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Week 17: Spring Mission Feeding

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Carol Kent

Sheila: Hi! Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Sheila Walsh here with my co-host, Randy Robison. I'm really excited about today's guest. Please welcome our in-studio guest, Carol Kent.

Carol: Thank you! Thank you.

Randy: I dare say, Sheila, that maybe one of the reasons you haven't read a book like this is because most marriages aren't tested quite like theirs.

Sheila: Yeah. But I think that's really true, Randy but I also think that everyone at some point is going to face something. Because your book is called *Staying Power: Building a stronger marriage when life sends its worst*.

Now most of our viewers will be familiar with your story but for those who are perhaps new, would you just give us kind of the cliff notes?

Carol: Well, Sheila, I married Gene Kent and I had a very happy life with him. He wasn't perfect but he was a good man. And we raised an only child. Our son grew up, went to the Naval Academy, made his parents proud; and made a whole lot of right choices. He loved the Lord, he loved his country, and he wanted to do something that would matter with his life.

He married a previously married woman with two little girls and there were multiple allegations of abuse involving the biological father. During that first year of marriage, the biological father only had supervised visitation but he'd been behaving well and it appeared he was going to get unsupervised visitation. And something snapped in J.P.'s brain and he wound up doing the unthinkable! We got a middle of the night phone call, one year into their marriage telling us that our son had been arrested for the murder of his wife's first husband. And we went through two and a half years and seven postponements of the trial.

I still find myself reliving the agony of hearing the judge ask him to stand. And then the verdict was read, "We, the members of the jury find Jason Paul Kent guilty of murder in the first degree." And I still can hardly get through that.

Florida is a state of mandatory minimum sentences and that's where we live. And so we instantly knew what the sentence would be because the death penalty had been removed. And the judge said, "I sentence you, Jason Paul Kent to live out the rest of your natural life in a Florida state penitentiary without the possibility of parole." And the gavel came down.

The news media was there, and I could feel the cameras zooming in on a weeping mama. It felt like the worst invasion of privacy of my entire life. I could hardly breathe. And we got back to April's home. I just remember holding each other and weeping.

And the phone rang. It was Jason. He said, "Mom and dad, when I got back to the jail, they brought me back to the faith-based area of the jail."

He'd been there so long he was now the cell coordinator in the faith-based area of the jail and many maximum-security inmates had come to faith. And he said, "The word of my conviction and sentencing had already reached there. And these big old maximum-security inmates were sobbing, and they said, 'Jason! If a man like you got a sentence like this, man, there is no hope for us! There is no hope!'"

He said, "Mom and dad, God gave me the ability to stand up and preach. And I said to those men, 'If we walk in freedom in this lifetime or in the next, we will still one day walk in freedom if we know Jesus.'"

And I knew he was going to be okay.

Sheila: His prison became his pulpit.

Carol: It has! And Sheila, I can hardly say this without tears, it's been 20 years. I've watched my young 25-year old son grow to be a 45-year old man now, gray along the temples, like his mama should be but I have a little help with that. My secret is yours as well. But we have watched Jason repent and ask for forgiveness and seek to live a life that matters.

But our marriage got hit with what we felt was the worst crisis that could ever happen. And I know there are so many couples who due to a child born with a disability or financial stress or they're caring for an aging parent or they have a child struggling with gender issues, and they are struggle in so many ways, maybe with a drug addicted child or an incarcerated loved one, maybe a health issue or an accident that has totally changed the rest of their lives and they say, "Is our marriage going to survive this?"

And we started to realize that there are a whole lot of marriages out there that are "okay," maybe even "pretty good" but when they get hit with a crisis, how can they make choices that will wind up strengthening and building that marriage instead of allowing it to crumble and end in divorce?

Sheila: So you've walked this path for 20 years, and along the road you have picked up diamonds and you have put them in this book. So I want us to get as many of them as we possibly can. You talk about making commitments like, "We're in this together."

Carol: Absolutely! If we are not in this struggle together, we are already dead on the vine in terms of emotional closeness. We started as a couple to minister to each other. Gene did that. He knew my heart was hurting so much. He brought me coffee in bed every morning. Sometimes we couldn't even speak because we were in so much pain. And he would bring me that cup of coffee, and then he would put his hand on my arm, or he would rub my feet, which is a real gift. And without words he was saying, "Honey, I love you. I know this pain is unspeakable but we're going to make it because we're in it together." So that was a huge thing.

And to any couple out there struggling, make the decision to be not doing this your own way, hurting in your own private way, do it together and you will discover that it will help a lot.

Randy: You said you ministered to each other. I know a lot of people went, "That's too lofty!" "That's too hyper spiritual." Or "Maybe I'm just a baby Christian. I don't know what that means!" But then you defined it in your terms, which was, "He brought me coffee." Now I think a lot of people think of ministry as being way up here but bringing somebody coffee, that's like...

Carol: It's in the little things. It's in those tiny little things. He knew it was very hard for me to handle the calls from relatives and friends because we have a lot of dear people in our lives and it would take an hour to explain everything that happened because they loved our son too. He knew that would absolutely leave me, not only in tears but a mess on the floor. So he would take those calls knowing he was sparing me from weeping and feeling the grief of every person who listened.

And then one of the chapters, Sheila is on making the next right choice. Because when you're going through the tough stuff, it is very hard to make decisions. So we started to talk about making pre-decisions before our next crisis hit. One of those pre-decisions was that we promised that we would respect each other's advice and listen without always talking immediately afterwards.

Sheila: That's good advice for any marriage!

Carol: And that was extremely helpful to us. And then we decided that another important thing is that we needed to forgive instantly based on the fact that we loved each other, we knew we wanted our marriage to make it, we knew that visiting a child in a maximum security prison for the rest of our lives, since it is life without parole, was going to be hard. That we needed to, when there were little issues, forgive right away. We called it "Choosing to be unoffendable." And that's a really important thing. Like even if he gets on my nerves, which he does occasionally, today, I'm going to choose to be unoffendable because I know his heart toward me is something that is precious. And I know he didn't do it on purpose.

Sheila: You talk about... Sorry, Randy! You talk about choosing your words. Honestly, Carol, that really spoke to me because I've discovered sometimes with my husband, I respond out of negative things from way before I ever met him. And that part of your book really spoke to me about understanding his heart and being careful about the words that I use.

Carol: It is so important to choose the right words because some words we can't take back. I'm a preacher's kid and I will never forget my dad telling about working with a couple who had been in a very serious automobile accident. The man was able to walk away but his wife was in intensive care for a long time and had terrible facial scarring from the accident. And once in a heated argument he looked at her and said, "You old scar-faced woman. Can't you do anything right?" And she said from that moment on, any time he looked at her whether it was during a time of intimacy or when they were just in conversation or with friends out for coffee or dinner, when he would look at her she envisioned that he saw her as unattractive, ugly, and something that was not a pleasure to be around.

So some things that come out of our mouths cannot be taken back with just a little

thought, well, I won't say that again. It hurts for the long run and we need to think twice before we choose the *wrong* words.

Randy: What I was going to say before and it applies to this as well, when you look at these things, refusing to be offended, automatic forgiveness, and being that careful with your words, it's very difficult to go through this life without those things coming at us. But I hear a little bit, I think, of the marriage being a sacred place, a special place where we can't afford that kind of grace to that person that God has put that close to us and expect it, hopefully back.

What is it about the bonds of marriage that allow for these things to happen and to create a better environment?

Carol: Randy, I really believe that my long marriage to Gene Kent, even before Jason's arrest, helped to build a foundation for that. Out of that grew something that we call in one of the chapters, "Serving while Suffering." Sometimes in the middle of our pain we think, well, I better quit ministry. I had that thought from the enemy. Well, Carol, you're the mother of a murderer, you can never stand up with your Bible in your hand and tell people Jesus lives and he can take care of your problems. Because look what happened to you and look at the bad choice your son made."

And I just want to say, tell the enemy to be gone! Greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world. And so we started to stand in these two-hour long lines to get through the security process to get into the prison...

Sheila: You do that every week.

Carol: We do it any Saturday or Sunday we're home. And that is hard labor in the hot Florida sun or in the torrential rain. And we started to meet families of inmates. And out of that we birthed the nonprofit organization, Speak Up for Hope.

One of the more humorous things that happened is that I noticed that Gene's pile of black T-shirts was getting shorter and shorter. Now I know dryers eat socks, but I don't think they eat black T-shirts. I said, "Honey, what's happening to your T-shirts?"

He said, "You'll find out soon enough."

Well, the next weekend we were at prison visitation and a woman was turned away because she had a sleeveless blouse on and that was a new regulation: No sleeveless blouses. And I saw her sobbing. And it is 20 miles to the nearest store, after you've waited in that two-hour long line. So that is a hard thing to hear that you're rejected.

Well, suddenly I realized Gene had left his spot in the line and he was out in the parking lot. I saw our trunk open and out came a black T-shirt. He walked it over to the woman. He said, "Here, ma'am. Put this on and go to the front of the line. Have a wonderful visit with your family member today. It is my gift to you."

And I saw her put that on and get through security. Well, he came back to where I was standing in the line. I said, "So that's what's been happening to your T-shirts!"

He looked down and said, "It's my ministry."

[Laughter]

And the next month I was in Wisconsin speaking at an event and I told that story. One month later there was this big box on my porch, and it was filled with black T-shirts. And there was a note inside. It said, "Dear Carol, I heard you tell the story about what happened with your husband's T-shirts. I work for a company that makes T-shirts so I can buy them very inexpensively. Please use this box of shirts for your husband's T-shirt ministry through his trunk distribution program. We hope it helps some people!"

Sheila: That's fantastic!

Randy: But that's exactly what your point was early. It is the little things.

Carol: Yes! Serve while suffering.

Randy: And that's a big part of it. We oftentimes think ministry is too far out there or I'm unqualified or I'm too much of a mess. And you're saying, no, there is something you can do to change someone's life. What kind of fruit have you seen from that?

Carol: Oh, and Randy and Sheila, all we have to do is look around and find one person who needs help worse than we do. And when we do a tangible act of loving kindness in Jesus' name, we get so blessed in the process. We're getting so that when we drive up to the prison, we see the water tower and we start to pray out loud in the car and we pray big. We say, "O Lord! Would you be big in that prison today? We pray that as we enter the doors, the spirit of almighty God will be evident to everybody in this place. Lord, help them to feel your presence here!"

And one day a lady came up to me and she said, "Is this Jason Kent? That Jason Kent I read about?"

And he said, "Well, ma'am, I'm Jason Kent." He said, "I'm Jason Kent."

And she said, "Thank you! Thank you for being a light in a dark place. This place is different because you're here because you have the spirit of Jesus in you."

And so I'm realizing that no matter what hits us, we can find hope and help. And Sheila, we built, what we call "Crises Help Sheets" into this book.

Sheila: And this is the best bit of the book.

Carol: Oh tell me about it! It is the crisis help sheets about whatever you're dealing with.

Maybe you're raising your grandchild. Maybe you are taking care of your aging loved one. Maybe you're dealing with the incarceration of that loved one. Or you are dealing with all of those things that happen when there are financial issues. But the 13 crises help sheets will give you how to's of where to go on the day you hit the crisis and where you can find resources and help immediately.

We not only want to help people practically, we want to help couples spiritually. So each chapter has questions. Some of them have little quizzes you can give each other so you get to know each other, and you'll love a lot as well as get biblical truth in there. But we hope this is a book that people will use in their small group studies, and that they will grow closer and that that marriage bond will be stronger because with him we can be stronger together.

Sheila: Oh that's beautiful! And you say it's okay to have guilt-free time outs.

Carol: Yes! And you know what? As a first born obsessive, compulsive, repulsive person occasionally, I find that it's hard for me to take a timeout because I have things to do and I have to meet these deadlines. And I'm running off to speak and have to get ready to go to the airport so timeouts are hard for me to take.

And I discovered when you are going through tough stuff that hits your marriage from the outside, if you don't take a break, you will break in two. One of the things that you can do is just go outside and take a deep breath. Gene and I started walking three miles a day on our at-home days and we turn those into prayer walks.

So we'll be walking along and people who are watching us probably think we're crazy, but Gene will start, and he will say, "Lord, we thank you for the beauty of this day!"

And I'll say, "Lord, we praise you! You are the one to whom nothing is impossible!"

And then Gene will say, "Lord, would you take care of my 91-year old mother today

because she is really feeling lonely."

And I'll say, "Lord, would you just help Jason to have a divine encounter at the prison so he can use his leadership and his biblical wisdom to help another inmate?"

And we'll go back and forth, and it strengthened our marriage to take these timeouts and to do these prayer walks.

And the other thing that is important is that when one of you is strong, often the other one is feeling weak. So give each other a break. Maybe on the day your spouse is really struggling, you say, "Honey, I'll hold down the fort today. I'll deal with our autistic child who is really getting on the last thread of my last nerve today, you go take a break."

Or he'll say, "Honey, go out with your girlfriends for lunch." It is so important we make time for timeouts.

Sheila: Well, the book is called *Staying Power*. It is fantastic. The appendix in the back is worth the price of the book. It is phenomenal! We'll let you know how to get hold of that.

But we want to take you to a place where there is real stress and real struggle right at the moment -- South Sudan. And I'm thinking that you and I can do something to change it. Would you watch this?

On the mission field:

Announcer: In South Sudan, at this very moment, families' lives have been devastated by floods, followed by drought and civil conflict. The end result is food supplies have been depleted. These mothers have gathered this day so our medical teams can assess the severity of the malnutrition that's impacting their children.

Isak: It is quite amazing as you walk in here and you're just looking at mother after mother after mother, child after child, you see how so many of these kids just kind of, there is a blankness in their eyes. There is a lethargic-ness. There is a quietness about them. There is a stillness about them. They look at you in your eyes and as they make eye contact you see that they are just lethargic.

That's because they don't have food. We've spoken to these mothers. Mother after mother tell us, their biggest single challenge here is that they have no food. That is why what is going on here is a crisis of epic proportion. And when we find this, we need you to react in an epic way. We need you to do something out of your heart that is as big as what this crisis is. Because without that, we're unable to meet these families' needs. We're unable to help these precious little children. And if we don't help them, they die. Yet another statistic, yet, another child that dies because of malnutrition or starvation.

To many of us, not a name, not a child we know, but to this mother and all the other mothers here, their child dies as a child with a name. Their precious little baby! Their little life that they would do anything for, just as you would do anything for your child.

So please, I'm asking you today from the bottom of my heart, help us. Help us to help these mothers. We're here but we can't do it without you.

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: You know the situation in South Sudan is absolutely desperate at the moment. These mothers and their children, they have been chased from their home. They have nowhere to go. And no matter where they go, they then discover that there's militia on the way and they are not safe.

You might be surprised looking at that, that some of these children don't look as

malnourished as some of the children that we show you. When we were in Angola in the malnutrition clinics and those little ones are desperate.

But what you need to understand is these little ones that you just saw in South Sudan, they're about four or 5 weeks away from that. Because if they have nothing, if they have no food... one of the things that we noticed with all the mothers, that they were running away with everything they could carry, they had no food. When these children have nothing to eat day after day and try to sleep at night with an empty belly, it's not a long walk between what you saw there and what we see when we go to the malnutrition clinics. That's why we want to intervene now and do something now, Randy.

Randy: Yeah, Sheila, for years we have been on the forefront, wherever the need is, whether it is in South Sudan or other countries where there's drought or famine. *LIFE Outreach International* has said you know what? We're not just going to proclaim the love of God, we're going to demonstrate the love of God.

We can only do that with your help and that's why we like to come to you during this time of year and say, you know what? \$30 will help feed three children for three months -- \$100 will help feed ten children for three months! \$1,000 -- that's 100 children. You can do the math, it's very simple. But the important thing is that we come together, and we do something.

We reach out and we say, you know what? We are, Lord, your hands. We are your feet. We go to where the difficulty is. We extend that hand. And there is something in that hand. In this case, it is a bowl of food.

Right now we have a lot of empty bowls. We need you to join with us to fill those bowls so that we can fill the stomachs of those children, so we can prevent the malnutrition from setting in in some cases or so we can turn it around in many cases and save lives. When you join with us today, go online, go to phones, do what you can, there is no gift that's too large, there is no gift that's too small because it all puts food into the stomachs

of children who will go hungry and likely starve.

And I know, Sheila, you've seen it. I've been there. I've watched them die. I have watched children die in Africa. I don't ever want to do that again. So I will boldly come to you and say, do the best that you can. Let's save lives through mission feeding.

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 350,000 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 life saving 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 *Global Impact of Life Journal*. This softcover journal includes pictures from the mission field and inspiring scriptures as a reminder of your impact in giving to bless lives around the world.

With your gift of \$100 or more, please request the *Global Impact Bible*. This English Standard Version presents a fascinating guide to the impact of the bestselling book of all time filled with quotes from well-known figures, photographs and reproductions of fine art. It highlights the many surprising ways scripture has shaped civilization.

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, "A Mother's Strength."

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

End of video

In the studio:

Randy: The biggest ministry sometimes is in the smallest of things.

Carol, we appreciate you being here. Before we let you go, I just want to ask how Jason is doing today after so many years both in prison and in ministry.

Carol: I'm so excited to tell you that he is living for the Lord in a very unlikely place. I call him my missionary on the inside. He teaches Bible studies. Right now he's teaching in the reentry program. He is teaching men financial management. He's been president of the Toastmasters on the inside. They call it "Gavel Club," teaching men communication skills. And he mentors individual men and leads them to Jesus and encourages them in their faith.

I know he sees this as a mission. And then he points out people, we can help with a little gift into their inmate fund so that when they don't have the basics of personal hygiene and postage stamps we can help out. But he is vibrantly serving Jesus. And he says, "Mom and dad, if I never get out in this lifetime, one day we'll all walk in freedom and we'll be free then and its okay."

Randy: Isn't that amazing? Don't y'all love that?

Sheila: And remember, for any gift at all, we will send you *Staying Power*, Carol's book. Carol, thank you so much for being with us. We love you!

Carol: Sheila, thank you. I love you! Thank you, Randy!

Sheila: We'll see you next time. Thanks so much for being with us!