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**Week 38: Christmas Shoes and Smiles**

**Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh**

**Jennie and Levi Lusko**

**Sheila:** Hi! Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh. I'm here with Randy Robison and we're really glad that you're joining us today. This is a little bit different because instead of just having one guest, we have two. We have a husband and wife team of Levi Lusko and Jennie Lusko. I just want to welcome you both to the show.

**Levi:** Thanks for having us.

**Jennie:** Thank you so much.

**Sheila:** Here's what I wanted to ask. Your book, Jennie, *The Flight to Flourish*, I want to read a line from your husband's endorsement of the book that I found really fascinating: "My wife didn't want to write this book. *The Fight to Flourish* is a tear and bloodstained playbook that has helped her face both victory and defeat with grace and grit. And it will help you do the same."

**Jennie:** Thank you.

**Sheila:** So talk to us, Jennie, about... for those who don't know your story, maybe, would you tell us what happened in your life as a family that this book is the fruit of.

**Jennie:** Yes. Well, we experienced the worse pain we've ever experienced when our five-year old daughter at the time in 2012 just suddenly and shockingly died and went to heaven five days before Christmas. Really was just so -- it was sudden. It wasn't like she was suffering from an illness or we were ready for it, we were getting ready for Christmas, wrapping Christmas presents and getting ready for our church, we lead Fresh Life Church, we were getting ready for

Christmas and then she's here one moment and gone, in heaven, the next moment. And so really the foundation of my book is from a place of pain and heartache and struggle and fighting forward. I think we all want this flourishing -- the idea of flourishing, living in abundance, thriving, full life -- we want that. But it almost feels like the pain we walk through or the struggles that we face, the grief that we're in, the heartache, the sin that we're struggling with, it holds us back from that flourishing life.

But what I found and what I write about in this book is it is actually those very things that have the potential and the possibility of creating and being this flourishing life that we're walking with. We can have pain and power at the same time. We can go through suffering and yet find such strength and beauty. It usually goes hand in hand, those two things.

So really, our story is the foundation of it. Like my husband said, like, I wish I didn't have to write this book. I honestly didn't want to. I didn't think that my voice or what I struggled through or the things that I learned really needed to be written but God was so gracious and so kind to really lay it out before me to be able to walk in it. Even the journey of writing the book was a fight forward and a fight to flourish in a season that I'm in as a mom of four kids and leading a church. It's hard. I'm just so thankful that God calls us to do the hard things because he calls us to trust him in it and to grow in it.

So really, *The Fight to Flourish* is my life, my story, my struggle. I even have like little journal entries in there from things that I've walked through. But I'm so grateful.

**Randy:** Levi and Jennie, you say that your daughter Lenya is in heaven and I believe that. That's the faith we hold, that's the hope we hold, and we have to fight for that. But I know that man, when we lose somebody like that, we know they're in heaven, but it feels like we're in hell. And you've been very honest, both of you, about the struggle, the darkness, and the fight. Just let people know because I know some people, they look at you and they think, well, they've got something I don't have. But the pain that people are going through right now, what can you say to them to just communicate how you guys, you've been there, and you've overcome, and you continue overcoming?

**Levi:** Yeah, Randy, I think what you guys experienced with your sister and what we've faced with our daughter, every one of us have walked through hard things. And I think what's important to remember is that hurting with hope still hurts. I always want to remind people of that. It can almost feel like well, either I have faith, or I don't. But it's not so clean cut. You can have faith and still have questions. You can have faith and still be sad. You can have faith and still be very frustrated.

Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead but still broke down crying. So that shows that in our human state there is still a frailty of emotions that is perfectly normal and natural. So I believe my daughter is in heaven, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't something that hurt like hell like you said. It did hurt. It hurt so bad.

I think when we know that it's okay to feel all the human emotions and still trust God, that is not a betrayal of God. In fact, he is glorified by us not really even knowing what to do but still trusting him anyway. Still saying like Job, I don't understand you, God. Actually, at the moment, I don't even know if I like you, but I will worship you. I think God is still honored. I think that's where there's a space for power for breakthrough.

**Sheila:** One of the things I wondered, Jennie, because you're going through this devastating tragedy and you're pastors of a church, I wondered, was it hard for you to allow people into your pain? Because I know sometimes, if I'm really hurting, I kind of withdraw. I wonder what that was like for you?

**Jennie:** Absolutely. I think initially we experienced such strength and peace and power from the people around us and being able to lead people -- I feel like in the initial days we were like how do we lead? We knew we just had to keep moving forward.

**Levi:** We also took time to heal too, though.

**Jennie:** Yeah, yeah, yeah! We did.

**Levi:** Took a couple of weeks off.

**Jennie:** You took a couple months off or whatever. But I think initially we just realized like life is even more so, we knew this, but we experienced it that our lives are so short. We don't know how long we have. We don't know how long people around us have who don't know Jesus. So really, initially, there was this kind of fight forward in the sense of we need to just tell people about Jesus. We need to tell people about heaven. That's still a great -- that's what we do, that who we are. But there was just this kind of added like... we experienced our daughter going to heaven and the nearness of heaven and eternity isn't as far as we think. So, it kind of gave us more of a fire just to reach people.

I think maybe now on the back end it will be eight years this year since she went to heaven where we have learned the beauty of rest and leaning into what God's called us to do. It might look different than someone else leading a church but just knowing the unique calling on our lives.

And even in marriages, you see in statistics that most marriages won't last after a child dies. And we just have found that it's actually strengthened and brought out a beauty -- it's hard. It's all hard. But hold on tight to God. That's really what I would say is that we just clung tightly not knowing, not understanding what God is up to. Why? But just holding tight to a God who knows all and who loves us and has a plan for us in the midst of it.

**Randy:** That's why I think your book is so aptly titled because when you say *The Fight to Flourish*, we all want the flourish part, but you had to fight. What were some of the things you discovered and continue to discover as you fight? Some of them may be the secrets to fighting?

**Jennie:** So good. All over the Bible you see examples of fighting. Paul talks about fighting this fight of faith. He compares the life of faith to a runner who is running not just to run, who likes to run? But it's good for your body, so I hear. But not just running to run, but running to win. And just this added effort and added on your toes, leaning in, like effort and energy and

anticipation. And I think that really, God has called all of us, no matter what we've experienced, no matter what we've gone through, he's called all of us to fight forward.

I think I've just -- I love boxing. I love spin class and I feel like there is parallels to that. Even just a stance, like a boxer's stance is bent knees, on your toes, guard up like you're ready. You're ready for a hit coming to the side of your head, a hit coming to your side. You're just ready. And I think that that's what God's called us to do is when you're not in a season of suffering, to be ready for what might be around the corner. And not that being a message of doom, like oh, you're going to go through hard stuff. But Jesus said it himself. He said, "In this world you will face tribulation and trouble but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." So knowing that we're going to face struggles and we're going to face grief.

Grief looks so different for different people because for some people it is the loss of a relationship, or it is the loss of a marriage or it's the loss of someone who did die or it's the loss of a dream, of what you thought life was going to be like and your life is not measuring up or reaching that goal at all. So to be in a place where you're just ready and you're guard is up and you're ready for what God is going to teach you, that anticipation of what he's going to show you in the midst of heartache and trials and grief. But also, just a readiness of how he wants to use you in the midst of it.

Because the Bible even says, like God comforts us so that we can comfort others in their pain, their heartache. And I think that is such a huge part of it, is allowing God to heal, allowing God to comfort, allowing God to minister to you but knowing that it is not just for you, God wants to do something through you to help others and strengthen others, and inspire others, and encourage them in the challenges that they face.

**Sheila:** And Levi, you've written several books before which have been awesome, my son loves your writing. But tell me about this new book you've written. It is called *Take Back Your Life*: A 40-day interactive journey to thinking right so you can live right. Why did you write this book at this time?

**Levi:** Sheila, the number 40 in the Bible as you know is the number of testing. So many times 40 is used it speaks of tests. I don't think it's a coincidence that we're in 2020, and 20 plus 20 is 40 and if this year has not been a year of testing. I feel like everything that's not nailed down has moved and some things that are nailed down are moved. This fall, I think all of us would like to think maybe a month from now it is all going to be behind us, but the reality is if it is not this it is another thing and we're being tested. These are the times that test men's souls.

So my goal is for us to see a test as a good thing not a bad thing. God doesn't test us to destroy us, he tests us to prove the power of his love inside of us. So the goal of this new interactive journey, first of all, it was a load bearer.

Sometimes people think, I can't read a book. Well, this is 40 days of reading. Anybody can do that. A little bit a day. Just a spoon full of sugar. Also, there's everyday questions, prayers, there is space to doodle. My goal is for people to just really give some room for the Holy Spirit, give some room for some time alone with God. And what I'm hoping that people can see is that 40 days from now your life could look very different. If you give a little bit of dedicated time to meeting with the Holy Spirit every day, letting Jesus breathe his new power inside of you, just what could it look like? If you will let him show you what your blind spots are.

Because I think we're all capable of being our own worst enemy, and holding ourselves back, whether it is a self-sabotaging tendency or an addiction or a pattern of thinking, even just negativity, it can just get in the way -- a victim mentality.

So in the book I try to really give some of the things that God has shown me through scripture, through my own struggles with anxiety and difficult thoughts that I've gotten into toxically. So I just really want to encourage people that you can take your life back. You maybe have given the reins over to stress or given the reins over to a medicating tendency or whatever it might be. Every time I'm stressed, I go shopping or online gambling or whatever it is. But take your lives back because for freedom Christ set us free.

**Randy:** Both of you guys, you're writing these books on testing, on fighting, to overcome, of

taking things back. And both of you, obviously have gone deeply to scripture. Are there any particular scriptures that come to mind that would encourage other people in the middle of their test or their fight or their struggle?

**Jennie:** The first that comes to mind is James 1 where James, the brother of Jesus is literally talking to Christians who've been scattered abroad and who are being persecuted for their faith. So the book of James is just this, this is how you live this life. This is how you fight forward. And so he says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials."

Another version says, "Into different trials and temptations." Because these things actually produce a patience and a perseverance in you that will help you to keep going. Because the whole goal is that we would walk with Jesus our whole lives, that we would grow, that we would flourish, that we would live these lives for God's glory regardless of what happens good and bad.

So he's saying if you go through these things considering them a gift, considering them an opportunity for God to build up your endurance, and to build up your perseverance and to build up your patience so that you can keep showing up, and so that you can keep fighting, and so that you can keep living this life that God has called you to live. That verse even recently, but throughout my life has been such a huge, perspective change. So often we look at a trial and we look at difficulties and we see an obstacle, like oh my gosh! This is just in my way. I'm supposed to be loving God, but this is in my way.

But James is saying, no. Look at it differently. Look at it as a gift. As something that is treasured, as something that is beautiful, that God actually wants to use to bring a depth and a beauty and a vibrancy in you and through you.

**Levi:** Yeah, for me it would be Matthew six where Jesus said, "If your eye is good, your whole body is going to be good. But if your eye is bad, even if you have all the light you're still going to walk in darkness." In the book, *Take Back Your Life* I'm really trying to help people try and figure out what lens they're using to view trials, situations, themselves. I think if we can do a lens change and get our vision up to where God wants it to be, it will change your whole life.

**Sheila:** It's interesting as you've said, Levi, we're living in very different times. It's not even a new normal, it is an ever-shifting model. I was wondering, what do you see God doing through his church at the moment? Because even that is not the way it used to be. What do you see God doing and what is your hope for us?

**Levi:** I see the Holy Spirit calling us to joy. I think this is an -- when God allows things to be stripped away and of course, I'm not presuming to know why God allowed COVID-19. That's all above my pay grade. But I do know what God is trying to do in the sense that it's the same thing he's been doing ever since his son rose from the grave, he's calling us to true joy. I think we, as the church so easily take our joy or try to take happiness from circumstances from, I think control. This season of all, control has been exposed as an idol we worship. I'm not in control. None of us can do anything. But are we ever? And I think our great joy comes from remembering God is in control. And if we have food to eat and some air to breathe, we should be happy because Christ can never be taken from us.

So I think that we're in a place where we're learning to value what cannot be taken away from us, having our true home, and our calling here as ambassadors on this earth, as apprentices under Jesus, I think we are positioned like never before to discover real joy.

**Sheila:** That's powerful. Jennie, I just want to say thank you for writing this. I have a friend who lost her little girl last year. I've been struggling to know what even to put in her hands. So I'm going to make sure she gets your book. So, on behalf of all the women, all the families who would be impacted, thank you for taking that painful journey to write your story.

**Jennie:** Thank you, Sheila! Thank you so much!

**Sheila:** Well, one of the things you know about us here at *LIFE* is that we're very committed to having our eyes opened to others around the world who are hurting. And this is a very special season when we are trying to put shoes on the feet of little ones who have never had them and give some children who have never been able to smile that possibility. Would you watch this?

**On the mission field**

**Announcer:** From your family to our family, your generosity has empowered *LIFE*'s mission efforts around the world -- and the look on these children's faces makes the impact obvious. It's in the smile of Mateo as he receives a bowl of food made possible by your giving or of Gabriella as she quenches her thirst from a clean water well that you helped drill. You could even say you make it your business to give children smiles.

Well, this Christmas we'd like to give a smile to someone who might not easily be able to smile otherwise. You see, all over the world there are children who have trouble smiling because they were born with a cleft lip or palate. But a simple surgery by loving doctors can radically transform the appearance of children like these and greatly improve their quality of life.

But they won't be the only ones smiling this Christmas because with your help we also want to give a brand-new pair of shoes to children who have never had them.

**Tammy:** You can see all of the little ones, honestly, the smiles on their faces, it's so exciting to be a part of it. You can look around at all of the children in this village and most of them are without shoes. They can lose their very lives because of an infection that they could get on their feet.

**Announcer:** Help make this Christmas special for a child like this. Help us provide Christmas shoes and smiles.

**End of clip**

**In the studio**

**Sheila:** You might be tempted to think, well, that's a little early for talking about Christmas. But the reason we're coming to you today is because we want to be able to get 150,000 pairs of shoes to children who've never had a pair of shoes in their life.

I've watched these children as they walk over these rough rocky roads. Where they put their darling little unprotected feet into water that is not clean water. And it can actually, honestly, even cost them their lives.

But we can do so much for so little. These shoes are amazing. I've had the joy, Randy of putting them on little feet and seeing children literally dance for the first time because they've never had a pair of shoes.

**Randy:** Absolutely! I love all the outreaches of *LIFE* in the way that we put smiles on their faces with food and with water and the rescue. But this one is something special about the Christmas spirit, the Christmas season and giving them something that they may not expect. And even know it can be lifesaving, there is an element of just something special when we put the shoes on them. We are getting close to wrapping up this emphasis even though it is early in the year for us. We have to prepare. I'm not quite sure how close we are to our goal of 150,000 shoes, Sheila, but I feel like we're going to get there and we're only going to do it with your help.

When you think about the fact that \$180, your gift today of \$180 will purchase, deliver the 50 pairs of shoes. They aren't just shoes, those are children! Those are children who will dance, who will laugh and who will be better off just because you said, "You know what? I'm going to do something special this year." Sheila, I just hope everybody will jump in and make this one of the biggest, most successful shoes and smiles campaigns ever!

**Sheila:** Yeah! Because this year could be marked by tragedy or we as the church could determine that this will be a year when we stopped just looking at what we might need for ourselves and began to look at the need for others. It is more blessed to give than to receive. And I honestly believe Christmas will be a sweeter time knowing that we've been able to put a smile on the face of a child who is otherwise an outcast, sometimes in their culture. \$500 can give a child literally a road to a new life. And \$36 provides ten pairs of shoes for children.

So please, would you go to your phone? Would you make a commitment that we together as the body of Christ are going to make an impact this Christmas because Christ came to us? Please

go to your phone. Make the very best gift you can.

### **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**

### **On the mission field**

**James:** Well, we literally stopped by the road where I say we knew we would bring them shoes and I'm confident that we will because children like these need shoes -- all over the

world. It is amazing. You may say, "Why would they stop and let you take a picture with them?"

Well, the truth is they stopped because I just got out and sat down here on the road and smiled at them. And they came over and started sitting down by me.

Then we explained to the parents through our missionary interpreter that our plan was to come right back to this area, this village and bring shoes. So that is our intention. But it is going to take you making that possible.

I'm asking you to give as many pairs of shoes as you can to put on these beautiful, beautiful feet of these beautiful children. Thank you! Thank you for your help!

**End of clip**

### **In the studio**

**Randy:** I want to thank all of you who are participating in the Shoes and Smiles. And if you haven't yet, it's not too late, do what you can. We're going to make this such a special Christmas. I also want to thank, Sheila, our two wonderful guests today. So good to hear from them. I just appreciate everything that they're doing.

**Sheila:** And their books, *Take Back Your Life* by Levi and *The Fight to Flourish* by Jennie Lusko. Thank you both so much for being with us. We absolutely love and treasure you.

**Levi:** Thanks for having us.

**Jennie:** What a joy! Thank you.

**Sheila:** And we will see you next time on *LIFE Today*. From Randy and me and all of us here at *LIFE Today*, take care, and God bless!

**Randy:** Thank you!