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Week four: WFL

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Andrew and Norine Brunson

Sheila: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh and I'm here with Randy Robison. I'm so excited. I'm excited for you about this particular show. I, like thousands and thousands and thousands of people around the world, when they heard the name Andrew Brunson, dropped to our knees and began to plead that God would bring this man and his wife home, held in a Turkish prison for over two years. I never thought we'd have the privilege of having him here in the studio. So please, help me welcome Andrew and Norine Brunson.

Randy: I've been excited for weeks. I know you have too. Both of us read his book, *God's Hostage* and I know both of us, we couldn't put it down. In a lot of ways it was not what I expected. It is very honest, it's very raw, it's very human. So glad to have you guys here. How are you doing now a year plus after being released?

Andrew: Being free is wonderful. Being back with my wife, with my children. It was the small things that I really missed. Sitting down on a bench outside with Norine or having breakfast together, going out for coffee and just being able to do those small normal things.

Sheila: One of the things that was really clear from your book is that so often we hear God say something and we think we know the timing, and sometimes the timing is completely different. Because you begin the story by waking up and feeling like God was saying something to you. What was that and what did you think it meant?

Andrew: It really surprised me. He said, "It's time to come home." At first, I didn't know that it was God. I thought, I'm already home. I'm in Turkey, we'd lived there for 23 years at that time and we expected to stay there the rest of our lives. I thought, I'm home. What does this mean? I thought, maybe it means he is taking me home to heaven. And my assignment has been stopped. It's an assignment to prepare for harvest in Turkey.

Then it became we were arrested to be deported. And then I held onto it as God was telling me ahead of time so that I would know that he's in this. So I'm thinking, after 23 years you're going to let them deport us? But there is so many good things happening. But when God said it's time to come home, I knew he was in it.

And then it became a promise that I held onto for two years. God, you said you'd take me home. Are you going to do it? Please do it! You said you would.

Sheila: I wanted to ask you because for the first, I think it was maybe 12-13 days you were both arrested and held. And then they released you. What was that like for you as a wife walking into freedom but leaving your husband behind?

Norine: It was one of the hardest things of my life. Yeah, I called my daughter right after that and I said, "I feel like I've done one of the hardest things I've done."

On the one hand, I have to leave, I don't have an option. I didn't want to leave him behind, but I don't have an option to stay. And it was really better for me to be out to be making all kinds of efforts and seeing what's going on, what can be done for him. But it was very hard because just the night before he had shared with me how that was his fear, was that we would be separated. And we were afraid of, while we were being held, we were afraid of being separated, and then disappearing into the system. We wouldn't know where the other one is, so we just wanted to stay together.

Andrew: And she actually argued with them. Said, "I want to stay with my husband." That really stayed with me. It really touched my heart that she would argue to stay in

prison with me.

Randy: When we pick up these kinds of books because there have been several great books about people who were held hostage for their faith in these missionary countries. We usually think, okay, I'm going to hear about someone who's got an amazing level of faith, who trusted God through everything, who endured through all these trials with a song on their lips and a smile on their face. It's not your story and you're very honest about it.

Andrew: Well, that's what I expected too. I read those stories too and I thought, well, I'm going to have a sense of strength, of joy, and certainly, just a feeling of grace -- a special grace because I'm going through something very difficult and I'm suffering for Jesus. When that didn't happen, especially the sense of presence, because I'd run after presence for years and sensed God's presence in a number of ways and then it was like it stopped. It really shocked me.

Sheila: Did you feel as if God had forsaken you?

Andrew: I did! I thought that he had turned me over and abandoned me. It wasn't true but that's what I was dealing with. Those were my doubts and my questions.

Sheila: When did you realize what you were actually being held for that you weren't about to be sent back to the states, but all these trumped up charges?

Andrew: Well, we never knew really why I was being held because they kept changing the reasons. So it ranged from terror, to being a spy, to helping to plan an attempted coup, all kinds of charges. And they kept changing them.

Behind it all, they knew it wasn't true. There were other reasons. I think the reason they initially held me after they released her was to intimidate other missionaries and have them self deport or to intimidate local Christians. And then they just held me to gain

leverage from the United States. But behind it all, there was a spiritual story going on as well.

Norine: By being held there together 12-13 days, something was clearly wrong.

Randy: You knew something was off. I think that was one of the things he said you said, "Something's off. Something is not quite right here."

I'm curious, as time goes on and Andrew is feeling like God's left him, how did you feel while you were outside trying to work to get him out?

Norine: I mean it was hard. All my thoughts were for him. All my efforts were for him. He was my priority. He became the priority, definitely during that time. Whatever I could do on the diplomatic side, trying to get prayer, keeping prayer going. How can I encourage him? Digging up the prophetic words and saying, Lord, what are you saying here? What are you saying to us?

Randy: Did you feel like you were hearing from God on a regular basis? Or did you feel a sense of detachment like he did?

Norine: No, I didn't feel a sense of detachment, no. I didn't. I didn't. I didn't understand the timing. As you said, the timing was a big thing. I really spent a lot of time just claiming these words, hoping they were from God but claiming them and standing on them. I had to lean into God. I knew that I couldn't do this on my own. So I think in a way that's just a grace, if you have that realization, you can't do it on yourself because it means you're going to be really looking to the Lord.

Andrew: What she should say is that there are things that God has planned for you outside of prison. You have to be outside to make them happen. So there are all these words, but I don't know when they'll be fulfilled. It could be 15 or 20 years down the road, and I didn't know that I could hang on for that long.

Sheila: You paint a very poignant picture in the book though of the days you would just show up and even days when they wouldn't let you into the prison and you would stand someplace where Andrew could see you or your car would be parked someplace where he knew. There was something about that that I found profoundly touching. Your total commitment to your husband for as long as it took.

Did you have friends... obviously, you've been planting a church there for years. Did you have many Christians gathering around you?

Norine: Sure! Absolutely! And the prayer was starting increasingly. So yeah, I was not alone.

By the way, the only place he could see me was from the detention center. Once he got to the actual prison, he was completely cut off. So that was just really difficult.

Andrew: Concrete and razor wire. Yes, I couldn't see her then.

Randy: So we could get into the politics of it all, internal or with the U.S. and Turkey but you also talk about something bigger that was going on. It's a spiritual battle. Tell me a little bit about what you think happened and is continuing to happen spiritually.

Andrew: So I think there were two stories and one is what was in the media with all the political intrigue, the religious persecution, the propaganda campaign the Turkish government had against me saying I was a dark priest, a spy priest, agent priest, C.I.A. Agent, all these things. So there was all of that political intrigue but then behind it is what I call "the God story." This is that God was taking what Satan intended to use to harm me and he was turning it around.

So in 2009 God had spoken to me and said, "Prepare for harvest." And after that everything we did was focused. How do we prepare for a powerful move of God with the

largest unevangelized country in the world, which is Turkey? Most Turks have never met a Christian. Most cities don't have a church. So in 2016 when they were going to deport us, they arrested us for deportation I thought, God, have you canceled this assignment? We're supposed to prepare for harvest. Did I do something wrong? What happened?

And then as the imprisonment dragged on, we began to hear of so many people praying around the world in huge numbers with great intensity for the entire time I was in prison, and in a number of countries. We began to see, wait, God is doing something amazing! I'm sitting in a Turkish prison cell weak and broken and just trying to hang on and he's doing something powerful and raising up millions of people around the world to pour prayer into Turkey. So I came to see that my imprisonment was actually part of my assignment to prepare for harvest.

Norine: So what we like to tell people is to... And by the way, we want to thank all the listeners who prayed. We're just so grateful. We wish we could tell everyone face to face. But what I'd like to say to people is keep an eye on Turkey now, watch what's going to happen because I believe these prayers, they were for much more than his release; and they're for the spiritual release for so many people. So I believe we're going to see that.

Andrew: By the way, this was also very scary also because I came to see, I'm of much more use to God in prison than out. He might keep me here.

Randy: For a season! For a season!

Sheila: But it is interesting though, Andrew because you, as Randy said, you're very transparent, very honest which I found really helpful and easy to relate to. But you do show the way that it's almost like you're going in circles but each time your faith is going a little deeper and a little deeper. When you look back, I was wondering, what was your hardest moment and what was your most glorious moment?

Andrew: Well, I had a number of hard moments. What happened is I would get knocked down and then I would begin to battle toward a point of submitting my will to God; of saying, I don't like what's happening, but I want to leave my life in your hands. If you want me to be in prison for a time, then I want to accept this and just submit myself to you. And I'd finally get to that point and then I'd be knocked down again to something harder, I'd fall deeper, and then I'd start to crawl back to that point. So it was like a roller coaster.

One of the worst times after I'd been in prison for about 11 months, I was called into a court session and they increased the charges against me so that I had an automatic three life sentences in solitary confinement with no parole. And this just felt like a death sentence to me. And I'd been trying to focus myself on God now for several months and fighting for my faith, for my relationship with God and this just knocked me down.

But then within a couple of weeks from that, I wrote a song that I sang every day in prison after that. One of the verses said, "I want to be found worthy to stand before you on that day with no regrets from cowardice, things left undone." And this became my prayer, my daily prayer thinking I'm going to stand before Jesus some day and I don't want to have regrets. That Jesus says to me, "I had assignments for you, I had an inheritance for you to win, victories for you to win and you didn't because of cowardice."

And so then I started to fight every day to say, Oh God, I don't want to be in prison but if this is an assignment for me then give me the strength to endure, to persevere in it. And it became my daily battle.

Sheila: Do you know how many people knew about that song? I mean I don't know if you realized it was posted. Yeah, it was posted on social media. And it was... I mean the words were phenomenal. It touched so many of our lives.

Andrew: So let me say this was a heart song and I was singing it, surrounded by concrete and razor wire under three life sentences. So people would write to me

sometimes and say, "Be like Paul and Silas." Because they sang when they were in the Philippian jail. And I'd think, well, they were only there for one night.

[Laughter]

But I would also think, we don't know how they were singing. Were they just full of happiness? Or were they giving the sacrifice of praise?

So for me, I didn't feel good. I was under the three life sentences. I thought I wouldn't see my children again, I'd be separated from Norine for the rest of my life and die in a Turkish prison. So I didn't feel good, but I was saying, Oh God, I need to worship. And it's that worship and submissions in that hardship that is so precious to God.

Randy: You've got some advice, and I marked this because I thought, well, that's really good. Because it is easy, I think for Christians to encourage each other in slightly cliché or not realistic ways. You said this is the best advice you got: "Just breathe. Keep your eyes on God. That's all. No other expectations. Just breathe and you will come through." I think a lot of people need to hear that. They don't even have to be in a Turkish prison to need that encouragement.

How much did that idea of just cling, just cling and get through get you through?

Andrew: It helped me a lot because some other people are saying, and I understand why they're saying it, preach! Just preach the gospel or sing like Paul and Silas and worship your way out.

Norine: And actually, he did all those things. Actually he shared his faith. Actually he sang every day. And actually there were many, many victories. And in court he forgives, and he shares the gospel. So there were many. Go ahead.

Andrew: But there was like Oh God! But it felt like I'm just barely hanging on. I'm

fighting just to survive and cling to my relationship with God. I don't feel like going out and singing. And for the first months I tried to sing, "Great is thy faithfulness" and I would choke up. I just had too many questions and doubts. But this just kind of relieved me of this burden of having to live up to all the heroic people I'd read about and just focus on just breathe and look at God. Just keep my eyes on him. And as long as I do that and just wait for him.

Randy: How is your perception of God changed or has it in the last three years?

Andrew: Yeah. Every means that I use to develop and cultivate intimacy with God, and this is what I was focused on for years, every one of them was severely tested. But in the end I came out stronger in my relationship. I said I experienced the silence of God for two years. I had no sense of his presence which was very, very difficult for me. I thought, I'm being persecuted. I understand persecution. I don't like it but where are you, in my darkest time?

But I came out of it. What surprises me was I felt that lack of intimacy like I was in a desert, where are you God? And why your silence? Where is your presence? And yet, after two years I came out with a deeper intimacy.

And I think it came from this. That my love for God can be completely sincere and real but until it's tested it is not proven. It is real and sincere, but it is not proven. And I came out of this thinking, okay, my love for God has been tested now. And I showed him that I love him. And he showed me, he let me see what's really in my heart, that in my heart I am devoted to him, I do love him, and I was faithful to him. And this gave me this tested love, this tested faithfulness that gives me a different sense of confidence with him. It's a different sense of confidence in my relationship with him.

Randy: What about you?

Norine: I would say the same thing, but it came about in a roundabout way because

again I had different expectations even for the days that I was held. I mean there was a... It wasn't panic, definitely, there was an amount of peace but not as much as I would have expected or hoped for. And I was surprised.

So what Andrew talks about is unfelt grace. For example, in the court, when he's testifying in front of it, I could see God's grace on him so clearly. But he didn't feel any of it. I could see the result of it.

So I guess it was, there are things about God that I knew wrongly, basically. And one of my prayers before this and during this is, Lord, let me know you as you are, as you really are. Not as I imagine but let me know you as you are.

Randy: I think, maybe even more than you realize, your life has demonstrated the gospel even when you didn't necessarily feel it. It was there. And you've shown it to all of us. I just want to say thank you for that.

Sheila, there is something I want our viewers to see where we have another opportunity to demonstrate the gospel, the truth, the grace, and the love of Christ through something very important. Would you take a minute to watch this?

On the mission field:

Announcer: Nothing draws nature and mankind together as swiftly or as contentiously as a water source in a barren wilderness, all clamoring to have their most basic needs met.

Open Captions:

>> I sent my daughters to draw water with two other friends. But before her friends were able to help her, she was dragged away by a crocodile. After searching for three days, we found only half her body floating in the water.

[Weeping]

Announcer: Every living creature in the area shares the water source for this village. Its banks are ground zero for all the drinking and bathing and waste. And although they avoid the river during the most dangerous hours, this is not the first time the village has experienced such a tragedy. They can't escape the waters danger. Either meeting it at the river or taking it home in buckets laced with bacteria that threatens every life. But what choice do they have?

Open Captions:

>> Going to the river is so painful. It reminds me of my daughter. But I have to go. Now I'm so afraid to send my other children to go get water. But if we had a well, we would be so grateful. We would have no more diarrhea and our children would be safe.

Announcer: Ida has no options. Nothing she can do to ensure the safety of her family. Her hands are tied but ours are not. There is a way to rescue Ida and her family and we can do it together.

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: Thank you so much! If the lines are busy keep calling. And for any gift at all you can request Andrew's book, *God's Hostage*. It's so, so, so good!

Randy: So good! I just want to thank you guys for being here, for opening up. Would you thank Andrew and Norine Brunson for being here? I appreciate everything you guys have done for the body of Christ and look forward to the great things God has in store for you.

And for you! Join us again every day.

Sheila: Keep praying for Turkey. Don't forget keep praying for Turkey, that God's spirit

will break out and they'll begin to see the miracles that God's already promised them.

See you next time on *LIFE Today*!