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Week 8: WFL

Sheila Walsh

The Fiery Love of God

SHEILA: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh. I'm so glad you stopped by. I'm just kind of wondering, I want to check in with you and find out just how are you doing? There's nothing like business as usual at the moment. We just came out of a year that was incredibly challenging in ways that we're probably not even able to put into words yet. We're still waiting and we're still watching.

But I want to remind you of one thing. A lot of things have changed, a lot of things are different. Perhaps you struggle with your job at the moment. Maybe you're struggling to pay your bills at the moment. Maybe you're wondering when will your children be able to go back to normal school or be able to study. And all those things, they create anxiety within us.

But what I want you to remember today is that God has not changed. That God is still with you. That God loves you. That Christ has promised his peace to us. Do you remember when Jesus said to his friends in that closing, incredible few hours he spent with his few hours with his disciples? I'm so grateful that John remembered so much of it so he could write it down for us.

But Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble." That little Greek word for trouble is "ektarasin" and it means literally like a storm. So Jesus was saying to his friends, "In this world you're going to face the perfect storm but take heart, I have overcome the world."

I just want you to know from all of us here at *LIFE Outreach*, we just pray that in this year you would know the peace of Christ and remember that God is still in control and

that God is on the throne.

So yes, a lot of things are shifting but what I want us to look at together are the things we know about God that we can literally stake our lives on. We live in a shifting, confusing world but there are things you and I can know for sure. So today I want us to look at, probably the most foundational truth and that is about the outrageous, fiery love of God. It's not a weak thing. It is not a passive thing.

Before we do that, I want to tell you a little story. It's one of the stories I used to love to tell my son when he was just a little boy. So according to traditional folk tale, once there were three little trees, all with *big* dreams. The first tree dreamed of being carved into a beautiful and ornate treasure box that would hold the greatest treasure the world has ever seen. The second tree dreamed of being fashioned into a great ship that would sail the seven seas. Well, the third tree didn't want to leave its home on the mountaintop. "I want to grow up so tall that when people stop to look up at me," he said, "They'll raise their eyes to heaven and think of God."

Well, one day when the young saplings had grown into tall strong trees, three wood cutters climbed the mountain. As they cut down the first tree it could be barely contain its excitement. It just knew that soon it would fulfill its destiny. But instead of an elaborate treasure chest, workers made the tree into a plain, very ordinary feed box for farm animals. The tree felt bitterly disappointed. Well, the second tree got made into a ship all right but not the kind that crests the waves of a great ocean. It became just a simple fishing vessel floating on a lake -- not the stuff that dreams are made of. Well, the third tree, to its horror and dismay also got cut down and chopped into wooden beams, and then just left to gather dust in a lumberyard. All it ever wanted was to stay on the mountaintop and point to God, it moaned.

So time passed and the trees forgot their dreams until one night when a young woman placed her baby in the animal feed box. And the first tree knew that indeed it carried the greatest treasure on earth!

Another night, a tired man and his friends crowded onto the little fishing boat. They got halfway across the lake when a terrible storm blew in threatening to tear the boat to pieces. But the tired man stood up and said, "Peace! Be still!" And the second tree knew that it was carrying the king of heaven and earth.

One Friday morning, the third tree felt itself yanked from the woodpile and dragged through city streets where crowds shouted insults. The tree felt cruel and ugly when it realized it had become an instrument of torture. Soldiers nailed a man's hands and feet to its beams. Where on Sunday morning when the sun rose and the earth trembled with joy, the tree stood tall knowing that from now on it would forever point people to God.

I love that story! I think I love it so much because it reminds us of a profound truth. God has good plans for us that we don't always understand at the time. Do you know what I mean? Our experience of life, and what we hoped to experience from life, sometimes are very different from each other and that can cause us to doubt God's love for us.

That's what's on my heart today. Life will not always go as we want it to but that does not diminish the love of God by one drop from the ocean. If things, let me ask you, if things don't go as you hoped for, even as you committed to God in prayer, are you ever tempted to doubt God's love for you? Perhaps, I think, we don't fully grasp the depth of the love of God.

I grew up in church with the phrase often uttered, "The unconditional love of God." I'm sure you've heard that over and over. I don't know if you realize it but do you know the phrase, "unconditional love of God" never appears in scripture? We just use it a lot. I'm pretty sure I understand why we use the phrase and why it's become so popular. That phrase really is trying to get at a foundational biblical truth; namely that when God sets his love upon us and adopts us into his own family, his love remains upon us regardless of what may happen, and regardless of what we might do. God loves you with an eternal love. And eternal means his love doesn't change as ours often does. God's love for you

remains.

We see that truth played out time and time again in scripture, both the Old Testament and New Testament. You see people who made drastic mistakes but God's love for them, his eternal love for them didn't change. Think of this, Abraham was called "the man of faith" but he lied about his wife to save his own skin. Not once, but actually twice many years apart. And yet God makes Abraham into a great nation through whom Messiah comes.

Or think about Moses. Moses killed a man and then disobeyed God publicly before all of Israel. And yet, thousands of years later Moses shows up with Elijah at the transfiguration. Do you remember? Moses and Elijah talking with Christ, encouraging Jesus before his own eminent trial?

Or think of the great King David. David committed adultery and he tried to cover it up with a murder. And yet God still loves him, continues to protect David's family line until the appearance of Jesus, the son of David. And David was called "a man after God's own heart."

Or move to the New Testament. Think about Peter. Peter denies the Lord three times, yet God still chose him to help lead Christ's church.

Sometime, if you have some spare time, look into the people mentioned in the "Hall of Faith," Hebrews Chapter 11, and see how many of them had less than stellar records. Honestly, it is all good news for broken people like me and you. That's actually why I don't think "unconditional" does God's love justice. It is so much more than that.

I worry that by continually using that phrase and seldom explaining what we mean by it, we've robbed it of its original weight. People today might hear it and tend to think, well, the love of God's love is unconditional. I can take it for granted. They think when they sin against the Lord he'll respond, "Oh, it's okay! Don't worry about it. I love you anyway."

But honestly, when you think of the fiery holiness of God, I think he really responds with something a little more like this. I will love you forever with a fierce and passionate love! And that's why it is not okay to live any way you like.

God wants you and me, this year, to be all in 24/7. Not just Sunday morning or Wednesday night or whenever we gather with other believers, from the minute we get up in the morning until the minute we lay our head on the pillow. Can you imagine what that would be like if everyone who claims the name of Christ suddenly decided they had a change of job description? Yeah, they go here and they go there and that's where they get their salary but their main job description is "Disciple of Christ on mission."

Our God loves with passion, with fire, with bone-rattling force. Sometimes I think his furious emotion would consume us if his love didn't shield us from its full intensity.

I read this interesting story a few years ago about a man who left a church but for a kind of unconventional reason. I actually read it in my friend, Brennan Manning's book. He wrote this book called, *Ragamuffin Gospel* which is great by the way. If you've never read it, get a hold of Brennan Manning's *Ragamuffin Gospel*.

But listen to how the man rejected what he called "Pastel Colored God" who promises to never rain on our parade. So this is what Brennan wrote: "A pastor I know recalls a Sunday morning Bible study at his church when a text under consideration was Genesis Chapter 22."

Now you might remember that's the passage where God commands Abram to take his son, Isaac, his promised son and offer him in sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. After the group read the passage the pastor simply offered some basic historical background on this period in Israel's history, including the prevalence of child sacrifice among the Canaanites. The group listened kind of in bored silence for a while. But then the pastor asked, what does this story mean to us?

Well, this middle-aged man spoke up, "I'll tell you the meaning this story has for me. I've decided that me and my family are looking for another church."

The pastor was floored, "Why? What?"

"Because," the man said, "When I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I'm near a real God. Not the sort of dignified, businesslike rotary-club God we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham's God could blow a man to bits. Give and then take a child. Ask everything from a person and then want more. I want to know that God."

Well then Brennan wrote, "The child of God knows that the graced life calls him or her to live on a cold and windy mountain, not on the flattened plain of reasonable, middle-of-the-road religion. For the heart of the gospel of grace, the sky darkens, the wind howls. A young man walks up another Moriah in obedience to a God who demands everything and stops at nothing. Unlike Abram, he carries a cross on his back rather than wood for the fire. Like Abraham, listening to a wild and restless God who will have his way with us, no matter what the cost.

God's love for you is not merely "unconditional" but wild, windy, even howling, demands everything. It stops at nothing. In a word, it's fierce! I'm reminded of a famous passage in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I don't know if you've read that recently. I read it again over the Christmas break last year and just loved it. It's where C.S. Lewis introduces us to Aslan, the great lion who represents Jesus Christ himself.

Before the story's young protagonists, you know the young children meet Aslan for the first time they ask to hear about him from some talking animals who live in the enchanted land of Narnia. Mr. Beaver starts first. "Don't you know who is the king of beasts? Aslan is a lion. The lion -- the great lion!"

"Oh!" Said Susan, "I thought he was a man! Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie! And no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" Said Lucy.

"Safe?" Said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver is telling you? Who said anything about safe? Of course, he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you."

God's love for you is not that sentimental weak sappy variety. Instead this love is strong. This love is a fierce love. A burning passion to overcome evil with good. This is a love that fought for you. That died for you. Let me just ask you this: How can you and I give him anything less than all we have and are?

This is probably one of the most famous verses in the Bible but some days we get so familiar with something we don't hear anymore. But when John wrote his gospel, he said this, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

I don't know what kind of situation you're in as you watch this program right now. I don't know if you have a personal relationship with Jesus. But if you don't, I urge you to change that right now. Scripture tells us whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Not nice people! Not good people! Jesus came for those of us who know we are broken. You simply have to call on his name and say, "Jesus, I know I'm a sinner and I want to be saved. But I don't just want you to come into my heart, I want to be a disciple -- to be changed."

Conversion means to turn around and go in a whole new direction. So I challenge myself as I challenge you, let's live like believers this year. Not as church goers, not as Bible readers -- let's live as those who have read the Word of God and it is alive in us. And

every moment or every day we're looking for opportunities to share the good news that God so loved the world that he gave. He gave everything for us. How could we possibly want to hold anything back?

I've been a Christian now for a long time, but I've felt a fresh stirring this year as we moved into 2021 that I want to be sold-out. I ask you, would you consider the same? One of the great privileges when you realize what God gave is that you want to find ways to give back to him. And there is no greater way of doing that, I think, than caring for those that God cares for.

Do you know that there are people right now, at this very moment, whose only prayer is to be able to give their child a clean glass of water? And you and I can be the answer to that prayer. Would you watch this?

On the mission field:

RALPH: Imagine living in a village where people are dying on a regular basis all because of the water.

Is this a water source for the village?

>> Yes. That's the water source for the village.

RALPH: And they drink that?

>> Yeah, they do!

RALPH: What do you see in this cup? What we don't see is what should really alarm us. All types of germs and diseases are in this one little cup of water. We've heard countless stories already of how many people have lost children from drinking this water.

Open Captions:

>> Unclean water is killing the people of our village.

>> The children say they are concerned about the dirty water, but they have no choice.

>> Families are dying because of this unclean water. People are disappearing. Many homes are closing.

>> Every day, we bury kids who have died because of this water. The first was my ten-year old boy. Then I lost my daughter, Francine. She was just six years old.

RALPH: They have no other choice. They have no choice then to drink this germ-infested water. We have a choice, and we can drill a well in this very village. We can drill down and bring clean beautiful water that will bring life to this village. We can stop the deaths. We can stop the burials. We can stop the tears and bring beautiful clean water to this village who desperately need a touch of God's love.

In the studio:

SHEILA: Yes, we can. Thank you, Ralph. That was really powerful. Sometimes I think we need to try and help repaint the picture for you. When we talk about this village, probably in your mind you imagine that you could just walk a mile down the road and there is going to be a couple of stores. No. Most of the people that we reach are living in such remote villages.

In fact, I remember one of the first times when I was in Africa, we drove for miles into the countryside where there was just a few kinds of huts. It was one of the times where we needed to ask for permission to camp there that night because you're not near even a Motel 6. But we asked for permission to camp there. And this elder came out, very noble looking, a silver-haired man and he was kind of shaking. I remember asking one of our on the ground staff, "Is he okay?"

He said to me, "He has never seen a white woman before."

That's how remote some of these areas are. So there is nowhere else to go. When Ralph said in that piece, "This is all they've got," that's what he literally meant. This is it. There is nowhere else to go within hundreds of miles. So their choice is: give our children this filthy, disease-infested water or give them nothing.

And to watch your child die of lack of water is devastating. It is like a *Sophie's Choice*. On the other hand, to give your child water that you know could take their life, not because you've heard it on a TV show or read it in a book but because you've seen it with your own eyes!

Can you imagine losing your ten-year old? And then losing your six-year old simply because there is no clean water? But here's the amazing thing and why I'm excited to be here with you today, we can change that. You and I can change that. We have created a goal this year at *LIFE* that we want to drill 350 new wells in over 20 nations.

Now that can sound really, really overwhelming but let me break it down for you. If today you were able to give \$48 that would provide clean drinking water for ten people, not for a week, but for life! \$144 provides clean drinking water for 30 people. Now if some of you are able, perhaps with other family members or a Sunday School class to give \$4800 then you will be able to drill one of those 350 wells. We'll be down to 349 because of your gift!

So please, would you do something? We can't all do everything but every single one of us can do something. So please, would you go to your phone and call that number on your screen? Go online, give the best gift possible. Let's put clean water in the hands of those who need it in the name of Jesus who is the water of life. Thank you.

Begin video clip:

Announcer: Dirty disease-filled water. How desperate would a mother need to be to consider giving this contaminated substance to her child? For many mothers and their families living in extreme poverty, this is their only choice.

But with your help they won't have to make this choice ever again. Mission: Water for LIFE provides clean, disease-free water for thousands of children and their families giving them a life free from the fear of death. With your gift today you can help drill and establish 350 water wells this year. Your gift of \$24 will help provide clean water for five children. A gift of \$48 will help provide ten. \$72 will provide for 15. And \$144 will help provide life-giving water for 30 people for a lifetime.

With your gift, we'll send you *Speak Your Name* devotions and declarations on the reality of Jesus. Filled with stunning imagery, these 40 encouraging devotions by Laney Rene serve as a reminder of the power of Jesus' name.

With your gift of \$100 or more, please request the "Be Refreshed" pitcher. This beautiful ceramic pitcher is decorated with Proverbs 11:25 and is sure to make a lovely addition to your table or home.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1200 to help provide water for 250 people or a gift of \$4800 to help sponsor a complete well. And you may request our brand-new, inspiring bronze sculpture, "Divine Servant."

Please call, write or make your gift online.

End of video**On the mission field:**

Betty: I'm standing here with these children and they're just a small example of children all over the world that deserve to be considered and loved and cared for. We have an opportunity to

do that right now among these children and those around the world; to give them some clean water, and give them a chance in life.

I ask you to help us do that. It's just a simple request but a very urgent and important one. Please join with us. You'll get such great joy out of it – I know you will! God bless you and thank you!

End of video

In the studio:

SHEILA: Thank you so much. If the lines are busy, please keep calling. Let's do this in Jesus' name.

For any gift at all we will send you this great devotional, "*Speak Your Name*" by Laney Rene. I think maybe one of the reasons I love it so much, do you know that's James and Betty's granddaughter?

For a gift of \$100 we're going to send you this great pitcher with that verse I love from Proverbs. It is a promise, it is a truth: "Those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed." I know you don't do it for the gifts, but it is just our way of saying thank you. It's a great reminder to pray for our partners who are on the ground who are daily going out there and loving people in Jesus' name. We don't just give them water, we introduce them to the water of life.

So from all of us here at *LIFE Today*, God bless you. We'll see you next time!