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Week 34: Christmas Shoes and Smiles

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Alice Marie Johnson

Randy: It's so good to have you. And oh my goodness! Sheila, what a story.

Sheila: Our guest today is phenomenal. How you go from being a mother of five, manager at FedEx to suddenly finding yourself given a sentence of -- a toe tag sentence basically, life without the possibility of parole.

Randy: Unbelievable! I saw this lady's story and I said, "We have to have her on *LIFE Today*." And she is now here. Would you welcome Alice Marie Johnson to *LIFE Today*?

Sheila: Miss Alice!

Randy: So good to have you. It's kind of a miracle just seeing you here because as far as society was concerned you were locked up for the rest of your life.

Alice: I was hidden away, given what is called an unexecuted sentence of death. I was told that the only way that I would leave prison would be as a corpse. That is the only way that I was told that I would ever rejoin my family.

Randy: How did you get to that point? Because you did make some mistakes.

Alice: I did. I take full responsibility for the mistakes, bad decisions, bad choices that I made in life. As she was saying, I was a manager with FedEx. I worked for them for ten years and I lost my job. My life started spiraling out of control. I got involved in gambling. My house was about

to be foreclosed on. I filed bankruptcy. I had five children and absolutely zero child support, me and my husband had divorced recently, and I was given an offer from hell, I can now say it was an offer from hell, to be involved in a drug conspiracy. My role was to be what is called the telephone mule; that means that I passed messages, telephone numbers from one party to the next party. They don't know me and I don't need to know them.

When everything came to an end and we were all arrested, the ones who literally brought me into this were the very ones who testified against me to receive lesser sentences. I made the decision, bad, bad decision to go to trial. I was offered a very low sentence. My attorney told me I was being offered three to five years. I chose to go to trial, a six-week trial. At the end I was found guilty of conspiracy.

Sheila: Was that a new word? When conspiracy was added into it because for you to be sent away for life for what you did is ridiculous.

Alice: Well, in conspiracy you're charged with every facet, everything anyone ever does in the conspiracy, you're charged with it. So because I went to trial, I was charged with everything. And conspiracy means my charges were attempted possession, never possession because it was mainly testimony and telephone records.

Randy: So just for clarity. You never actual sold any drugs. You never handled any drugs. When they came and raided your home there were no drugs. You literally weren't buying or selling or placing orders. You were passing information via telephone from one party to another, which understandably in the scheme of things is a crime.

Alice: It is a crime and it was wrong, but it did not deserve the sentence. The mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines...

Randy: There are drug dealers that have been in and out quicker than that.

Alice: The ones, the very ones who had long criminal records, they knew the system. I didn't

know the system. So they knew not to go to trial.

Sheila: What was that like when you received that sentence? What happened inside of you, Alice?

Alice: I couldn't believe it. Inside of me, I knew I had come to the very end. And how am I going to survive this? How am I going to live this? When I fell to my very lowest point, Sheila, I think that is a point that I needed to be at the lowest point where there was nothing left of myself. The only place I could look was up and that is exactly what God wanted me to do, is look up and depend totally upon him.

Sheila: One of the things I thought was beautiful is you end up in prison, which is crazy, and this sweet woman in a wheelchair gave you a piece of advice. What did she say to you, Alice?

Alice: She told me, "Bloom where you're planted. God knows where you are."

Sheila: That's huge!

Alice: God knows where you are. And as the scripture says in Romans 8:28 that all things work together for the good for those who love the Lord, for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. And it would be in prison that I would find my purpose.

Randy: So what was your relationship with Christ before, leading up and throughout your life?

Alice: Well, I grew up in a very strong Christian family. I know people might wonder, well, how in the world did you end up walking in this -- how did you end up on this path? When I was 14 years old, I turned my back on church. I literally, my heart was broken over something that I saw in church and I said that this is not -- in fact, I stood up in the middle of the church during revival and announced to the whole congregation, "There is more to God than this!"

Sheila: Woo! That was prophetic!

Alice: That's what I said, I was 14. I said, "I'll never raise my children in church." And I walked out. My mother -- now I came, I was born and raised in Mississippi. My mother was no-nonsense. So can you imagine that shock on my deacon father's face and my choir director mother's face? Mother in the church to hear their daughter, you look around and you wonder, they called me by my middle name, Marie. You could hear a pin drop. And then all the sudden, my mother is marching down through there as I leave the church and I'm headed outside to ask me, "What is wrong with you?" And so she brought me back into church.

I still went to church every Sunday because going to church was not an option. I still went to church every Sunday but in my heart I was no longer a part of it.

Sheila: Until you find yourself behind those locked doors. What happened to your faith in there? Because one of the things that is amazing about your book is the way that God used you in prison. It was like you blossomed in prison. It's like God sent you to prison to set you free.

Alice: That's absolutely right. I never understood, I always loved Jesus all of my life. I grew up just -- I can't remember a time that I didn't love him. I wrote my very first poem at the age of ten years old and my teachers realized I had a gift, I could write, and it was about God. It was called, "Who is He?"

Randy: It's in the book.

Sheila: It's beautiful actually.

Alice: It is called, "Who is He?" And when I went to prison that gift that was lying dormant was stirred up and I picked up my pen. It's like the Lord asked Moses, "What is that in your hand?" It was a rod. And it was that question, what is that in your hand? It's a pen. Use it. And I started writing plays.

Sheila: For the prisoners?

Alice: For the prisoners. I wrote faith-based plays. I wrote all kind of plays but mainly faith-based plays. My first full production play, "The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ." A hundred cast members including artists -- artists, singers, dancers, women who had been told that they could do nothing all of their lives, all of the sudden were being applauded. And can you imagine what that means to someone who has never in their life been applauded for doing something? So they started blooming. And it started having a domino effect all over the prison. I can't tell you just not focusing on myself and focusing on other people.

Randy: I'm thinking that because you could have been writing plays about how the system is bad and people are evil and there is no justice. But yet there is that phrase, "No justice no peace." You didn't have any justice but you had peace.

Alice: I had peace. The first Bible I picked up in county jail that I understood was a N.I.V. Bible, free on the inside. I fell in love with the Word of God. That was the thing that was missing from my life. I knew Jesus, I loved Jesus but I didn't know his word for myself. I only knew what preachers preached from behind the pulpit. So I fell in love with the Word of God.

And when you know that you have been forgiven much, how in the world could I not forgive others? I released everyone, my ex-husband, the people who testified against me, the people, the system that put me there that I knew was unfair, but could I live my life in bitterness? I couldn't. I could not. Because as I've said, it makes -- you have a rottenness of the very soul.

So not only did I embrace forgiveness from Jesus Christ, I gave -- I gave forgiveness. Whether they ever knew I forgave them or not, I really didn't care because that's what set me free and put a skip in my step. And that was something that I minister to other women, let it go. Let it go because you're not destroying anyone. They've gone on with their lives. Do it for yourself.

Sheila: You start the book by telling this dream that you have while you're in prison. You have this dream that some beautiful woman is going to call you and somehow you're going to be free. You lived to see the fulfillment of that dream.

Alice: I lived to see the fulfillment of that dream. All during my time in prison, I'm not kidding, Sheila, Randy, the Lord would give me different dreams. When I'd feel down he'd show me again. But every single dream, all the time, even strangers would come up to me and tell me, "Miss Alice, we dreamed that you were set free. There was cameras everywhere. Media!"

I kept having these media dreams. But in that dream, I shared it with another friend of mine, Josett, when I came home, she shared it back to me the same thing I had journaled about. She said she could never forget me telling her that.

But there was a beautiful woman who I did know who would tell me, who would fight for me to be free, and in fact would tell me that could go home, a woman I had never seen before. And I now know that that was Kim Kardashian. I never knew who Kim Kardashian was.

Randy: How did she know who you were?

Alice: I did a video op-ed and it went viral. Someone who Kim follows tweeted it, retweeted it.

Sheila: Did you even know what a tweet was back then?

Alice: I really didn't. I'm going to tell you something. When they told me that the video op-ed had gone viral, I got scared. I thought I had introduced a virus into the internet.

[Laughter]

Sheila: That's amazing! Because the other thing, Alice that was amazing was clemency was on the line but you had so many disappointments. Reading the book is heartbreaking how many doors kept...

Alice: I didn't just sit around just waiting for clemency. I was fighting. I had exhausted every remedy, appeal after appeal, even a cert to the Supreme Court. Even when laws changed because

they were not retroactive, they didn't apply to me. Laws for people who were just coming into the system would never have gotten a life sentence like I received -- but they were not retroactive. And because there was no parole in the federal system no one would ever hear about what was called "extraordinary rehabilitation" that I had gained while I was in prison.

I had completely clear conduct. I had letters from my warden, letters from my captain, and letters from the staff. Even the women in prison started writing letters to the pardoning attorney and to the president begging for my release because they wanted to see me free too.

Sheila: And that looked like that was going to happen. But on that final day, as President Barack Obama left office and walked up the steps onto that plane and turned around and said good-bye, you felt as if you'd been left behind. But God had another plan. He had a bigger plan.

Alice: I've said this over and over, I was denied, I was not delayed. I was destined for such a time as this.

Sheila: It gives me chill bumps.

Randy: So take us to that time.

Sheila: Kim Kardashian takes up your case, she goes to the White House; Ivanka gets involved.

Alice: Jerry gets involved. And she gets an audience with the president on my birthday, May the 30th. And for seven days, the number of completion, we were in limbo as to whether or not the president would grant my clemency. And on the day that it actually happened, I didn't really think it was real. People were telling me, "Watch the news." I'd gotten so many disappointments. I went in my room and I shut the door. I shut everything out. And it was a Wednesday. And on Wednesdays that's hamburger day.

Sheila: Well hey! You've got to love hamburgers.

Alice: We only had hamburgers every Wednesday. So I went to lunch.

Sheila: A woman after my own heart.

Alice: Yes. And as soon as I took a bite I heard my name being announced over the intercom to report back to my building. When I went back I thought it was an attorney call, my case manager told me I had an attorney call. But when I picked the phone up not only was it attorneys but it was Kim Kardashian on the other end.

Sheila: And what did she say to you?

Alice: She thought I knew. Yeah, she told me, she said, "We did it!"

I said, "What?"

I'm still... it's not registering to me that she's telling me that I'm free. When she told me that I could go home and the other attorneys told her, "She don't know."

She said, "No one's told her?"

She didn't know that I didn't know. And I'm telling you and I've said this, I broke you into a full Pentecostal holy dance in my room.

Randy: I guess so.

Sheila: And how long had you served at that point, Alice?

Alice: 21 years, 7 months and 6 days.

Sheila: I remember watching on the news the day you were released, and I remember only one car was allowed in and your family were waiting outside, and I remember... Tell us about that

moment because you gave glory to God.

Alice: Oh yes! When we pulled out my family was on the other side of the road. I saw all of those cameras and satellites. I couldn't believe it. But just at the minute my eyes were big as saucers passing by them. But when I saw my family, that all disappeared. I ran across the road with my hands up in the air. And as soon as they gave me that mike, I gave thanks and glory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ because he is the one who is with me 24/7.

My family was with me, I was surrounded by friends but it was the Lord who did, who was with me, who I could call upon in the midnight hour. Who I could call upon when I was down and feeling hopeless. He would renew my hope.

Some other thing God would do to let me know that he was with me. When I got that last denial because I tried three times for clemency. On that day that I thought all hope was gone, as I was on my knees praying that morning, trying to figure out what more I could have done, I received a very strong distinct word from the Lord. I can't tell you I heard it audibly but I heard it because I jumped up with a smile on my face from prayer -- from tears to praise right there at my bunk bed on that concrete floor. The Lord said to me, "Jesus is the resurrection."

And so as everyone in the prison would ask me, including staff, "Are you okay, Miss Alice?"

My only response, I didn't even say I'm okay, I just said, "Jesus is the resurrection."

And he showed me that he is the resurrection. Even though it looked like a dead thing, that all of my hopes, everything was dead but in order for there to be a resurrection something has to die. And it seemed like every chance I had to be free was dead. And my sister said to me that the Lord is going to do this in such a way that everyone is going to know that it was him who did it. That it would not be man, it would be him.

Randy: There are many people who are watching right now. Yeah, right! They need that resurrection. I'm here to tell you, if you're that one that you're watching and you're saying, "You

know what? I feel like I'm in prison." Whatever that prison may be, literally, figuratively, spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, Jesus is that resurrection! If you didn't hear anything today, hear that. Jesus is your resurrection.

We want to send you this book right now, *After Life*, the story of Alice Marie Johnson. Because you heard a good portion of it today but you did not hear all of it. We want to send it to you as a gift when you make a gift right now to give life to someone else. Let me show you how to do that. You can be that hope in someone's life today. Watch this.

On the mission field:

[Child crying]

Janice: Is he saying something?

Open Captions:

>> He says, "It's paining."

Janice: I'm in a village in Angola and came upon this child. This little boy is Augusto and this breaks my heart. His little feet are in some of the worst shape I've ever seen. And there are many in this village with horrible conditions on their feet. But this little guy is just scratching; they itch so bad. They're completely infected. He said there's insects that have gotten into his feet. I'll be surprised if he doesn't lose his toe. Then the disease comes in through their feet and just goes throughout their body. It can actually kill them -- all from going barefoot in conditions that we're in right here.

I know *Shoes and Smiles* is a campaign that we get really excited about and it's fun but this is why it's fun, because it saves lives. You would think just a pair of shoes is not life-saving, but in areas like this, in conditions like this, it is. We can change it for Augusto. We can help him. We're going to clean these up and get him a pair of shoes and help him.

Please do what you can. Help bring shoes to little children like Augusto all over the world. You

can be a part of something big -- and something even fun! But this is the reason we do it. Please!

End of video

In the studio:

Randy: Do you know what it takes to give that young boy shoes? A pair of shoes like this -- \$3.60! That is so little to make such a huge, huge difference.

Sheila, this is the last week that we're doing the Christmas Shoes and Smiles. I know we're early as far as the year goes but it's so important that people understand that this is not just simply a gift, it is a lifesaver.

Sheila: Yeah, I was in Angola with Janice, that you saw there in that film piece and when you walk with some of these moms and their children down to where they get water, and these children have no shoes on, and they have cuts on their feet, and then they put their feet into dirty water and often, it is hookworm, which can actually go to a child's brain and take away their life. And all they're asking for is a pair of shoes for their child.

Now we're a little early as Randy said for Christmas but we have to know, it's been our goal to get 150,000 children shoes for Christmas. This is our last week. We can all do something. Very reasonable. For \$36 you can give ten children a pair of shoes. You can't buy shoes for that price over here. For \$180 you can put shoes on the feet of 50 children.

To me, it's one of those things that when Christmas comes around, it gets kind of crazy, the mall gets busy, everything gets kind of nuts. Wouldn't it be a phenomenal thing to do as a family to say, you know what? This year we're not going to do that. Sure, we're going to have fun together but we're going to make Christmas about giving because Christmas is about giving. If God hadn't given us Christ where would any of us be?

Randy: You mentioned the mall. Do you still go to the mall?

Sheila: I don't, actually.

Randy: I don't either. I go online, I click a little bit and boom! A gift arrives. That's what you can do! You can send that gift halfway around the world. Just go online to LifeToday.org, make the best gift you can and this wonderful gift will arrive this Christmas for children who will appreciate it so, so much.

We call it Christmas Shoes and Smiles because there is another part of this. We provide shoes but we also provide smiles, literally giving children the ability to smile as we go in and we work with these surgeons who have so graciously given of their time to fix a cleft lip, a cleft palate, which in third world countries is not a simple thing. It is a very complex thing and it can really put a child at a disadvantage from a health standpoint, from all sorts of stand points. So we can fix that.

That's a \$500 item, a big-ticket item to me but I think there are quite a few of you out there that have the means that can say, you know what? I want to put that smile on a child's face. \$500 will do that for one. \$1,000 for two. Whatever you can do, I think it is that sense of giving, that sense of you know what? We are the expression of the one we celebrate at Christmas -- of Christ.

Will you go online or pick up the phone and give the best gift you can? Give some shoes and give some smiles.

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 often take for granted like a simple pair of shoes. Far too many children living in extreme 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 will help secure and make ready 150,000 Christmas shoes to be shipped and delivered to 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 a gift of \$180 will help provide 50 pairs of Christmas shoes for children in need.

As a thank you for your gift of support, be sure to request this beautifully crafted blue crystal shoe ornament. A treasure to display at each Christmas. With your gift of \$100 or more, you may also request this keepsake boxed set of all *LIFE*'s Christmas shoe ornaments.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,000 or more to help provide 275 pairs of shoes or two children with corrective cleft lip or palate surgeries. And you may request the beautiful "A Mother's Strength" bronze sculpture.

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

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: Thank you so much! Please make your best gift possible. This is the last week. But this is a phenomenal book, *After Life: The story of Miss Alice Marie Johnson*.

I just want to thank you, our dear sister. May God bless you and continue your ministry. Phenomenal! Absolutely phenomenal!

Randy: Thank you so much for being here. And thank all of you for being with us on *LIFE Today*. We'll see you again next time.

Sheila: Remember Jesus is the resurrection!

Alice: Amen!