

1/25/22

Week five: WFL

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Philip Yancey #1

**SHEILA:** Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh here with Randy Robison. One of the great things about what we do is that books are sent to us from different book companies, and you get a chance to read them and find out what's happening in people's lives. But when I knew that this author was coming up, I couldn't wait for the book to arrive, so I went ahead and got it on Amazon and began to read and couldn't put it down. I'm so so honored that you're with us. The book is called *Where the Light Fell*. Welcome, Philip Yancey.

**PHILIP:** Thank you, Sheila!

**SHEILA:** You know what I thought when I got to the end of your book? Because I've read almost everything you've written, I think. I understood everything you'd written at a different level. I read *What's So Amazing About Grace* and *Disappointment With God*, all the different books. But having read this, which is a memoir, suddenly, it was like pieces falling into place and explained the depth. Why did you choose to write this at this stage in your life?

**PHILIP:** I wanted to give the back story, what was really going on. My other books tend to be idea-driven books; they're questions I have. I feel blessed to be able to explore the answers full-time. I can figure out who is Jesus? He is not the Sunday School character I was taught. Who is he really? Does prayer work? If grace is the most important thing, why don't Christians show more of it? Some of these questions that we all have.

Behind that, however, was the story of my own childhood, which puts some urgency on those questions. I like to think of it as a prequel. I frankly learned myself when I started writing this book why I end up writing about two themes, over and over: Suffering and grace. Because I grew up with a fair amount of suffering, I grew up without much grace. It is a redemptive story. It is a story of hope; God did change. I had a pretty rough upbringing, but God changed that.

I wanted to put it together for myself just to understand, not just what I believe; I've done that in other books, but why I believe it; what happened behind the scenes to put me on a different course than I started out.

**RANDY:** I'm like Sheila in that this is one that I couldn't put down. I typically like the kind of book that you typically write, which is idea-driven, working through these things. But this personal story, man, it just -- my jaw dropped reading it many times.

Can you get into some of the details so that people understand where you've come from? It just sheds so much light on you.

**PHILIP:** Well, it starts out in the very first chapter with a secret that I discovered about my family. My father died when I was just 13 months old, so I have no conscious memories of him at all. He was 23, very devout, was planning to be a missionary in Africa, and had several thousand people willing to support him and pray for him. And then he died.

He died of polio; that was the big pandemic back then. He was completely paralyzed. Polio mostly hit children, but he happened to be one of the unlucky young adults at age 23. So he couldn't even breathe on his own, put in an iron lung machine.

So I knew all that, and I knew that he died. What I didn't know, and I found it out when I was 18, I came across a clipping from a newspaper. When he was in that iron lung, some

people around him, who cared for him, who wanted to support him, but they believed that God was telling them he would be healed. And so, against all medical advice, they removed him from the iron lung, signed him out of that hospital, put him somewhere else that didn't have the equipment. There was an article in the Atlantic Constitution, the big newspaper there, about an apparent healing underway because he thought he could move his toe a little bit and was feeling much better, progressing.

I looked at the date on the newspaper clipping, and it was nine days before he died. I learned that not everybody who thinks they speak for God actually does. What you believe really matters. These were not people who were against him; they were for him. But that changed my entire life. My mother, from that point on, was a widow. She was unprepared for life. She couldn't drive, she had never written a check, she had no income really. Our whole childhood, all the way through high school, was lived in poverty.

She was a Bible teacher. We were saturated with Bible. We heard the same Bible stories every day. Of course, she couldn't afford baby-sitters, so she would take us to her Bible clubs. And then, just to save money, because she couldn't pay rent, we lived in a trailer eight feet wide, 48 feet long on church property. So I could never get away from the church. I was saturated. Every time the doors were open, we had to be there. And part of my struggle, and I've been struggling ever since trying to figure out what is fake and what is real? Because when you're around an environment like that, you learn to give the testimonies, read the Bible, impress people, be camper of the week one week, and then be kicked out of camp the next week.

[Laughter]

So that's why I write about the things that I do because I think there are a lot of people who look at the whole Christian environment, and they're wounded by the church, and they just don't know what is fake and what is real. What can we trust, and what can we distrust? That whole thing? Who speaks for God? Are they really speaking for God? That's something we all have to face.

**SHEILA:** I wrote down one of your quotations because I thought it was so powerful. You said, "My brother and I were the atonement to compensate for a fatal error in belief." That's a heavy load for two boys to carry.

**PHILIP:** Right. Yeah. My mother, feeling, I'm sure, guilt and a sense of betrayal -- I wrote a book called *Disappointment With God* and her theology, you couldn't express disappointment with God, so she had to do something with those emotions. She transferred them to us. She thought, well, maybe if when they grow up, they become missionaries in Africa to replace their father who's dead, then it will be worthwhile.

We didn't turn out exactly as she wanted pretty early on. Especially when we were teenage boys! What else do I need to say? It just didn't look good. She kind of freaked out, went off the rails a bit, especially with my brother. I watched my brother, and they would fight. He's a kid, so he always lost. I had a different defense mechanism; I just tried to keep everybody, to build a shell around myself to protect myself, to keep them from getting to me, to survive.

I went through a period of time where my faith was up in the air. I didn't know what I believed. And then, I had a dramatic conversion experience. God, in His grace, reached out to me and changed my life forever.

**RANDY:** But before we get to that, I think there is one more thing people need to know. Because you're not just dealing with the loss of your father at a very young age, the poverty, but you mentioned church. It wasn't just any church. You were exposed to some very damaging, fundamentalist, racist ideas.

**PHILIP:** Yeah. And that was part of my questioning the whole thing. Because we were taught from the pulpit that people of color were inferior. They could never rise above a certain level.

**SHEILA:** From the pulpit?

**PHILIP:** From the pulpit. And actually, the deacons got together, and I still have one of the cards. I reproduced it in the book of what they would give to an African American, a black person who tried to enter the church. They would give them the card that would say, you're not welcome here. We know you're just a troublemaker. You're not a sincere worshipper of God.

That particular church softened a little bit later. A black student from Carver Bible College, a historically black school in Atlanta, applied for membership to this church. They got together and voted and finally rejected him because of his color. His name was Tony Evans. He runs a 10,000-member church in this town, along with a lot of other good things.

**RANDY:** We know him well.

**PHILIP:** I'm sure you do. That's the kind of church it was. It was blatantly racist. I found out that was wrong. More than wrong, it was sinful. It was blasphemous. So if they were wrong about race, maybe they're wrong about Jesus, maybe they're wrong about the Bible. So I went through this period of throwing it all away. And then I have been blessed after God met me; I've been blessed to go back piece by piece and try to figure out what should I keep and what should I discard? That's what I do in my writing, basically.

**SHEILA:** So there has to be a grace about that because the temptation would be to throw everything out. Which something is so clearly not just wrong; it is evil. The temptation to walk away. What have you seen? Toward the end of the book, I know you talk about going back to so many of those places. In fact, you even talk to Priscilla, Tony's daughter, who is just -- we adore her. Do you see significant change? Or do you think we're still struggling with some of the same issues?

**PHILIP:** Well, interestingly enough, I thought things like the race issue and divisions

and things like that, that was in the '60s when I was an adolescent. A lot of those things are just coming back again. Here we are 50 years later, and you're seeing the same protests in the street, the racial issues in the news again, and divisions in the churches. Those things haven't gone away.

But back to your question, Sheila, why didn't I throw the whole thing out? I had a brother two years older, Marshall, and he did throw it all out, and he went in a very different direction. He thought they can't tell me how to live. He dropped out of school his very last semester. He should have been a concert pianist; he was that gifted musically. But instead, he ended up tuning pianos; the same note over and over because he dropped out. He became one of Atlanta's original hippies. Did a lot of L.S.D. It affected his mind. Moved to California with a bunch of other hippies and just explored his freedom.

It's a funny thing. I watched my brother, and he thought he was going for freedom, but he ended up being addicted to many of these things, sex, alcohol, drugs, and he wasn't free at all. In fact, he was chained. He was addicted; that's what that means.

So I saw that example. I didn't want to go that route. And then, in His grace, God reached and changed my heart. It was something I wasn't really seeking at the time, and I tell the story in there. I've always been careful about trying to tell a conversion story because people might hear that and think, oh well, I didn't have one of those. Well, you're right. God meets us all in different ways. I don't know why and I thank God I didn't initiate it. I didn't say, God, I want you. Actually, God said to me, I want you. So everything was different from that moment on.

**RANDY:** I'd love to explore that, actually. Can you give us -- I want people to really see how that happened? Because it's beautiful. It won't happen the same for everybody, you're right, but tell us where you were when that occurred.

**PHILIP:** I was at a Bible college of all places, very unhappily there. We had a Christian service assignment, so we would go to a nearby local university. We were supposed to be

witnessing, having evangelism conversations with these students. I tried that a couple of times, and it was embarrassing, it was awkward, so I just gave up. I would sit in the student center and watch ball games. We didn't have TVs at the Bible college. This is a big treat. The other three guys were sincere Christians, and they were also my friends, and they did not judge me.

So every week, we had a prayer meeting, and Joe would pray, and Craig would pray, and Chris would pray. And then they would wait about ten seconds, and I never prayed. And then, one day, I just started praying. I said, "God!" You could touch the tension with a knife. I said, "You know I don't care if all of those students at the university go to hell." It was really silent.

**SHEILA:** Hard to amen that.

**PHILIP:** I don't even care if I go to hell. I mean, I might as well be doing witchcraft on a Bible college campus. And then I started praying out loud. I started praying about the scene of the good Samaritan, and this is not what Jesus had in mind when he told this story. But I saw it was like a revelation. I saw Jesus reaching down, the face of Jesus as the Samaritan reaching down, and I was the person in the ditch. I was the victim, the bloody person. And every time Jesus reached down to help, I would spit in his face. I could actually see the spit coming down his face.

I realized I thought I was superior; I thought I was arrogant compared to all of these Bible college students, these paper cutter kind of kids. And I realized I was the neediest one of all. That I was trying to be sophisticated and intelligent and all that, and arrogant -- and I was -- but I was the neediest one of all. It was one of those moments; I've never had anything like that since; it was just a gift from God. You can't bottle those things. God deals with us all individually. But it happened, and it changed everything.

**SHEILA:** Can you explain the title *Where the Light Fell*.

**PHILIP:** Yeah! I sure can. It comes from a quote by St. Augustine, who said, "I was unable to look at the sun directly." You know you're not supposed to look at the sun, right? "But I could look at *Where the Light Fell*. And that was my story because I was so saturated by church, I had been scorched by the sun. You know this angry God, this bully, this opinion that I had of God coming out of that narrow fundamentalist church. And yet, that started to break apart.

Three things brought me back. There is no way a Billy Graham tract, even the Bible, could get to me. I knew that stuff backward and forwards. I tried it, it didn't work. And God reached me, softened me first by these three things. The beauties of nature, when I was in a tough family situation, I would just go take a hike; and this was in the Atlanta woods. I would explore the birds and the animals and the flowers and all that kind of stuff. And digging in logs for insects and beetles; that was my resting place. And classical music, my brother was a great musician, and I learned early on, even though we were poor and lived in a trailer, we could enjoy great music. And then finally, romantic love. All three of those things softened me.

I realized that the church had misrepresented God to me. I came away with this image of a bully that was just waiting to break people, especially if they were trying to have a good time. I'll show them! And I realized whoever invented those things, those beautiful things if this was God, I had the wrong picture of God. And I wanted to know who came up with this? Who came up with love? Who came up with butterflies? I wanted to meet that person. So that was the softening. I was finally open, but I was still skeptical and nervous. And then God graced me with this one revelation that changed everything.

**RANDY:** I think we get nature; most of us will acknowledge the beauty of nature. And many people, I understand the music and the art. When I read that list in your book, I went, yep. And I hit romantic love, and went, how does that work? I'm just very curious how that revealed God to you?

**PHILIP:** I had a pretty hard shell in those days, Randy. This whole idea of unconditional

love. When you first taste that, you realize this is different, this is profound. And it set me up to believe that the heart of the universe is not a frown, it is a smile -- that God is love. First John tells us that -- God is love. It doesn't say God loves, verb. It says, "God is love." God can't help loving; that's who he is. And I was so far from thinking of that being God.

There is a quote from G. K. Chesterton that I enjoy. He said, "The worst moment for an atheist is when he feels a deep sense of gratitude and has no one to thank." That's what those three things did for me. Those three things, nature, classical music, and romantic love; I had a great sense of gratitude, and I wanted to thank. I wanted to find somebody to thank, and instead, God found me.

**SHEILA:** This is a sincerely profound book. I want you to get a hold of it. I want you to get a hold of it for somebody who has walked away who thinks this God is not for me. And so we're going to tell you after this how you can get a hold of your own copy of *Where the Light Fell*.

Randy and I have both been in places where there is very little light falling, and the people are really, really struggling. And you and I have this incredible privilege of bringing some light to some very, very dark places. Would you watch this?

### **On the mission field**

**RICK:** Jeanne, I wanted to show you where this village collects their water. It's just incredible. Look! It's only a couple inches deep -- just a few inches deep, and you can't even see the bottom.

**JEANNE:** Oh, my goodness!

**RICK:** This is an area that last year had a cholera outbreak, and over 20 people got killed -- died from cholera.

**ANNOUNCER:** Cholera is an intestinal infection caused by ingestion of food or water contaminated with the cholera bacterium. And it can kill a person within hours.

**OPEN CAPTIONS**

>> I lost my child because of cholera. We faced this disease here because of the unclean water.

**ANNOUNCER:** Rural villages in African countries like Burundi often have no access to clean water. And when animals and people share a dirty water supply, a cholera outbreak can be imminent.

**OPEN CAPTIONS**

>> We lost many persons. We are always burying people.

**ANNOUNCER:** Cholera still remains a global threat, especially in the world's poorest countries. Over a billion people are at risk, and children under five years old account for more than half of the global incidences and death.

**RICK:** Kids and people should not be drinking this dirty water at all.

**JEANNE:** Disease, pollutants of all kinds come into this water, and it's just flowing all through this whole valley, isn't it?

**RICK:** All through the whole valley.

**JEANNE:** And this is it for them.

**RICK:** They desperately, desperately need clean water. We have to have wells. We have to!

**End of video**

### **In the studio**

**SHEILA:** I remember the first time I stood at the edge of one of those rivers, and the thing that shocked me was the children were bathing in it, they were also drinking water from it, and just a few yards away from me, there were animals in the same -- the very same water. I watched as this darling mother gathered up water in a bucket, and I followed her back to the village with her two little ones behind her. They sat down, and she poured out cups of water, and they all drank from it. And something in me just -- it's like everything in you wants to say no! Until you realize how arrogant! It's all they have.

And that's why I'm so grateful to be part of what James and Betty started a long, long time ago. They look to see who is God using in this nation and how can we underwrite this work? Water for LIFE is literally that. On my last trip to Zambia, I spent days with mothers who gave me the privilege of walking to where they had buried their children and kneeling with them there. And then the following day, we'd go to where there is a well put in by the partners of *LIFE Outreach*. And then you see children laughing, smiling, a sparkle in their eyes. And we need to do that in 20 nations this year. So that's been our commitment to drill 350 new water wells. You can help us.

**RANDY:** Your gift today of is \$144 will help provide water for 30 people on average for a lifetime. We've been doing this, as Sheila said, for so many years. We have seen the effects. It turns lives around. It restores health to sick people. Do you know what that does? That demonstrates this unconditional love that God gives to all of us. We very often have to answer the question, why are you here? Why are you doing this? And that answer is God's love.

So will you join us in not only providing Water for LIFE but providing an example of the love of Jesus Christ all over the world? \$48 will help provide water for ten people for a lifetime. Many of you can provide an entire well. The average price there is \$4800. It varies from region to region but on average, that's what it is. If you can provide a whole

well, you will change a whole village, you will change lives, you will absolutely save lives.

Sheila and I have seen the effects. We have seen a positive change in people, and it happens quick. And we can do it with your support. Will you do it now? Will you go online, on the phone, call us, give the best gift you can to provide Water for LIFE.

### **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 *Bible Promises For Life*, the ultimate handbook to everything God guarantees you in his word. A powerful resource that will give you the confidence to face life's troubles. With your gift of \$100 or more, please request the "I Will Give You Rest" throw. It is a reminder of our Savior's promise of rest to those who trust in His grace and love.

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. You may request our new, inspiring bronze sculpture, "Let the Children Come."

Please call, write, or make your gift online.

**End of video**

**On the mission field**

**ISAK:** You've just seen a woman collecting water here in this hand-dug well. They have literally just dug in the area into the ground. They've got to where there is some water seeping through because it's an effort to try and get the cleanest water they possibly can. And yet, if you look at this water, you can see that it is not clean.

This is the reality of why the biggest killer of children under the age of five is waterborne diseases. Hundreds of thousands of children die on the continent of Africa each month because of the simple fact that they don't have access to clean water. And yet, it is so easy for us to change that through Mission: Water for LIFE. We come into these villages; we identify the right places to drill the water wells. We drill deep water wells that go to a level where the water is fresh, clean, and life-giving. And then we equip those with the pumps right there in the villages easing women's arduous journey of having to come and collect water. But most importantly, ensuring that those villages will receive fresh, clean water. Please help us today.

**End of video**

**In the studio**

**RANDY:** I pray you are going online or going to the phone and making the best gift you can. We can do it together. Sheila, I want people to get this book. It is so amazing!

**SHEILA:** Yep! For any gift at all, please say you want your own copy of *Where the Light Fell*. It took you a long time to write it, but boy, I'm glad you did! This is a phenomenal book. Thank you, Philip.

**PHILIP:** My pleasure, thank you.

**SHEILA:** And we will see you next time. For all of us here at *LIFE*, we want you to know we love you, and we pray for you. We have a great prayer center. If you ever need someone to talk to, just give us a call. We'll see you next time.

**RANDY:** Bye-bye!