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Week 36: Christmas Shoes and Smiles

Sheila Walsh

Abby Johnson #2

Sheila: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh. I'm so glad you stopped by. Today I have a guest with me who, honestly to me is one of the heroes of the faith in our day. You may have seen the movie, *Unplanned* or read the book, former Planned Parenthood clinic director who then made a sharp, I don't know whether it is a complete about-turn, and now God is doing amazing things through her life.

So Abby, welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm so glad you're here. We had you on an earlier program but for anybody who perhaps missed that, would you just give us the little elevator speech of what went on?

Abby: Sure! Yeah. I worked for Planned Parenthood for eight years of my life. I was an abortion clinic director there. I left in October of 2009 after a few events, but ultimately left after witnessing a live ultrasound guided abortion procedure and saw a 13-week old baby fight and struggle for his life against the abortion instruments.

I knew then that there was life in the womb, there was humanity in the womb and if those two things were true I knew I was on the wrong side of this abortion debate. So I ended up leaving and have since then been proclaiming life and exposing abortion for what it is. I've really been trying to really speak up about God's mercy and his healing power because since the legalization of abortion, since 1973, there have been approximately 60 million recorded abortions in the United States. That means there are millions and millions of women and men who are suffering, who are hurting from abortion decisions. And they deserve to know about the healing power of God and his goodness and His grace.

Sheila: With everything you experienced, I would have understood if you just wanted to walk

away from the whole thing and have nothing to do with any of it. Instead of that, you have stayed very much in the fight. What do you think so many of those who work in the clinics, what do you think they think they are doing?

Abby: They think that they are helping. They think that they are helping women. I can tell you approximately 70% of those who work in abortion clinics have had abortions themselves. So these are women who are wounded and they believe that they're helping, they're on this sinking ship and they're trying to drag other people on the boat with them.

And so look, abortion is a deep cycle of dehumanization. In order for abortion to be acceptable in someone's mind you have to dehumanize the child. In order to participate in abortion you have to in a sense dehumanize yourself. And so it's this big cycle of dehumanization that takes place in the clinic; that takes place to the mother who is having an abortion, who takes place of the child. So what I'm really trying to do in my work, in my line of work, in my ministry is really trying to bring some humanity back into that cycle to rehumanize the mother, to rehumanize that child, and to even rehumanize the abortion clinic worker.

Sheila: When the movie, *Unplanned* came out what kind of feedback did you get? Because it made quite a splash.

Abby: We didn't know what was going to happen. We didn't even know if it was going to be successful. I thought, well, I know my family will go watch it. [Laughing]

Sheila: We can count on our families!

Abby: Party of ten, I know they'll go see it. But I didn't know how successful it would be. It actually set a record for the most shows sold before... the most seatings and the most shows shown before release in history.

Sheila: Oh my gosh!

Abby: So that was pretty amazing! And then I thought, well, everybody has going to have seen it by the time it actually goes out. But it did very well. It actually was number four at the box office on a quarter of the screens.

Sheila: Wow! That's hugely significant.

Abby: So really, when you think of the math that really makes it sort of number one. Right? So it was phenomenal. The feedback was incredible. Of course, secular critics hated it because it showed the truth of abortion, and we're living in a hurting society. So of course, they hated it. But we knew they were going to hate it. And if I'm totally honest, we wanted them to hate it. Because the more they write about it and the more that they hate it the more publicity it's going to get and the more conversation we're going to have about abortion.

Sheila: You just don't want them to ignore it.

Abby: That's right! We didn't want them to ignore it so it was fine that they hated it. But every single day... it was in theaters for 14 weeks and every single day that it was in American theaters I was waking up to messages from people saying -- I mean every single day! I was waking up to messages from people saying, "Abby, I walked into the theater as a critic, I walked into the theater pro-choice and I walked out pro-life."

Sheila: That's amazing, Abby!

Abby: Or people saying, "I walked in." I was told, "I had an abortion appointment. Somebody told me to go watch your film. I walked in, planning on aborting my baby, I'm now choosing life." And that's why I agreed to do this film. Because originally, when the writers came to me, when the directors came to me and said, "Have you ever considered turning your book into a major motion picture?" I said, "Absolutely not. I have no interest -- no interest in film, no interest in putting my name out there like that. I've done enough. I've been vulnerable enough." It's one thing to put your story on paper, it's very different to see the worst part of you on a screen, and for everybody else to be able to see that. For your parents to be able to see that. I just

thought nope! No interest.

But God kept prompting me. This isn't about you. It's not about you. It's not about you. I thought, okay. I'll do it. Fine! So we did it. Honestly, Sheila, it could be have been about anybody. They could have made the movie, *Unplanned*, a story about Alice Jones. It wasn't about Abby Johnson. This wasn't -- I didn't do this to make Abby Johnson a household name. I did this, I agreed to do this to make God's love and his redemption something that every household knows about.

Sheila: That's fantastic. Tell us about, "And then there were none."

Abby: So after I got out of the clinic and I wrote *Unplanned*. *Unplanned* came out in 2011 and I started getting emails from abortion clinic workers who had picked up the book to read it as a critic, found truth in it, and they said, "Can you help me? I want to leave too."

At the time I thought my gosh, we've been fighting abortion legally for about 40 years. We've got ministries all over the place in the pro-life movement, for women in crisis, for men who have experienced abortion, for women who have experienced abortion. Ministries everywhere in the pro-life movement. Certainly there is a nationwide ministry to help abortion clinic workers who want to leave the abortion industry. I looked around and I found out there was none.

And so I started praying and I said, "God, please put it on the heart of someone to start a ministry for abortion clinic workers."

Sheila: Never pray that kind of prayer!

[Laughter]

Abby: I prayed it and I prayed it for months. I wrote it down in my prayer journal and I was praying and praying and it wasn't happening. And I was getting a little frustrated with God and finally he's like, "Idiot, it's you!" I was like no! I don't want to do it.

So I talked to my husband about it and he says, "Abby, who else is going to do it? Of course you're going to do it. Who else will do it?"

Okay! So I didn't know anything about starting an organization. I didn't know anything about starting a nonprofit. So we got it started and we didn't know how successful it was going to be. Honestly, I went to my friends in the pro-life movement, who are leaders in the pro-life movement. I said, "This is what I want to do. What do you think?" And they all looked at me and sort of laughed. They said, "Abby, that's never going to work. I mean that's a cute idea. That's sweet. Bless your heart." Pat me on the head. "But these people are too far gone." That's what they all said to me.

I said, "Too far gone? What about me?"

And they said, "Well, you're different."

I said, "No. No, I'm not different. I was a sinner in need of a savior. And if you think anybody is too far gone then we must serve a different God because the God that I serve he's in the business of miracles. And the God I serve, as far as I can tell, he loves a good conversion story. I've read the Bible. I've read the Bible and he loves a good conversion story."

Sheila: How did it start? I mean you just made it known?

Abby: We just started, and I just started putting it out on social media that I was going to do this. And in the first year we had about 50 people come to us. We thought we would have ten and we had 50 people. I thought, wow! That's a great start. And now here we are in year eight and we've had 600 workers come to us. And it's not just about getting them out of the job. That's superficial. It's not just about getting them out of a job. It's about getting them out of the job, getting them into a place of healing and getting them into a relationship with Jesus Christ. That's the goal. Because that's where real change happens. That's where real healing happens and that's our goal.

Sheila: What are some of their stories? What have you seen God do in some women's lives?

Abby: I believe every woman that leaves is a miracle in the making. I mean that's what we believe. But I mean we have seen so many miracles take place in this ministry. We have seen people be -- I don't want to sound too hyper-spiritual or anything but we have seen people be healed of physical illness, we have seen marriages restored. Because when you're working in an environment like that it emasculates your husband, because they are anti-nuclear family, they are anti-men. They try to destroy the family. There is definitely a bigger agenda than just abortion going on.

Sheila: What's going on behind the curtain?

Abby: Absolutely. I was very discouraged from marrying my husband when I worked inside of the clinic. I was discouraged from having children. I was constantly encouraged to abort my first daughter, Grace. So it's very anti-family. Trying to constantly destroy the nuclear family. We have seen marriages be saved. We have seen physical healings take place. We've seen people be healed from suicidal thoughts. We have seen people be cured of alcoholism.

I mean just miracles all the time happening in this ministry and it is because people are being removed from this bondage and they're being brought into this new life with Christ.

Sheila: What do you think we as the church don't understand? Or what do you think we got wrong in terms of how we view those who work in abortion clinics or those who go for abortions -- Apart from everything.

Abby: You know, that's a good question. I tell people, it is interesting to me how we see people who sin differently than we do.

Sheila: Oh, isn't that the truth?

Abby: It's funny to me because I was giving a talk one day at a pregnancy center banquet and I was saying how interesting it is, how we look down our noses at a young girl in our church who is unmarried and pregnant while we, after church go and engage in all of our gluttony at a potluck; right?

Sheila: Yes! Where two or three are gathered in his name there will be a casserole in the midst.

Abby: What are we doing? Are we really looking at this young woman and saying, "God is sure disappointed in your sin but not mine?" It's interesting what we've done to each other in the church and how we've hurt one another in the church. And how we're so quick to point out the sins of one another and not look inward.

And I'm not saying that we are to judge bad behavior, that's not what I'm saying. Of course, we are. But I think that sometimes we have chosen to judge bad behavior so much that we've forgotten to love first. I think that we can do better as a church. I think that we can do better. I think we can love better. I've seen it happen in church congregations. I've seen it happen where the congregation really comes together and where they love well. But I believe that it starts in the leadership. I think it has to start in the leadership. I think that we just have to start with being very vulnerable with our own mistakes and our own sin.

Sheila: So it becomes a safe place to tell the truth.

Abby: We just have to tell the truth.

Sheila: What is Love Line?

Abby: So Love Line really is a ministry that I started. It is a crisis line. And this is allowing the church to be the church. There are brick and mortar pregnancy centers all around the country, about 3,000 of them, all around the country and really, their wheelhouse is to -- and they're amazing ministries. They're miracle working ministries. Their wheelhouse though is to intercept women who are in crisis pregnancies and to assist those women until their babies are about two

years of age.

All right. So then what? So then yes, we want to equip them, we want to get them on their own, we want to get them on their own two feet. We want to empower them to be independent on their own but sometimes life happens. And sometimes that mom has a turn of events in her life and she is a single mom and she has a five-year old and a seven-year old and her utilities are about to get cut off. And then what?

We were getting a lot of these calls. I was getting a lot of emails from moms like this -- and dads -- and all kinds of people and all kinds of situations. I said we've got to do something as the church to empower people to lift them up. And then I was hearing from churches saying, "Well, we're running out of our benevolence fund," month after month. So something is not fitting here. We don't need to just hand out cash, we need to get into these people's lives to love them, to be the church, to be Christ to them and to sort of pick them up and to figure out what's going on here.

That was really why Love Line was started. So it is a case management crisis line. And so we're engaging with these women and men who are calling. We're getting into their lives, we're loving them well, and we're partnering with churches in their area, ministries and resources in their area and we're helping to transform their lives.

Sheila: That's long-term.

Abby: It's long-term.

Sheila: Which is beautiful. How can people get in touch with you Abby?

Abby: They can go to AbbyJohnson.org. It's A-B-B-Y Johnson.org. There is a contact link. It goes to me directly. I would love to speak to anyone who has questions, is interested in finding out more about what we're doing.

Sheila: I'm so grateful for you. Any time that Planned Parenthood thought they could put a gag order on you, boy, were they wrong.

[Laughter]

One of the things that we love doing here at *LIFE* as you well know is as Christmas is kind of coming up, not quite yet, but we want to be able to provide shoes for children who have never had a pair of shoes on their feet in their life. And we want to do that in Jesus' name. When you and I decide we're going to do this together we can make a huge difference.

After watching this, I'm going to tell you how you can get a hold of Abby's book. But before that, would you watch this beautiful video?

On the mission field:

Announcer: There is nothing like the sights and sounds of Christmas to bring a smile to one's face, especially to the face of a child. But for tens of thousands of children around the world, there is little to smile about at Christmas time. That all changes when they receive a brand-new pair of shoes -- many for the first time in their lives.

Without shoes these children must face the very real challenge of disease and infection entering their bodies through their feet. A very real danger is being infected with hookworms that can lead to stunted physical and mental development.

The smiles on their faces upon receiving their new shoes reflects the joy of Christmas that comes from giving to those in need. And yet, there are still others that cannot share their gratitude because they simply cannot smile without corrective surgery for cleft lip or palate. Now you can help bring smiles to so many with a gift these children will never forget no matter if they smile for a season or for a lifetime.

Won't you please consider making a lasting difference in the lives of these precious children? There is a child waiting for someone to help them smile this Christmas. You can be that special someone to give them a smile.

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: Gosh, can you imagine what it would be like to have a little one and they can't smile because of a deformity in their face? And the thing that I love about this particular campaign is that you and I can change that. We have some amazing doctors on the ground who will do these corrective surgeries for \$500. I have no idea what that would cost normally in the states. But to do that for \$500 and to change the life of that child. When you see that kind of deformity whether it is cleft lip or cleft palate, the child can't swallow properly. So many cultures, so many villages when children are born like that, they're seen as cursed by God and they're kind of kept to one side and not allowed and grow up and be a normal child.

But you and I can change that. And I know it probably feels like a little bit early to be showing you Christmas trees and presents but that is very intentional because it is our commitment this year here at *LIFE Today* that we want to be able to provide a pair of shoes for 150,000 children. And it will literally be the first pair of shoes they've ever had in their life.

This is one of the campaigns, it is very doable. There is an entry level for every single one of us. Do you know that for \$36 you can provide ten pairs of shoes for ten children? That's amazing! For \$72 you can provide 20 pairs of shoes. Now perhaps you watched the images of those little ones who had the corrective surgery and how they looked before and you think, that's what I want to do this Christmas. For \$500 you can do that.

And for any gift at all, we'll send you this year's little Christmas shoe. It is beautiful cobalt blue crystal. It is absolutely lovely. I know you don't do it for the gift, but it is simply our way of saying thank you. Even though it is a little bit before Christmas, we're getting in early because

we want to make sure that we're able to send all the shoes and get them there before Christmas day and bring smiles to a lot of children who have never had a pair of shoes in their life.

But not only that, can you imagine? It would be like a miracle for a mom who holds her baby for the first time and sees that horrible deformity where they can't smile, where they can't swallow properly and what a gift it would be that somebody from around the world cared enough about them to want to make their baby whole? Such a beautiful, practical way to show the love of Christ.

So please will you go to your phone? Will you dial that number on your screen? Will you make the very best gift possible? Or you can go online. We just want this to be the best Christmas ever. And I honestly believe if you're a family and you have young children, make them part of this. Maybe they just want to give a couple of dollars of their allowance and put it together with something that you're sending so they have the joy of giving, of realizing that not every child is hoping for a new iPhone, some would simply love their very first pair of shoes. Would you call now?

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: Thanks so much for staying with us through this show. And remember, for any gift at all you can request Abby's book, *Unplanned*. We actually taped another program. If you didn't get a chance to see that, you can watch that at LifeToday.org. Abby, we're just so excited for everything that God is doing through you and being the church to those who are hurting. It is just beautiful. So thank you so so much.

Abby: Thank you.

Sheila: We'll have her back some day because I'm just excited to hear more stories. Remember, for any gift at all, you can request Abby's book. We'll send you this lovely little Christmas shoe. And we look forward to seeing you next time. So for all of you here at *LIFE Today*, I'm Sheila Walsh saying good-bye. God bless you!