

12/15/20

Week 51: Fall Mission Feeding

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Kayla Stoecklein

Randy: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Randy Robison. Sheila Walsh is with me. You know 2020 has been a very difficult year for a lot of people and not just with the COVID but with some of the ramifications of the lock downs and the job loss and the uncertainty. So I think today's program is actually going to be very important, possibly even critical for many of you and those you love.

Sheila, this is a tough subject but we have a wonderful guest who is really going to help us walk through some of these things.

Sheila: When I first met this young mom online, I was so blown away by her story and it rang some really pretty deep bells in my own life. But she has her own story to tell. I just want you to please welcome Kayla Stoecklein to the program. I'm so glad you're with us Kayla.

Kayla: Thanks so much for having me. It's such an honor.

Sheila: I remember with the rest of America, the rest of the church hearing the news that your husband had died by suicide--the horror of that. But I wonder if you would take us back to, when you're just married, you're a mom, you have children, you have the perfect house, you have the perfect life. What began to happen? When did you first think there might be something going on with your husband?

Kayla: Sure. Just a few years ago I was living the life of my dreams. I had everything I could have ever asked for and more. I was married to Andrew. He was a lead pastor of

our church. We had three small kids and we were living in a beautiful home. I had the mom car, the big Suburban. Like I really had everything I would have ever imagined or asked for, and it was a good life! I loved being a pastor's wife. I loved doing ministry with him. It felt like such a huge calling and I felt so honored that God had called me to be his wife and to do this job with him. I found my niches in ministry. I was serving on the women's events team and in the moms' group. I was also just serving him and doing whatever I could to help him prepare for Sundays and get ready for the weekend and get his head on straight.

I just loved it. It was a really great life. And the church was wonderful. Our church had walked through a very difficult four-year journey. His father was the lead pastor of the church. He started the church when my husband was three. He had passed away in 2015 from leukemia. So our church had walked through a lot and my husband had taken over during that journey. But they welcomed him with loving arms and embraced him as the lead pastor. And the church was thriving and the church was growing under his leadership. He was the young, cool, hip pastor in the neighborhood and it was such an honor to sit in the front row every Sunday and be his wife.

Sheila: You talk in the book about that first major panic attack that he had. Help people who don't understand what that is to know what that is and what do you think led up to that for him?

Kayla: Yeah. So it was 2017 when things really started to change for us. We had a stalker issue in our family, which oftentimes happens for people who are in the limelight in a community. I'm sure other pastors have had similar experiences.

Well, we had this stalker issue and I really think it was the biggest invitation for fear for my husband. So this fear started trickling in and he started experiencing panic attacks. And these panic attacks were so debilitating. He had never had them before. I had never witnessed a panic attack before, and they would mostly happen at night when he was trying to fall asleep at night. It would come on with this ache and intense pain in his chest

and it would just spread throughout his body. I will never forget his eyes. His eyes would glaze over and he would be gone. There would be nothing that I could do to reach him. I just had to wait it out until the fear subsided.

So those were happening two to three times a week. At first he was able to maintain them but over time they grew and they started happening during the day, and eventually landed him in the hospital. That's when we decided enough is enough. He's been having these-- he'd been having them for months. The doctors were not finding anything wrong with him. It was so confusing, so hard. Where are these coming from? Why are they happening? Why is he being so debilitated by them and why aren't they going away? So we put him on this sabbatical and it was then that he was diagnosed with depression.

Randy: I think the difficulty, especially for people in the church, Kayla, is that when we look at something like this, we're dealing with something that is spiritual, that is emotional, and it is physical. A lot of times, it is difficult for even the medical community sometimes to know how to deal with it properly, and in the church as well. What did you learn about this whole balance between the body, mind, and spirit and how these sorts of things, they can cross them? And they can be complicated. What's your experience?

Kayla: You're exactly right. I'll never forget Andrew's psychiatrist telling us that we know a drop in the ocean of the brain. The brain is a mystery, the mind is a mystery. There is so much we do not know about the human mind. It is so complex.

I think that's what's so confusing about mental illness and trying to treat and approach mental illness. There is so many different ways to do that. And so sometimes medication works and it is healing and they're able to be healed that way. Sometimes there is supernatural prayer and that works and they're healed and they never suffer from depression again or suicidal thoughts again. Sometimes just changing your diet and exercising and getting more rest can help.

So there's no one-size-fits-all approach. I think that's been the biggest takeaway for me

and maybe a misconception that I held before is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to mental illness.

You're right, it is all of it. For us it was spiritual, it was physical, it was burnout. He had been running so hard and so fast in ministry for so long. He was 23 years old when his dad was diagnosed with leukemia and he really stepped up to the plate and helped lead the church through that season. And then he took over the church and he never stopped, he just kept going. So physically, he was exhausted, mentally and emotionally he was exhausted. He never took time off to grieve the loss of his father.

And he was under spiritual attack. Like that was a part of our journey, which I know is probably not a part of everybody's journey and everybody has their own unique journey with mental illness. But there is a whole chapter in the book that I wrote called "Stranger Things" where I talk about these encounters that he had with what he described as creatures. Like he really felt like he was being oppressed by the enemy and that was a major part of the confusion.

And just the darkness. I know that can be a stigmatizing word for mental illness but in my experience it really did feel like there was just this dark cloud that was covering my husband, that was covering our home, and we couldn't get out of it. We were really just consumed by this dark cloud of fear, of depression, of anxiety and of spiritual warfare.

Sheila: I found myself when I was reading your book, wondering what was happening with you during that time. Because you're a mom, you've got three little ones. You've got a husband who now has a diagnosis of depression who is on medication and is kind of retreating into his own world. What was going on in your life, Kayla? Were there times where you were angry, were you confused, were you afraid?

Kayla: It was so hard. I would walk around my house and I would say, "This is the summer from hell." I would say that out loud. It really was. It was so hard. Like I said earlier there was nothing I could do to help. I would keep trying and I would keep trying

and I would keep trying and it really felt like there was nothing that I could do to help except for take care of the kids and kind of keep them away from their dad so that he could rest, and create as much as space as I could for him to rest.

I even got involved with the church stuff and was like, "If you need to talk to him, because he is on a sabbatical, don't talk to him. If you need to talk to him, come to me. I'll deal with it. I'll answer the phone call. I'll help you navigate a solution." So I really was taking on a lot. I was "co-burdening his depression" is what our therapist explained to us. Like I was just getting a small taste of his depression and anxiety and that dark cloud that was in our home that summer. I really felt that as well.

And I felt frustrated with God. It was very difficult for my faith because here we are serving God with our life and doing ministry and we just lost his dad. And now God's allowing this big season of depression to happen. Like, God, why are you allowing this to happen? And why aren't you intervening? And why aren't you healing him? And we're praying and we have people over to our house to pray and anoint him with oil and it just felt like nothing was working. I was left just asking, where are you God? And why aren't you fixing this? And I was exhausted.

Randy: I can't help but think God has really walked you through this dark, dark time. Am I right?

Kayla: You're right. That was a frustrating part of it because Andrew died and then it felt like God was everywhere, in everything, all of the time. It went from this wilderness season with the mental illness where I'm like, where are you, God? Why aren't you fixing this? And then Andrew dies and God is everywhere. And that's how it's been.

We have this mantra that we have as a family called, "God's got this." And it was this phrase that meant so much to us when my father-in-law was walking through leukemia. And our church made wristbands, we had a website, we really clung to those words, "God's got this." And through Andrew's mental health journey and through the suicide

and through our grief journey it's just been this phrase that's meant so much to us.

And to me, it means that God is sovereign over all of it. I'll never understand why God allowed this to be filtered through his hands but I really deeply believe that he is still good, that he still has good plans for my life and for my boys' life, and he can squeeze as much good as possible out of this absolute horrific tragedy as he can and he has.

From the very beginning, that very first week I wrote Andrew a letter and that letter really went viral, our story really went viral because here is this young guy who had it all and why did this happen to him? I think it really shocked a lot of people. So I wrote him this letter. It was through that letter that I first began to see that God was up to something so much bigger than I could have ever imagined that he would do through this in redeeming this story.

I was receiving emails and letters and direct messages on Instagram from people who were saying, "I was thinking about suicide and then I read your letter and then I decided to stay." Or "I've been struggling with depression and I checked myself into rehab this morning." Or "You finally helped me call the therapist and tell them how bad it really is." "You helped me help my son who is struggling with depression." Like there were so many messages coming in and I couldn't look away.

God kind of handed me this microphone and I became this mental health advocate overnight. And God really carried me through that. Like he gave me the words, he gave me the strength, he gave me the comfort. Like I really felt God as the comforter so deeply in that season, and still do today. But it was so tangible, even my closest friends, they witnessed God's hand more clearly than they had in their entire life just by walking alongside me in that season.

Sheila: That's why I think it is such an important book, Kayla, because mental health is a huge, huge issue in our nation, but it is still one that we don't talk a lot about. In fact, when I was reading your book the part I connected with was, when my father died by

suicide, my mom was left--she was about the same age as you--she was left with three children, seven, five, and two. And the thing was back then, we never talked about it. And children, what children imagine in their minds is so much worse than the truth. How are you helping your children to navigate this reality?

Kayla: I've been really honest with them since the very beginning. I waited a week to tell them. They stayed with my dad and I wanted to talk to Child Life specialists and make sure that I approached the conversation the right way from the beginning. I never want to hide anything from them. I never want to lie to them so it was important for me to start that conversation. So I did.

So that very first time I sat them down and told them that Andrew had died. I told them that daddy did something that caused him to die. That's the way that I've explained suicide to a, at the time they were five, four, and two. So for a five, four, and 2-year old to understand. But then it leads to more questions. "Well, what did he do?" Like there is more questions that I'm not able to answer until they're older.

So that's why I wrote the book. It was for them. It really truly is for them. They are my target audience, those three little boys. And I think it is going to be so special and so powerful for them as they get older to sit and read that together. Or to listen to the audio book together and they can hear me read it to them. And for them to be able to ask questions and talk about it.

I don't want to hide anything from them. I want them to know that it was suicide and I hope that through the way that I've explained it in the book that they will have compassion and empathy for their dad. That they won't think that their dad abandoned them. That they won't think that their dad decided to leave them. But they will grow in empathy and compassion and see him as this wasn't a choice. This was something that happened to him. He would have never chosen this.

Sheila: That actually, honestly, even helped me, Kayla. Reading the book, that even

helped me because when I was younger I would think, whatever my dad was feeling was worse than his love for me. I think that--what are some of the common misconceptions about suicide that you clear up in your book?

Kayla: I think the biggest is that suicide is selfish. I'll never forget the one time that Andrew told me that he was suicidal and my instant reaction to that is like, "That is so selfish. You would never do that. You can never do that to me and the kids." And it is this--we think it is this selfish thing when really it is a pain problem. The person who is struggling with suicidal ideation is overwhelmed with an all-consuming pain.

I'll never forget reading a blog that Anne Voskamp had wrote and she had described it as being trapped in a burning building and the only way to escape the flames is to jump out the window. That really helped me to have compassion for Andrew and to know that it isn't a selfish thing.

For me, I almost see the suicide as a tragic accident. I describe it, he was surrounded by support, he was surrounded by a team of doctors, he was surrounded by people who loved him so much, who would have done anything to save him. And so we almost describe it as a child drowning in a swimming pool at a birthday party. Like that's how it feels. Like anyone would have jumped in the pool and saved them. Like anyone of us would have jumped in and saved him. And it wasn't this selfish decision. Like he was overwhelmed with pain. And so the suicide was a result of that overwhelming pain in mental illness.

And then I also think one of the other biggest conceptions in Christian culture is that when someone dies by suicide they don't get to go to heaven. I remember I'll never forget a lot of comments that came in and emails that came in like, "How dare you say that he is in heaven. When you die by suicide you don't go to heaven."

I was under the same misconception. I'll never forget being in the hospital room and he is laying on the hospital bed and he is taking his last breaths and I leaned over the hospital

bed and I asked my mother-in-law, "Will he go to heaven?" Like I was under that same misconception that I'd picked up somewhere along the way. She reassured me then as I'm confident now that our salvation does not hinge on how we die. Our salvation hinges on our relationship with Jesus. I'm so confident of that. That he is in God's love. Whatever that looks like, like he is there and he is healed and he is free. I hate that this happened and he would hate that this happened but that does not separate him from God's love.

Sheila: Amen.

Randy: We can't earn our own spiritual birth and we can't unearn it. We just have a few seconds left but I want to give you the opportunity to speak to two people who are watching right now. One who is all consumed with that pain. And the other person who is the loved one of that one consumed by that pain. What do you say to those two people?

Kayla: If you're sitting in a place of pain and you're struggling with depression and you're struggling with suicidal ideation, I just want to say I'm so deeply sorry for your pain. I'm so deeply sorry that it feels so overwhelming and all-consuming and all-ending. I want you to know that you are worthy of help. That you are worthy of love. That you are loved. That people do care about you. That help is available. Please keep reaching out. If you feel like no one understands your pain, please keep reaching out. Please keep calling. Please keep calling a therapist or calling a friend or calling the suicide hot line. There are people who are surrounding you that love you and want to walk beside you but you have to let them in. You were never meant to carry that pain alone.

And living with the pain is possible. That's the biggest thing I've learned in my journey as I have struggled with suicidal ideation as well in my grief journey is that living with the pain is possible. There is a way to carry the pain and still build the beautiful life around it.

And for the person who is walking alongside somebody who is struggling, I would say, keep reaching out for help too. Like you can't keep pouring out and you can't keep taking care of this person that you love without taking time for yourself. Go see a therapist by

yourself. Schedule a weekend trip away. Go do the girls' night. Hire the baby-sitter. Like invite other people into the pain. Tell other people how it really is. Be transparent. Be authentic. Let people in. There are people that want to care for you and that want to walk alongside you too and you are not alone.

Sheila: Fantastic wisdom, Kayla. Thank you so much. What I'd like to ask our viewers to do right now is we're going to tell you more about how to get a hold of Kayla's book.

But there are some people right now who are suffering and who are hurting and who can't even imagine living one more day. It's not because of struggling with thoughts like that, it's because they simply don't have enough food to give their child. That's a desperation that you and I can address. Would you watch this?

On the mission field:

Announcer: For 30 years viewers of *LIFE Today* have been helping save millions of lives from malnutrition and starvation. Though you may never meet them in this life, people like Jose, Jacob, and Matthew are grateful that you chose to make mission feeding possible through your giving. But while there is cause for celebration there are children we've still been unable to reach. Their tragedies caution us against growing complacent.

Randy: Angelica was only five years old when they buried her here. They put a marker in the sand with her name and the dates. If you look at the inscription here, you can see that it won't last that long. It will fade.

Malnutrition is robbing children of their future. These children must not be forgotten. I can promise you God knows them by name. Will you think about those that we can still save? There are so many that are right on that edge of life and death and we make the difference. Let's not forget them.

I'm asking you to do something right now. Support the mission feeding outreach because that's how we stop this cycle of death because you really can make a difference. You can give these children hope and a future instead of an unmarked grave.

End of video

In the studio:

Randy: You know it's actually very heartbreaking to walk through a cemetery and see so many short graves with no marking or a simple cross or some other marker. Angelica's, it looked like it was just written in pencil. And with the sun, it wouldn't take long before you didn't know who that was.

But God knows their names. He knows every name of every child. And when you look at the faces of these children over there, I hope you'll connect for just a second as individuals with each one of them because they are each a person created in the image of God, precious in his sight. That's what we see. I know that's what so many of you see. Because for so many years you've been by our side as we've fed these children in different areas of Africa and brought them from that place of death to a place of life.

Sheila, I love the contrast where we've gone in with the mission feeding and we see such a huge difference. We see life in these children. We know this works.

Sheila: Absolutely! And as you said, Randy, if we brought one of these little ones to your home and asked for help, you would help in a moment. You would see the need and be like, "I want to help." That's the amazing gift we have through mission feeding with *LIFE*. We can bring you these children and say, "Look, these children need your help now."

This year has been such an incredibly difficult year for so many of us in so many different ways. But can you imagine being a mom in Africa, and not only are you dealing with COVID but you're dealing with your child who has no resistance to any kind of

bacteria, any kind of pandemic? It is way more likely that those children will lose their lives due to malnutrition than any other disease.

But the thing that brings me hope and the thing that brings me joy, and the thing that means we will keep doing this until the Lord takes us home is because we can do something about it. Do you know that for \$30 you, you can feed three children for three whole months! Think about that! If you're able to do \$50 you can feed five children for three months.

Money goes very quickly in our society. If you ever looked at your wallet and you think, well, I'm sorry I split that \$20 because now it is gone. For \$30 add \$10 to that \$20, you've just fed three children for three whole months. We can all do something.

We have told these moms, we've told our faithful partners on the ground, "We will come home, and we will tell your story." So please, will you go to your phone? Call that number on your screen. Give the very best gift possible. We're bringing the children to you and you can save their lives.

Begin video clip

Announcer: Today on top of the daily fight for life and food, families and children across Africa are now forced to deal with the challenges of a global health crisis. Because of COVID-19 food scarcity has increased drastically and the fear of dying from lack of food is far greater than the virus itself.

Even in these unprecedented times, mission feeding won't stop. With your help, mission feeding will continue to be a daily source of food, encouragement, and health for the 350,000 children counting on us.

Call now with your lifesaving 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 *40 Days of Healing Promises*. This beautiful hardcover devotional will encourage you in your faith as you dive deep into the healing promises that are yours in Jesus' name.

With your gift of \$100 or more please request the "Blessings for your Home" bowls and tea towel set. This set of bowls and two beautifully designed tea towels will make a wonderful addition to your home and serve as a reminder of your help in blessing others as a friend of *LIFE*.

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:

Sheila: Thank you for helping us. We can't thank you enough. But this book is going to help you, *Fear Gone Wild*: "The story of mental illness, suicide and hope through loss." This is an important book. I think this book should be in the home of every American. Because if you're not struggling yourself you know somebody who is. So Kayla, I just want to thank you for writing this book and for the courage and the strength you've shown.

Kayla: Thank you so much. It's been such an honor to be with you both today. Thanks so much for having me and being brave with me in this conversation.

Sheila: Thank you.

Randy: Thank all you guys for watching. Join us again next time here on *LIFE Today*.