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Week 34: Christmas Shoes and Smiles

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Jarrett Stephens

RANDY: Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Randy Robison; Sheila Walsh is with us as always. You know there are times when you just feel like God has left. What do you do? We're going to talk about that today. We have got Jarrett Stephens, the senior pastor of Champion Forest Baptist Church in northwest Houston. Sheila, I was looking at the book, and you know our guest, don't you?

SHEILA: Very, very well. In fact, let's go ahead and welcome you, Jarrett. Because it is such -- I cannot tell you what a personal joy it is for me to have you on the program. Because for many years, my husband, Barry and I, were at Prestonwood Baptist, and you were our teaching pastor. It was, if I've got that wrong, correct me.

Jarrett: No, that's right.

SHEILA: But any time you were on the platform, I learned so much from your ministry. So this is a total joy.

Jarrett: Well, thank you, Sheila, Randy, for having me. So good to be with you. Yes, 20 years served as teaching pastor at Prestonwood, here at Dallas. And it was a great ministry, a great church. Loved it! And just recently moved to Houston; been there seven months now. So it's just been a great journey, beautiful church. Really glad to be here with you.

SHEILA: You were telling Randy and I in the dressing room about the number of baptisms you've seen in the church just recently.

Jarrett: It's amazing! In the first 26 weeks of the year, we've seen over 350 people baptized. God is just doing amazing work in our church, and we're seeing young and old, and every stage and phase of life. It is just amazing to see what God is doing. So we're celebrating like crazy down in Houston.

SHEILA: That's awesome!

RANDY: I want to jump to the book because I think this will really touch a lot of people. Obviously, what's going on with you and your church? God is with you. You can see it. And in your book, *The Always God*, you really address an issue that I think hits home for a lot of people. Those are those times where we don't necessarily see God working. Where we feel, like us older people will understand, Elvis has left the building; we feel like God has just left our lives. So, where did that whole idea of addressing that issue come from for you?

Jarrett: Well, it started when we were in a nationwide timeout with the quarantine, right? When we were locked up, and nobody was going to work, nobody was going to school. So I was spending a lot of time outside running. I've got four girls, Sheila, as you know.

SHEILA: I know! They're darling!

Jarrett: So I was outside as much as I could. So I was running. Certainly, as a pastor, you're listening to people in your church and congregation who are going through tremendous trials and difficulties. You had people being laid off; you had people taking pay cuts with the coronavirus. You had people whose loved ones were getting sick; some were even dying. So the question was being asked, God, do you see what is going on here?

I think we've all been in rooms where we pray, but we don't feel like our prayers are going past the ceiling of the room we're in at the time. Do you hear me, God, when I'm

crying out to you? About that same time, there was a real popular song out, "The Waymaker": Even when you don't feel it, he's moving. Even when you don't see it, he's moving. So I would listen to that song while I was running, and then what was going on in the country.

And really, God put a message in my heart that became this book. And the subtitle really says it all, *The Always God*: "He hasn't changed, and you're not forgotten." So I break it up into three parts. The first part is: God is always here. The Bible says he is an ever-present help in time of need. So I talk about that. How God is always seeing what's going on in our life, always hearing, always speaking to us when we open his word. The second part is: He is always working even when we don't feel it, even when we don't see it, even when we don't think it. And I unpack how God works even behind the scenes. And the third part is: He is always faithful. Because of who he is, he hasn't changed. So you can always trust him, and you never lose your hope in him.

SHEILA: But the thing I've always loved about your teaching, and this book is great; I love this book -- is that you combine deep, profound, spiritual, unchanging, biblical truth with the reality that many of us are walking through. And you talk about an experience with a friend. I think his name was Zac. Tell us about that experience.

JARRETT: I would love to. It was his 41st birthday. Zac is a buddy of mine that I went to college with; he was a roommate my freshman year and kind of the life of the party. I kind of characterize him in the book as kind of like Chandler on Friends; real sarcastic, dry, witty sense of humor. When we graduated college, he lived up in northwest Arkansas, and I came to Dallas. So we kept in contact, really, through social media. He always kind of maybe send a jab at one of my pictures or something like that, just making fun of me.

But love Zac. He had recently got married; got married later in life, and they had just had a little boy, and the little boy had dwarfism. He and his wife Kelly were really just -- you could tell they were growing in their faith through this situation. On his 41st birthday, I

get a call that you never want to get. It was from a buddy of mine that said, "Jerry, have you heard about Zac?"

I said, "No, what happened?"

He woke up that morning, spent breakfast with his son and his wife, got out on a motorcycle that he had just gotten, and it got away from him as he was pulling out into an intersection. He hit oncoming traffic and died on his 41st birthday.

I start a chapter on "God is Always Seeing" with that story. You know what do you say to a person like Kelly who just loses her husband? Here they are raising this family, this beautiful little boy, and Zac was the perfect father. I don't know if you could say anything, but the message that resonated in my heart was, you know what? God sees.

And in the scripture, we know that God reveals himself through his names oftentimes. There is the story of Hagar; it's revealed in the desert when she's running away. She thinks she's going to die. An angel appears and says, "This place is El Roi, the God who sees me." I just related that story, Sheila, to Kelly's life, saying she doesn't need a sermon. She doesn't need any quick fixes. There are no answers to this. What would help is just to know that God sees me.

I think that is the message. If anybody is struggling, anybody is going through heartache, anybody going through tough times, often we think, does God see what's going on? And the message of scripture is loud and clear: He does see, and he does care.

RANDY: Years ago, I interviewed a chaplain for a local police and fire response, and he is the first on the scene to accidents, often to suicides. I asked him, "What do you say? What do you say to these people? What can you say?"

He said, "Oftentimes, nothing. I'm just there for them. I call it 'the ministry of presence.'"

You talk in your book about how God is present even when we don't necessarily hear him or see him working -- his presence. What assurance have you gained from knowing that Immanuel, God is with us?

JARRETT: Well, it is a great assurance, right? The fact that not only do we have God with us, but God through the power of the Holy Spirit lives in us. I talk about that in the chapter on living in fear. With this virus that came along, we saw so many people living in fear. In one section of that chapter on fear, I talk about how to get over it. It is to think Christmas. Because when we think about Christmas, we know that God is with us, we know that God is for us, and we know that God is in us. And if we really took that message to heart, and I think that really is at the heartbeat of this book, is we cannot live off of our feelings and emotions. Feelings come and go. I tell people all the time if you live off your feelings, your life is going to look like an EKG heart chart: Up-down, up-down, up-down. You can't live off of feelings. You have to live off the truth.

So when we go to the truth of God's word, and we concentrate on the truth of God's word, and what it says, that really helps us understand when going through these trials and these troubles and having these questions and doubts and concerns. It is not about what we think, it is not about what we feel, but rather it is about the truth of God's word. When we say yes, he is for us, and he is with us, and he is in us, and we really believe that, I'm telling you, it puts steel in your soul.

SHEILA: You deal with anger in a section of the book. There is a part that made me laugh out loud, where you actually ask your children a question about have any of you ever seen Dad angry? It was an interesting response.

JARRETT: Yeah! Bad idea. Don't do that. So, Sheila, you know how it is. You're writing these books, and I'm thinking I need an illustration, I need something to draw it out. The best advice that was ever given on writing a book is to put it on a shelf where everybody can get it. I always try to think about that. So I sat my kids down because I don't see myself as an angry person. I don't have a temper per se. I just don't get riled up.

So I said, "Girls, can you think of a time that dad was ever angry?" And it didn't take them two seconds to come up with multiple times.

[Laughter]

So I thought, well, maybe I do have an anger problem.

SHEILA: What is the scriptural response to anger because I don't know about you, but social media at the moment I find very disturbing. We live in such a cancel culture where you say one wrong thing, and you're immediately dismissed as a human being. But there seems to be a lot of anger, even amongst the church, amongst Christian communities; what does scripture tell us about anger?

JARRETT: I think it is the one sin that's keeping the Christian community back, perhaps more than any other. And we really see it when the political seasons come and go. People were airing out their opinions, to your point, Sheila, on social media. The Bible says a lot about taming the tongue, and we need to take the thumbs on our social media.

But the answer is Ephesians chapter four, that we replace all of that anger and bitterness with forgiveness. That is the answer. And so when we look at the cross with the Lord Jesus Christ, and we see that he forgave us, we can look at what someone has done to us, offended us, and we can forgive them. There is great power in that.

In my story, I share a little bit about that in this book coming from an abusive background, sexually abused between the ages of eight and twelve. Never told anybody until I was 19. We can carry that around and harbor that bitterness and that anger and that resentment, but I'm telling you when you learn the power of forgiveness, of letting go, there is something about it where you're not being held back any longer.

SHEILA: I'm thinking of people that may be watching right now, and that's been their experience. In a situation like that, you want to say, okay, God, I believe you see, but

why didn't you stop it? How do you wrestle with that? How did you make peace with that?

JARRETT: Well, I'm a big believer in the sovereignty of God; that nothing touches the child of God without first filtering through his holy hands. I would not wish abusive backgrounds on anyone, Sheila. I don't know why God allowed that to happen to me. It was a Little League coach that I played under from eight years of age to twelve years of age. I don't know why God allowed it, but I'll tell you this, I'm here on your show today, and I'm able to speak of the healing power of Christ. I'm able to speak of the hope that comes from forgiveness. I'm able to preach this message of reconciliation and love and grace and forgiveness. I can tell you this, I've never once shared this message when somebody has not reached out to me via email, or text message or phone call, or come up after I've shared my story and said, "You know what? That happened to me."

And so, while I would say I would never want to go back and relive it or go through it again, I don't think I would change it because of the hope that it's been able to give to others.

SHEILA: I understand that.

RANDY: That's a heck of a thing to say. I would change it on your behalf if I could. Let me ask you again about the nuance of the anger really quick because I think some people don't understand this. The Bible does say, "Be angry," but then it follows up with "but do not sin." Check me for a second. This is what I think. It's right to be angry when a boy is abused by a coach. I think we should be angry. But I think the catch comes in; what is our response to that? Is it a godly response? Because I think there is a godly response to sin, and there is a godly anger, and then there is a way to respond that's right.

JARRETT: Yes. Absolutely. There is a righteous indignation. We see Jesus in scriptures going through the temple, driving out the money changers because they were taking advantage of the people at that time. So we see this holy anger that Jesus has. So we

ought to see things, like abuse, things that don't line up with the holiness and justice of God, and those things ought to make us angry. But it's exactly what you say; what do we do with that anger? How do we act in that anger? So we have to make sure that our actions line up with the holy character of God just as much as we're looking at what is making us angry. So we have to make sure that that lines out.

SHEILA: When I finished reading your book, *The Always God*, when I got to the last page, Jarrett, the thing that I was so aware of was the redemptive nature of God -- that nothing is wasted. I think when we live with this understanding of -- to me, this is just like the tuning up of the orchestra before we're finally home with Jesus, and life is the way it was always supposed to be. I'm sure if you hadn't gone through that, your ministry would have been different. And as a lead pastor in a major church, the fact that you share that is huge!

JARRETT: I'm so overwhelmed by the goodness and grace of God, Sheila, in my life too. I don't know, I had great parents that loved me and supported me. I had a great church that I grew up in. I don't think you can; the abuse happening in an environment where I was still loved and supported at home. I had my relationship with Christ that really helped me. But I just cannot imagine -- I heard a quote one time that said, "God has yet to use a man greatly that hasn't been broken deeply."

SHEILA: I believe that.

JARRETT: I really believe that. I believe our scars tell better stories than our trophies because it testifies to the goodness and grace of God. The church ought to be leading the way in being able to be open and honest and vulnerable and saying, this is who we are. It is in our weakness we are made strong. It is the foolishness of the world that God uses to shame the wise. So I think when we lift up what Christ has done, that's what it is all about.

RANDY: That's a deep issue, that's a tough one, and I would point people to the book,

The Always God, to really unpack your story. We're going to tell you how you can get that here in a second.

There is one more thing I just don't want to let get away from us because I think in our microwave society, we want things right now. I prayed yesterday, and I haven't seen it today, so where's God? You have a personal story with your brother where it's really, it's the long game. I think it is important to bring that out because so often we get discouraged easily, but man, you had to stick it out, and you saw a great ending.

JARRETT: I do. I think that's a great point. In the chapter on prayer, talking about God always hearing, I think that is the issue. Our problem is not believing that God hears, we just want God to act on our timetable, and it just doesn't work that way. I tell Christians all the time, "Listen, don't waste your wait." God does his best work in the waiting times in life. There are some things that God, he does his best work where we're having to wait on Him and trust in Him.

I have written in the pages of my Bible two words over and over and over, "trust" and "in trust" -- "trust" and "in trust." As you read the scriptures, you'll see it. Our job description as believers is to trust the Lord and then trust our lives to him. This story that you're talking about with my brother, I pray for 17 years for my brother to come to know Christ. We grew up in the same home, went to the same church, the same vacation Bible School, same church camps, and when we went to college, he went away from the Lord and never came back. I went to Bible college to study to be a preacher. We went two different ways. He went to the frat house to study partying, I went to a Bible School to study preaching.

But I was burdened for my brother. I would share Christ with him. I would try to bring it up at times. And my brother would just say, "Jarrett, save it! Save it!" For 17 years!

And what happened is, as God always does, typically what he does to get our attention because God knows how to get our attention. He'll send a trial, he'll send trouble, he'll send a heartache, and it will cause you to look up for the first time. That's what happened

in my brother's life.

There was a particular situation I write about in the book, and God used it in his life for me to share the hope of the gospel. My brother, I was able to go down to New Orleans, Louisiana, where my brother lives, and I preached at the church that he was going to at the time and then baptized him in the back of a pickup truck. His life changed forever. So it was really great.

SHEILA: That is amazing! You know all through the book you have got this thing I love, you're going to see hard situations, profound scriptural answers, but to me, the thread that goes through the whole book is hope. I think we've come out of 18 months where people have been despairing. Is hope what you hope will be deposited into their lives?

JARRETT: That's exactly why I wrote the book. Never lose hope! That's what those last two chapters are about that God is always faithful. And because he is always faithful, you can trust him no matter what's happening in your life. And you never have to lose hope. He's never failed you.

Hebrews 13:8, when I sign books for people, I always sign it with Hebrews 13:8, "He is the same yesterday, today, and forever." He didn't fail you in the past. He is not going to fail you in the future. And that last chapter, I talk about hope has a rope, and his name is Jesus. So you're attached to him; he's never going to let you go. And so you never have to lose hope.

RANDY: That's good! You said something good. You said, "Think about Christmas." And we've been doing that already this year. We're thinking about Christmas, and we want to show you guys how you can think about Christmas and offer hope at the same time. Because Sheila, we're really excited about this outreach where we give shoes, which are practical, and we put smiles on children's faces. When you support this outreach, we're going to let you have a little piece of *The Always God*. So take a look at this and

then we'll come back and tell you exactly how to get Jarrett's book and how you can put smiles on people's faces this Christmas. Watch this.

On the mission field:

Randy: As we travel around the world, one thing we've noticed is the condition of the feet of so many children. We see children all over the world running around barefoot in some terrible conditions. It's not just unsightly, it is unhealthy and potentially deadly.

As we give shoes, which is a wonderful Christmas gift, keep in mind that we are actually giving them a chance for better health -- potentially, even saving lives. We are protecting them from some really debilitating diseases, things like hookworm, several things that can happen in their feet. These protect them. So it's doubled; it's a gift to give them something they don't have, and it is something to protect their health.

Just like the smiles when we go in and correct a cleft palate, we're not just giving them a cosmetic change, we're actually improving their health. Everything we do is to improve the health of others physically and spiritually.

So join with us as we celebrate the birth of our savior at Christmas, and we give Christmas Shoes and Smiles.

How are you doing, buddy? Let me see if we can get this on.

End of video

In the studio:

SHEILA: You might think it is a little early to be talking about Christmas, but our commitment is to be able to get shoes to so many children who've never in their life worn a pair of shoes. I'll never forget my first trip there where we had shoes, and that was in Southeast Asia. We traveled in a very old vehicle over very bumpy roads for a long time.

And we came to this village, and just saw these children with cuts in their feet, and looked into the eyes of the mothers who, I mean, they're just like you and me, they're keeping an eye on their children, but there's so little that they can do. And to be able to physically, myself, put these little shoes onto a child's feet was like a Christmas miracle.

Now I tend to think that at Christmas time we get a little bit overindulgent. We eat too much. We spend too much. Wouldn't it be amazing if, as God's daughters and sons on the earth at this moment, we determined, you know what? This Christmas is going to be different. It's not going to be what everything I get because I've already received the gift, Immanuel, God with us. This Christmas is going to be about what we, as a family, do in the name of Jesus. And Randy, it is very doable for every single one of us.

RANDY: Absolutely. Neither of us has 50 children or 50 grandchildren.

SHEILA: No!

RANDY: Not yet. But did you know that you can put shoes on the feet of 50 children for only \$180? I know this Christmas will go fast for us. But you really want to make a big difference? \$180, 50 pairs of shoes! Now, if you can't do that, you can put shoes on 20 children for \$72. Or maybe ten children for \$36. Whatever you can do, we just invite you to be a part of this beautiful expression of Christmas, of God with us, by saying, you know what? To these people in these desperate areas, we're with you. And we're here in the name of Jesus Christ. That's how you can partner with us to bless others. Don't forget those corrective surgeries. Those, on average, are \$500. Let me tell you the difference it makes in a child's life, not just the health issues, which are very serious but in the expression on the child's face. When you see a child smile who has had corrective surgery, it just warms your heart.

So I'm asking you to do whatever you can today. If you can provide for a surgery, maybe two for a gift of \$1,000, maybe more. Whatever God's putting on your heart, partner with us. Do it right now! Go to the phone, go online, make the best gift you can, and don't

forget to ask for today's guest's book. If you would like *The Always God*, we'd like to bless you as well. But let's put some smiles on some faces and some shoes on some feet. Do it now!

Begin video clip:

Announcer: Poverty is a killer, and because of it, children needlessly suffer, not only from a lack of food and clean water but also from a lack of things we often take for granted -- like a simple pair of shoes. Far too many children living in extreme poverty have never owned a new pair of shoes. And while that may seem minor in light of all their needs, walking with bare feet puts them at risk with life-threatening infections and diseases 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 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, green crystal shoe ornament, a treasure to display each Christmas. With your gift of \$100 or more, you may also request this keepsake boxed set of all four shoe ornaments celebrating the various outreaches of LIFE.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,000 or more to help provide over 275 pairs of shoes or two children with corrective cleft lip or palate surgeries. And you may request the beautiful "Divine Servant" bronze scripture.

Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of video

In the studio:

Isak: I'm here with this mother and her child, Aralmundo, and you can see from what you're seeing on your screen how this little baby boy has been born with a cleft palate. So her child will grow up with this deformity and will ultimately end up having huge struggles in life. And yet it is so easy for us to be able to bring this solution to Aralmundo.

You've seen how we've given shoes and we put shoes on children that so desperately need them, and how that just changes their lives because their little feet are not breaking open and bleeding and getting sores and infection. Well, we want to do the same here. We want to bring shoes and smiles. Smiles to Aralmundo. And I want to ask you from the bottom of my heart to please be the person that says, "Yes, I'll bring that smile. I'll give a smile for a lifetime to this little baby boy." Please, do that for me today. Give the greatest gift, give the gift of a smile.

End of video

In the studio:

SHEILA: Thank you so much! If the lines are busy, keep calling. Let's make this the Christmas of giving because of everything we've been given. And for any gift at all, ask for Jarrett's book, *The Always God*. He hasn't changed, and you are not forgotten. There could not be a more perfect message for right now. Don't you think?

JARRETT: It's the perfect message for our time, and I think it is going to give people a lot of hope. And thank you for writing the forward. They should get the book just to read your forward, Sheila! So thank you for writing it.

SHEILA: It was my honor and privilege.

RANDY: And it's our honor and privilege for you to be with us and to support the outreaches. Join us again next time here on *LIFE Today*.