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Week 32: WFL

Sheila Walsh

Michael W. Smith

SHEILA: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh; I'm glad you're with me. You'll be glad that you were here too. When I say the name Michael W. Smith what comes to mind? Obviously, phenomenal success as a Christian artist, Grammys, Doves--you name it. But his recent offering is something that really touched me deeply. It is a book called, *The Way of the Father*: "Lessons from my dad, truths about God." So Michael, welcome to *LIFE Today*!

MICHAEL: Thank you so much, Sheila! I appreciate it. Good to see you. Even if it's on Zoom, it's good to see you.

SHEILA: It's good to see you, too. When I read through your book, the one thing at the end that I was left with was, I wish I'd known your dad. I mean the stories that you tell and the kind of character he was at your events and your concerts. I mean, right from the beginning, he was your number one fan.

MICHAEL: He was. I say this all the time. He was the kindest man I'd ever known who happened to be my dad. His glass is always half full. He came from that great generation; if you were sick, you went to work. He loved my mom so well. He loved me and my sister so well and his community and the homeless shelter. He was a deacon in the church. He smiled and laughed every single day; I don't ever remember him hollering at me. I know he had his faults, but I just didn't see very many of them.

So we had a great life together. I miss him. He crossed over to the other side in November of '15. I knew at one point I would write a book about him, and 2020 was a good time to write a book.

SHEILA: Absolutely!

MICHAEL: It was the right timing, so I'm really happy with it.

SHEILA: One of my favorite stories has to do with your baseball team, and the way that your dad, the way your dad kind of modeled what success really is. Tell us that story. It is just delightful.

MICHAEL: Yeah. I think the great thing is he didn't base any of this stuff on our performance. He obviously wanted us to win. Everybody likes to win. But I remember that year; we were just awful. We just weren't very good. We had 16 games, and we were 0 and 15, and we had one game left to play. But in this little town, there is a Dairy Queen. And the Dairy Queen is only a block away from Mitch Stadium, where we played Little League Baseball. And only the winners got to go to Dairy Queen.

So after the first game, second game--we got beat 30 to nothing the first game. Our heads hung in shame. You'd think the world would come to an end. My dad would walk in that dugout and say, "Boys, we'll get them next time. Let's go to Dairy Queen."

We went to Dairy Queen, and when we'd walk in there, all those people would look at us like, what are you guys doing in here? We just annihilated you.

And then we won that last game. I'll never forget it. I was on second base, and I was the scoring run, and we won 3-2. You'd thought we had won the World Series. He walked in the dugout and said, "Boys, great job! Let's go to Dairy Queen." We went to Dairy Queen 16 times in a row.

But I think it's so cool because he never, he was always affirming. That was the magical part of my dad; his whole life, he just affirmed people. He affirmed us, even though we weren't very good, he'd be going, "Hey, we're going to get them next time." So kind of

painting me a beautiful picture of who God is, really.

SHEILA: It's interesting because your dad and your mom both experienced heartache. I just see the legacy that's passed on to you, that you've passed on to your children, that you've passed on to your grandchildren. What did watching the way that your mom and dad deal with the hard things in life teach you?

MICHAEL: That you can get through anything. I talk in the book about my mom. She was eight years old, with her three younger siblings, and they were a block from their house when my grandmother would just go off. I heard stories, obviously after the fact. But she told them to get out of the car, "You're walking home." And she drove off, and she never came back--ever!

I can't remember if I mentioned this; I don't think I did, but a crazy story about my mom. I got to meet my real grandmother one time, and my mom only saw her one other time too, and we both were there together when my Aunt Pat died of cancer. I was 20 years old, and I was not happy. I kind of wanted to give her a piece of my mind, you know? But I sort of bit my tongue. But I watched my mom love on her mom. And my mom had forgiven her a long time ago. I just remember that moment going, you know what? My mom is extraordinary!

You can either be a victim, or you can--forgiveness is a beautiful thing when you're not bitter. Again, I'm not going to pretend to know everybody's story. There are some horrific stories out there, but the people that I know that I'm close to who have had those kinds of upbringings that were not good, they found a way to let God father or mother them. And they're extraordinary people. So there is a way to get through the storm.

SHEILA: I think there had to have been a lot of laughter in your house growing up. But then there is a later story that shows that who your dad was, was as deep as the marrow in his bones. An ambulance comes; it looks like he's not going to survive. Tell us what happened that day.

MICHAEL: Yeah! We thought he was out of here. He was white as a ghost. Thank God I wasn't on the other side of the world touring. My mom had called me and said he's fallen. Long story short, we get there, and it's awful. It was just awful. So basically, they put him on a stretcher, and they took him. There were five emergency vehicles outside of my mom and dad's house in Franklin. So they put him in this big vehicle. There are five people working on him.

In the meantime, all these people come out loving on my mom. It's a beautiful thing. But I'm watching these guys work on my dad. And then not even 7-8 minutes later something like that, the color comes back into his skin. He was always for me. He had all these sayings. One of those things was, "Hold the phone!" Or "What in the wild world of sports is going on?" But when he said, "Hold the phone," growing up, that always meant he had something to say. But whatever.

Long story made really short. I saw the color come back into his skin. I think he's going to be okay. So I turn around, literally, just go greet all my mom's neighbors. I don't get five steps away, and I hear my dad go, "Hold the phone!" And he said it four times, "Hold the phone! Hold the phone!" Shouting it.

I run back over there, going what's going on? And every paramedic, like everybody is frozen, nobody is moving. And my dad lifts his head up off of that stretcher and looks at those paramedics and says, "Do you all know who that is out there? That's my son, Michael W. Smith!"

I'm sitting there, going, oh dad! What are you doing? You're embarrassing me again. He did that my whole life. Just going, "Hey, this is my son!" He'd always brag on me.

And then it was really crazy, that ten seconds I was laughing, and then I had an epiphany. My knees buckled, Sheila, I'll never forget it. It was one of those moments in time moments, felt like God spoke to me and said, "That's how I feel about you." It just took

my breath away.

I have a couple of those a year where you just get annihilated, and it is just a reminder that God not only loves you, but he actually really likes you and is extremely fond of you. So it was one of those wow moments. But my dad, it was classic dad.

SHEILA: I just love that! But the thing I love about your moment, that sacred space that you had there, was that speaks to everybody because not everybody had a dad or a mom who would say, "Look! This is my child." But the fact that that's how God feels about all of us speaks to every one of our viewers. That's powerful!

MICHAEL: It does. And it is true.

SHEILA: There are so many stories about your dad, which is why I'm going to tell you all how you can get a hold of this book. You need to read this book for yourself. It's brilliant! But you tell a story of being at the Grammys, and you have to call your dad to tell him that you didn't win. I just love what he said.

MICHAEL: Well, let me just say this. I saw very little fault in my dad. The only time he would get upset was when I wouldn't win, like an award show or something like that. He just couldn't figure it out. But I called him from the Grammys, and I just said, "Hey, dad! I just want you to know I didn't win. I'm okay with it. And actually, one of my friends won. I just wanted to make sure you're good." And it was just dead silence on the phone. I'm thinking, oh my word! So I said, "Dad, talk to me."

My dad said, "What do you mean? Like, what are those people smoking? Like what do you mean you didn't win the Grammy?" He just could not believe it. And so classic dad again.

SHEILA: A serious part of your journey with your dad and what you share about in the book is I remember watching the movie, *Remembering Marshal*, and I didn't know at that

point your very profound connection; that you and your dad were actually there that night. What are your memories of that?

MICHAEL: Well, for a 13-year-old, to go out there and see fire all over the place, you know there has been a crash. It's kind of like, oh my gosh, I'm in a movie. We didn't really know what had happened. My dad had gotten the call that there'd been a crash; that airport is actually in my hometown. It's actually out on a hill called the Tri-State Airport. It's literally seven minutes from my house.

So my dad got the call, and he says, "There's been a crash."

I said, "I'm going with you."

So I just hopped in the car with him. So it was raining, and it was--I'd never seen that many emergency vehicles in my life. We eventually had to pull off on the side of the road. We actually got out and walked probably a good hundred yards in the rain and got to a place to be able to look over to the left, and that's where we saw the fire just everywhere.

You're just sort of in shock a little bit. You don't really know what happened. And then we got back in the car, and we just sat there. Then we recognized one of the firemen from the Kenova Fire Department who'd come up. My dad rolled down the window and said, "Was that the football team?"

And shoo! He said, "I think so."

It's the first time I saw my dad well up with tears in his eyes. We, I can't really explain it, Sheila. It was kind of one of those moments where we knew what we felt, and we did not know what to say, but it was kind of like this father/son moment. This is going to be, like we knew, this is going to be hard. Our town is going to die. This is almost too much to take.

And then, obviously, you find out late that night it was Marshall University football team. That was November 1970. And you know, the movie really is not so much about the crash; it's about they weren't going to build the football team back. And it's all about that team coming back and rebuilding. That's the beautiful part of the story.

But every time I go back to Kenova, I go back and visit friends. I have an aunt who still lives there. I go back and do stuff at my church at times; I always, every time, go to the crash site. It's so sort of, I don't know, it's not holy ground, but there is something about going back to that spot that just, I don't know what it is, I just have to do it every time. And I did when I went back for the 50th anniversary of the Marshall University plane crash.

SHEILA: Weren't you invited to go and take part in a service there?

MICHAEL: Yeah. I did. I went and sang. Whoo! It was tough.

SHEILA: But I think what you do when you go back there, I think that's your way of honoring those people, of honoring that their lives mattered, that they were there.

MICHAEL: Yeah, and we'll never forget. It's amazing how many people--we didn't have as many people show up this time because of the COVID thing. But supposedly, every year, there are thousands and thousands of people that flood this whole--where the fountain is. I'm not talking about 3,000. I'm talking about 20,000-30,000 people show up. And boom! Every year, they turn that fountain off for that whatever, five minutes or whatever to remember those who perished that day.

SHEILA: So many people know and love you for your music. They love you for the worship leader that you are. You have a way of ushering us into the presence of the Lord in such a powerful way. Tell people who don't know if any of our viewers don't know about Rocketown. Tell us about that, why that was important to you, and what you were

able to do there.

MICHAEL: Well, I got the vision for Rocketown in 1991. It's a youth facility; it's a place for kids to go. But it was 1991. I heard about all these kids that were cruising in Franklin, and they were getting in trouble. I thought, well, gosh, I used to be one of those kids. I'm just going to go down and observe. Maybe I can learn something.

I remember standing on the corner, and I seriously heard these words in my head going, "Build it, and they'll come." I'm thinking, that's Field of Dreams; that's Kevin Costner!

[Laughter]

"Just build it, and they'll come." I felt like that was God. I went, what do you mean? Build it, and they'll come? Build it, and they'll come? And then just the vision just started to manifest itself inside my head and heart. I had this dream to build this youth facility. I did all this research that said it would never work. I called all my friends. And President Bush, Sr. was my campaign chairman. Steve Kay, he's a great friend of mine, helped us, and we built this big facility in Downtown Nashville.

It's going really well. We've learned a lot. With kids, a lot of times when you're trying to share with them this greatest story of all time, the Father heart of God for mankind, you have to earn the right sometimes to speak into these kids' life. They've been hurt. They've been lied to. So they want to, as Saint Francis says, "Preach always. If necessary, use words." So we just love on them, so you earn the right. And then, all of a sudden, all these kids are coming to know Christ, almost on a daily basis. So it's really great. There is a skate park, and there is a music venue and a dance studio, and a music studio. We have afterschool programs. We have a food program because we found out that kids hadn't eaten in three or four days. A kid, typical kid, mom's a prostitute, dad's in jail.

SHEILA: Wow! That's amazing that you're doing that. I just wondered, what would you say to those watching us? Some of the people that watch us are prisoners. We get people

from all different walks of life. What would you say to those who didn't have a father like you? Who thinks, well, I'm so happy for you, but that was not my experience.

MICHAEL: Well, I'm not going to pretend to know your pain because everybody has got a story. I just know that God can father you. I believe there is a way out. And I believe that if you let him do that, you're going to be able to help a lot of people who had the same experience you did. I think God is bigger than any sort of adversity or any sort of crazy life that we've had; he's bigger than all that. If you just look through the book, the Bible, look at all these crazy things that happened to people. But I believe if you'll just really commit yourself to the Lord and let him fight these battles for you, you'll find freedom, and it will change your life, and you'll see life in a totally different way. And it's beautiful!

SHEILA: You had a very special relationship with George W. I know that somebody who works with him really closely said to me, "Oh, gosh yes! He just loves Michael W. Smith!" Where did that friendship come about?

MICHAEL: Well, I really got to know George Herbert Walker Bush first; that was my first relationship. I was really close to mom and dad. I was at an N.B.C. Christmas Special, 1989; I always wanted to do Christmas in Washington. It was a beautiful, beautiful TV special on N.B.C. I got invited, and there they are on the front row. We met them before the deal. I'm thinking, oh my gosh, I'm singing for the President of the United States! And then later, after the show, we had a secret service guy and the president of N.B.C. come up and says, "The President and Mrs. Bush are requesting your presence at the White House." And so I said, "Okay." So Debbie got in the car, ran every red light; pulled up right in front of the White House. I looked at Debbie going, "What's going on here?"

So we go in, and Mrs. Bush is telling stories. Bush Senior had just gotten back from being on that ship with Gorbachev. So he's standing there with me and the president of N.B.C. telling us about his talks with Gorbachev. I'm going, I cannot believe this is

happening! And then I end up leading Christmas Carols in the East Room on that ancient Steinway grand piano.

And then he started writing me letters, Sheila. Just crazy! "Come and see me when you're in D.C." Like, you don't have anything else to do? You know? I must have gone--I can't even tell you how many times I went to hang out with him in Kennebunkport in their home. And I met W. at Kennebunkport. That's the first time I met him. In a fierce tennis match, me and my partner beat him and his dad. And I thought I'll never be invited back here again.

SHEILA: You're a brave man!

MICHAEL: I was a brave man. I should have just given the game away, but I didn't know how fiercely competitive the Bushes were. But that's how I met W. and obviously, I spent a lot of times W. In the White House as well.

SHEILA: Well, this book, *The Way of the Father*: "Lessons from my dad, truths about God" is a fantastic book. I want to tell you how you can get a hold of your own copy of this book. But first of all, you know that here at *LIFE*, we're very committed to providing clean water in parts of the world where there is no clean water. So I want to ask you to watch this, and then when I come back, I'll let you know how to get hold of this fabulous book. Watch this.

On the mission field:

Sheila: I've just visited the graveside of a nine-month old baby boy. I'm standing right beside his killer. It was water from this exact well that this darling boy is now getting his water from. It is a hand-dug well. It's not very deep and the water is filthy. Mosquitoes lay their eggs in there. Children get malaria; they get diarrhea.

This little one, this nine-month old boy died with diarrhea. The mom took him to the

clinic to see if he could get some medicine. They gave him medicine but by that point he was so sick he couldn't even take the medicine. He vomited it up again and died in her arms.

It's unthinkable! I would never ever let a child of mine drink this, but they have no choice! James, Betty, this is your heart. It's been your heart for years. The need is urgent. I've never felt such a sense of despair. I've visited four children's graves and I've been here three days.

And I've asked mothers, "What do you do when you lose a child?"

And every single one of them said, "We are just simply praying. We pray to God that he will send help."

Well, here we are. We are the help. You and I are the help. So please help us change the world. This is their normal -- they need a *new normal* where for the first time in their lives they drink clean, fresh, life-giving water.

End of video

In the studio:

SHEILA: Those kinds of trips mark you for life. They change you because there is something that, it's like everything inside of you screams, this is wrong! And the thing that kind of blows me away; we get used to watching things on television. We watch movies, we watch all sorts of things that are not reality, but this is literally two, three plane rides, and we're right there. This is just a few hours after we leave Dallas airport. And suddenly, you're there in this place where mothers that are just like you and just like me, and all they want is for their children to be healthy. They just want their children to be healthy and to be happy. But to have no choice.

At first, it was hard for me to grasp that concept till I got there. And we drive for hours over these dusty, bumpy roads to get to a village. And then when we ask, "Can we see your water source?" We'll walk with mothers, like the one you just saw, and you'll see these children put these kinds of dirty containers down into this well and pull up water that I wouldn't give to my dog. And that's all they have to give to their children.

But the other thing that marked me on that trip, in particular, was the fact that they're still praying women. They're not women who have given up. They're not women who think there can't be a god because this is so terrible. They're still believing and praying that God will send help.

And that's why you and I are here; we are his hands and feet. This is happening right now. Wherever you're watching, whether you're just finishing dinner or just having breakfast, or whatever you're doing, this is happening right now. These children are walking to these hand-dug wells because it is all they have.

And so, our commitment this year at *LIFE Today* is to drill 350 wells in over 20 nations. That might seem like a big task, but when you break it down it is very, very doable. If you are able to give \$48, that gives clean water for ten children for their life. If you're able to do \$144, that will provide clean water for 30. And if you would be able, perhaps with some of your family members, or perhaps you received some money you weren't expecting, wouldn't it be amazing to put it to use that would last a lifetime? For \$4800, you could drill a whole well in a village that will provide clean water for a lifetime for 1,000 people. When you do, please request Michael's book, *The Way of the Father*. It's such a beautiful book about the impact a father can have on the life of his children.

See, that's why we're here at *LIFE Today*. It's because of the love of the Father that he has had on us that we want to reach out to his children--every one of these little ones made in the image of God. Let's help them. Please go to your phone and give the very best gift you can. Please call. Please call now!

Begin video clip:

ANNOUNCER: Waterborne illness is a killer that strikes the most vulnerable. For many impoverished families, the death of a child is the tragic result of having no choice but to drink contaminated water. But with your help, they won't have to make this choice ever again. Mission: Water for LIFE provides clean, fresh drinking 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 for 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 James Robison's book *Living Amazed* full of inspirational true stories. You'll learn how divine encounters can change your life. In addition you'll also receive Randy Robison's brand-new devotional, *Upgrade: "Seven moves in seven weeks to a better life."*

With your gift of \$100 or more please request the N.I.V. Thinline Bible with easy-to-read large print. 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 inspiring bronze sculpture, "Divine Servant."

Please call, write, or make your gift online.

End of video

In the studio:

SHEILA: Thank you. Thank you so much for doing that! And for any gift at all, please say I would like my own copy of Michael's book, *The Way of the Father*. Thank you for

this beautiful, transparent, funny, heartwarming book, Michael. We appreciate it!

MICHAEL: Thank you, Sheila. Good to see you again.

SHEILA: Good to see you, too. And good to be with all of you. And we will see you next time. So from all of us here at *LIFE Today*, God bless you and be near to you. We'll see you next time.