me as a mom. I just happened to be born in Scotland and they happened to be born in Africa. I was born into a family where there was always breakfast and dinner at night, and that mom, did you see, she has literally sold everything she had!

And the other thing I saw on our last trip is that these are not mothers sitting around wishing somebody would help them. Most of the women I met get up at 4:00 in the morning to try and scramble for food or to try and find water to cook something. They work so hard all day.

But to bury five children! To bury a little four-year old girl? We had the privilege as a team to walk with some of these women to the places where they had buried their children. Honestly, I felt like I was on holy ground -- and weep with these women.

But the great news is this is not one of those national disasters where there is little we can do. We can change this and that's our commitment through mission feeding. We can do it together. No matter what your budget is, \$30 will feed three children for three months! What can you do with \$30? You can go to a movie and it's gone. But \$30 would feed three children for three months. \$50 will feed five. \$100 feeds ten! And if you've been blessed, if God's blessed you where you're able to do more, \$1,000 feeds 100 children.

Now for any gift at all, I'm going to send you Ruth's book because honestly, it's one of the best books I've read in a long, long time and I believe it will have a significant impact on your life and the life of your family. But what we're asking is would you just join with us? That mother, she said, "When I look to the future it is bleak." But you and I can change that. We can be the answer to her prayers so that they're given a future and a hope.

So please, would you go to your phone? Would you give the best gift possible? You can only give what you've got but if we all do that, we will change the lives of entire villages in Africa. It's our commitment this year to continue to feed thousands of children as Betty has often said, we never want that line to be longer than the food we have to give them. They're waiting with their little red bowls. Let's feed them in Jesus' name. Please call! Just give the best gift you can possibly give.

Begin video clip

Announcer: Mission feeding began with a promise to be there in times of crisis for thousands of hurting and hungry children in their time of need.

Now more than ever we need your help to save lives by feeding and caring for children across the continent of Africa. With food reserves gone and many areas experiencing severe famine, we urgently need to replenish our supplies to reach the 400,000 children who are counting on us. Your gift of love can be the miracle answer to a desperate mother's prayer.

Call now with your lifesaving gift of \$30, \$50 or \$100 that will help feed and care for three, five or ten children for three full months. With your gift, we'll send you the authored worship CD by Anthony Evans. This powerful full-length album includes unique versions of some of today's most cherished worship songs that are sure to uplift and inspire you.

With your gift of \$100 or more please request the "Filled with Faith" and "...Joy" travel mug set. These 12-ounce mugs are crafted with large handles, double-layered insulation and vacuum sealed lids to prevent spills. Each mug includes a message to remind you of God's blessings and faithfulness.

Finally, with your gift of \$1,000 or more to help feed and care for 100 children, be sure to request our commemorative bronze sculpture, "Safe in the Shepherd's Arms."

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

End of video**On the mission field:**

Isak: This is just the beginning of the hungry season and yet, already we're seeing a line

here that is way longer than what we're used to seeing. Far more mothers and children here than what I've seen for a long time. That's terrifies me because what that means is that many of these children may well lose their life.

That's why we have to get Mission Feeding out there into the villages. You see if we get to the villages where these mothers are, if we can meet them there with mission feeding, we can solve this problem where we can guarantee life. Yeah, we fight the battle of life and death out in the village with mission feeding, we guarantee life.

Please, do whatever you can do. Partner with us to help us continue to expand mission feeding and continue mission feeding in the areas we are so that we can guard against mothers and children having to be in malnutrition clinics.

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: Keep calling. If the lines are busy, just persevere. Ruth, honestly, this is an amazing book. Was it a hard book to write?

Ruth: It was a very hard book to write. It's taken me years to write it. But very happy to be able to finally write it and to know that God will use it, I believe.

Sheila: Absolutely! Because honestly, if you're struggling to forgive anyone, if you're struggling to forgive yourself, there's so much wisdom in the pages of this book. So for any gift at all you send to help us with our mission feeding this year, we'll be happy to send you, *Forgiving My Father, Forgiving Myself*: An invitation to the miracle of forgiveness. There is so much to talk about. I would just love it if you would stay and we could do another day.

Ruth: I'd love to! Thank you!

Sheila: Thanks Ruth! Thanks so much for being with us. We'll see you next time on *LIFE Today*!