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Week six: WFL

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Michael Phillips

RANDY: Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Randy Robison; Sheila Walsh is with me as always. I am so excited because today, we have that story of what God wants to do in everyone's life. A story of redemption. A story of hope. Maybe you need that; maybe someone you care about needs that. So you're going to get -- you're just going to be inspired today.

So, Michael Phillips, we're thrilled to have you on *LIFE Today*.

MICHAEL: What an amazing honor and delight to be on *LIFE Today*. It is a thrill of mine to be here. So excited.

SHEILA: I love your title. The book is called *Wrong Lanes Have Right Turns*. Brilliant, brilliant title. Talk to us about the cover.

MICHAEL: This cover is amazing. If I could really tell you the story of this 12-year-old boy on this cover, you might not believe it, but it's me at 12 years old. Six months removed from my father's passing, I was angry, lost, hopeless, and disoriented in ways I couldn't really articulate. This little boy decided that he didn't want anything to do with church, God, in any capacity whatsoever. I was a very angry young man.

And so this is me deciding to go down to one of the worst corners and play dice and start a life of dipping my toe and foot in the criminal element of life.

SHEILA: So that was not safe to do in that area?

MICHAEL: Oh no! [Laughing]

SHEILA: That's how much I know.

MICHAEL: Playing dice on the corner is risky any day of the week at any time.

SHEILA: See, I grew up in Scotland. We don't do that.

MICHAEL: Right! Right! Yeah.

RANDY: So give us a little more of the background there because you weren't at church that day.

MICHAEL: No! So my mother dragged me to church. It was the first time I ever yelled at my mother -- like I never yelled. I told her I was not going down to that place because it reminded me so much of my father's death. My father was a preacher. So to give context, he was a preacher. I'm a fourth-generation preacher that vowed he would never preach. How do you like that? [Laughing] But here I am today.

So my father had just passed suddenly, and I couldn't reconcile in my mind how this could be. And so that made me very angry with God. So going to church was a daily reminder of that pain. So my mother dragged me down to church that day, and I told her I didn't want to go. I actually cursed at my mom, which I still feel horrible about today. She has no problem reminding me about it. [Laughing] But it was terrible. So they're inside the church, and I'm outside the church on the corner playing dice.

RANDY: That was the beginning of a trajectory. Take us through some of that arc.

MICHAEL: It was. It was the beginning of a trajectory. I stole my first car that year.

SHEILA: At 12?

MICHAEL: At 12. I started selling drugs at 12. I ran the streets like it was nobody's business. I did so many things at a very young age that it's really hard to fathom, but I did it. The only thing that rescued me from going all the way in was I was an athlete. So that kind of helped me have some semblance of normalcy and structure that stopped me from going all the way there. However, that didn't last.

SHEILA: What happened?

MICHAEL: So when I was 17 years old, I got a full scholarship to a Division 1 school to play basketball, and football, actually, but I chose basketball because I figured I could do it longer. Plus, my suitemate was 6'6", 270 pounds, and he was the tight end, so I figured I might be better over here on the court. So I went home for a weekend visit. Actually, I didn't wind up playing in college because on this weekend visit, after hanging out with some friends, the individual driving the car fell asleep behind the wheel, and I woke up in the hospital. My lower torso was caught underneath the dash of the car. My upper torso went through the windshield of the car. And when I became conscious, I was in the hospital strapped to a board, and I couldn't feel anything.

They told me I would never walk again, certainly, never play again. I was devastated. Completely. I thought my life was destroyed because basketball was my passport to the world. And everything that I went through up to that time had conditioned me to think this is the only way I can make a life. This is the only way I can be somebody. So now that's gone.

So that took me deeper into my despair, which caused me to make a catastrophic decision for my life -- that could have been catastrophic. But it was changed, it was subverted, it was altered. My trajectory was totally changed by one decision. One man's decision changed my life forever.

RANDY: Before we get there, I love getting there, so now your sports are out; your scholarship, right? Where do you go? Did you turn to God at that point?

MICHAEL: No!

SHEILA: Were you angry at God for that, too?

MICHAEL: Pain has a counterintuitive process that causes you to go down before you can go up. That level of pain caused me to go way down. I decided that since I can't be an athlete, and since I won't finish school, I'll just be the best criminal anybody has ever seen. And at 17 years old, some of my friends and I started selling drugs; that sort of thing. All types of different aspects of that world landed me in the hands of federal officers. [Laughing]

RANDY: This is in Baltimore, is that right?

MICHAEL: This is in Baltimore in the mid-'90s at the height of the crack epidemic. We were fully all in, all the way.

SHEILA: One of the things I wanted to ask you before we get to that one gentleman and that one question that changed the trajectory of your life, back when you're fully in, when you're in bed at night, what's going through your mind?

MICHAEL: The first thing that really goes through your mind is that you don't belong there. You know, and it is not even subconsciously, you know consciously, this is not the life for me. But you don't know what to do with your pain. The pain that you're not willing to transform, you will ultimately transmit. And if you don't know where to place pain, if you don't know how to give voice to pain, where does it go? So when you see people doing the things they do, don't judge the what. Find out why.

SHEILA: That's great!

MICHAEL: Find out why. I was in an insurmountable amount of pain that I couldn't give language to. All of the guys with me, all of the people buying drugs, and they were every color, every shape, every creed, it didn't matter, we were all in pain. There was a woman, she was a registered nurse, but she had formed an addiction. She was very beautiful, and she got to the point where I couldn't recognize her. She came up to me one day, and I didn't recognize her. I actually drove her home because I was so concerned for her well-being. I said, "We've got to get you some help!" Think about it. I'm the one doing it. I'm saying, "I've got to get you some help."

On the way home, I asked her, "Why are you out here? You had this great job. What are you doing?"

She said, "We're all addicted to something."

Changed my life forever. She said, "Mine is just crack. Yours is power."

SHEILA: Whoa! Perceptive.

MICHAEL: I said, oh my. I never heard anybody articulate that before. This is my addiction? This is how I'm voicing my pain? By having power over pain-filled people? It totally, totally changed my perspective on what I was doing.

SHEILA: We've got to get to that one guy. That one question. [Laughing] We've got to get there.

RANDY: Until the feds stepped in and showed they had more power than you.

MICHAEL: Right! Exactly.

RANDY: Talk us through that.

MICHAEL: So the whole thing got shut down. I don't have time to go through the whole story, but the whole thing got shut down as those things do. And federal officers raided my mom's house. When we found out everything was being raided, I went on the run because I said, "Okay, I'm not going to jail."

So here I am in my car, headed to Miami. My mom calls me on a Nextel two-way. This is how far we're going. She called me on a Nextel two-way, and she said only like a mother can, "Baby, what are you doing?"

I said, "Mama, I can't talk right now. I'll call you when I get to where I'm going."

I didn't know if her house was bugged. I didn't know what was going on.

She says, "Baby, whatever you're facing, we can face together. Come on home."

So I got in my car; here I am, sitting in my car. I'll never forget it. I'm sitting in my car; my gun is on the seat. I'm sitting in the car, and I'm going, come on, man, just get to Miami, you'll be fine. You can figure it out from there. So I get in my car, and I'm on I-95 going south. But I'm like in Richmond, Virginia. You can either go down to Virginia Beach, or you can keep going down. It is a very busy intersection. So at that busy intersection, I made a decision. I said you need to turn around, and you need to turn yourself in. I was in the wrong lane at this very busy intersection, and there was no way I could turn around. And if I had kept going, I would have kept going.

And so I had to roll my window down and flag everybody down and literally, stopping traffic, asking everybody to get over because I was in the wrong lane, but I needed to make a right turn.

SHEILA: That's the title of the book!

MICHAEL: That's the title of the book, *Wrong Lanes Have Right Turns*. And I turned around that day and turned myself in, not knowing what the consequences were because consequences are more powerful than decisions.

SHEILA: Wow!

MICHAEL: We study decisions but study consequences. If you study consequences, you'll make a better decision.

SHEILA: That's really good!

MICHAEL: You'll make a better decision. And that decision to turn myself in was a powerful consequence in my life.

SHEILA: So you end up in front of a judge?

MICHAEL: I end up in front of a judge. After doing six months of what they called pretrial detention. Here I am thinking, okay, I'll turn myself in. I have no record. I'm not a violent offender. I don't even know what they're coming after me for. So first, let's find that out. Right? So I find out that I have a RICO charge, which is a racketeering charge. I'm facing 30 years, and it's serious. And so they had my bail so high I couldn't post bail. So now you have to wait until your trial, okay, and they do that in pretrial detention.

They put me in this place called "The Cut," which is like San Quentin, basically. I'm in a 23/7 cell, which means I can only come out an hour a day. And you'll never forget the sound of a prison door shutting. There is an eerie clank that echoes and reverberates around the cinder block walls that let you know it's over. I thought that my destiny would be written on those concrete floors and cinder block walls.

But on a Sunday, which doesn't happen, they opened that door, a guard tells me to come

on. He puts the cuffs on me, takes me to a van. I get in the van. I'm asking him, what's going on? Where are you taking me? What's happening? Because I don't know -- like I don't know if I'm about to catch a beating. I don't know what's about to happen. I get to a federal building, and they take me into the judges' chambers. He sits down in front of me and says, "Son, would you like to go to jail, or would you like to go to school?"

SHEILA: I've never heard of anything like that.

MICHAEL: I said, "Well, let me think." I said, "I would like to go to school." And he began to describe this program this gentleman had that was acquainted with Oral Roberts University that they wanted to put me in. It was a program for adjudicated youth; if you had the potential to go to college or were already in college, you could go to school rather than go to prison.

The prosecutor thought I was a pawn because I was so young. So I was the little fish they were going to throw back to get the big fish. They thought that I was inconsequential to the investigation. I'm very thankful for that. [Laughing] I'm very thankful today for that. And that was the one man that changed my life's trajectory by offering me that opportunity to go to school rather than to go to jail.

RANDY: So tell us, you go to O.R.U. and everything is perfect, right?

MICHAEL: No! [Laughing] No. Because you can change your location but if you don't change your mind-set it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if you move to California or to Texas or to New York. If you're the same, you're going to be the same in those places. I was still the same, still trying to figure out what do I do with this pain? It was a culture shock to me. I'm an east coast city guy in Tulsa, Oklahoma; I had no reference for what I was getting into. I really didn't. And more importantly, I didn't want to mess anybody else's life up. So I just stayed to myself, mostly off-campus, but still doing those same things I was doing back home.

RANDY: With the drugs. Until when?

MICHAEL: Until spring revival -- spring revival, which was, if you are an O.R.U. Alumni, you understand what I'm talking about. So spring revival is mandatory; you had to go. And they told me, you have to be there, you have to go. And I was a very belligerent young man. I had a very difficult time with authority. So if you tell me this, I'm going to do the opposite thing. And so they said, "But you have to go. You're not going to be able to get your grades if you don't attend."

So here's what I decided to do. I never did drugs, only sold them. I hardly ever drank because I wanted to be sober of mind to control my environment. But this is how bad it was for me to go to church. I didn't want to go, so I decided I would smoke weed, which I did. I'm going to smoke five what we call blunts.

RANDY: Yeah, that's a bit!

MICHAEL: It's a lot. I drank a fifth of Grey Goose Vodka, and then I chased that with half a case of Budweiser with some friends.

SHEILA: To go to spring revival?

MICHAEL: To go to spring revival. I said, "I want to be as numb as I possibly can so that I don't feel God's presence."

RANDY: How did that work out for you?

MICHAEL: It didn't. They started singing a song, "How Great Thou Art." This feeling came over me that I knew. I knew God's presence; I'm a fourth-generation preacher. I grew up in church. My father used to sing that song playing the organ.

And when they started singing, all that pain, all of that trauma that went

unacknowledged, God acknowledged it that day. Because when trauma goes unacknowledged, tragedy goes uninterrupted. So my life would have been a tragedy unless God interrupted this trauma. And he did it through a song.

And the presence of God came over me. I was sober, I was crying, and I was so terrified I ran out of the chapel while they were singing, up the middle aisle, by the way, because I'm on the third row. And I ran back to my dorm room. I slammed the door just to escape God's presence, but I couldn't.

I picked up the phone and called my mom. I was just crying; I was bawling, and she hung up on me! [Laughing] She said, "Oh baby, God is dealing with you." And she hung up the phone.

And then there was just me and the presence of God in that room. I got down on my knees, and I said, "God, I give you my life." I was 19 years old. Turns out I was in that room for three days.

SHEILA: You were unaware of the passing of time?

MICHAEL: I thought it was 30 minutes. My R.A. knocked on the door, and they thought I had like O.D.'d or something -- or was dead. He said, "Man, your whole countenance has changed. What happened? What's going on?"

And I shared my testimony for the first time. I gave my first altar call at that moment, and I have been preaching the gospel ever since.

RANDY: Beautiful!

SHEILA: As you can probably tell, there's a lot more to this story, and you're going to want to read it in *Wrong Lanes Have Right Turns*. I'm going to tell you how you can get a hold of your very own copy of this book. It's an amazing -- let me tell you what Bishop

Jakes said: "A heart-wrenching and triumphant story that will change lives."

And we'd like to ask you if you would help us change some lives right now. Would you watch this?

On the mission field

SHEILA: Waterborne illness is a killer that knows no boundaries. The death of a child is the tragic result of having no choice but to drink contaminated water.

Miriam lives in a shack in Central America. She had to watch her son die in her arms because the only water source she has is a contaminated river.

In South Asia, the journey these women make each day to collect water is filled with potential danger; danger not from the rough terrain but from their water source that causes sickness, and all too often the death of a child.

Pitch is a young mother from a small village in Cambodia. She knows the water she collects is filled with contaminants, but she has no other option. One of her children has already died and the other one is sick.

Thousands of miles away in drought-stricken Angola, the rural clinics cannot keep up with the number of children dying from waterborne diseases.

JAMES: I am by a water source that is so typical of water sources all over the world. The water is contaminated. We know for a fact in this area disease is killing entire families and many children. Would you be an answer to the need of so many people right here and respond by giving them clean water? Thank you so much for doing it.

End of video

In the studio

SHEILA: There is something about when God has rescued you and when God has impacted your life. I think it is like he washes your eyes again, and suddenly, you see things that you would have missed. That was my experience the first time I went to Angola and saw, wept with mothers who gave me the privilege; it's hard to know the words of walking with them so they could show me where they buried their children. The thing that was so clear to me was that this woman beside me, we were just born in different countries -- we're both mothers. I can't imagine what it would be like to have as your only choice to give your child water that you know has already killed one of your other children.

But until we are able to make an impact and drill a water well in their village, they have no choice. I've seen the difference. I've gone to the villages where there is nothing, and these hand-dug wells, six feet down, filthy, horrible water! And then the next day, I actually went to a village where there was *LIFE Outreach International*. It was something that you'd helped us drill, and the difference is literally death and life.

Randy, we've made a commitment this year to drill 350 additional new wells that will change the lives of so many people.

RANDY: It will! You're right; we've seen it. We've seen how simple it is to go into a village where there is death and bring life. I have to tell you, I have knelt down beside the graves that were short because they were children's graves. When you stand up from there, something inside of you says, this is wrong, but we can make it right. This doesn't have to be this way, but we have to do something. I've got to tell you, I stood right there and said I will never shy away from asking our partners who love people around the world to do something in the name of Jesus Christ to impact others. I will never hesitate to ask them to partner with us to drill water wells and deliver clean drinking water to people who might die otherwise.

It's very simple. A gift of \$144 right now will help provide clean drinking water for an

average of a lifetime for 30 people. Many of you can do that right now. I just ask you to go to the phone or go online and do it right now. Some of you, a gift of \$48 is what you can do to provide clean drinking water for ten people -- ten lives impacted! Some of you can give an entire well, a gift of \$4,800; that's the average cost of the wells. We do these 350 wells in 20 nations around the world. Some of you can make that gift or more.

Whatever you can do, I am just asking you to reach out today and make a difference by providing clean drinking water, which will save lives. So go to the phone, go online, right now. Do it! I pray you'll do it right this second and make the best gift you can. You will be giving 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

In the studio

RANDY: Go online or go to the phone. Give the best gift you can! And thank you for saving lives. When you do, ask for Michael's book because there is so much more here.

SHEILA: This little boy, 12, dice outside, you won't go in the church, how did that story end?

MICHAEL: To bring it full circle, 17 years later, I bought that exact building. I started my church in that building, from the corner playing dice, to pastoring thousands of people in that very same building.

SHEILA: What a story of redemption!

RANDY: It is! And I love it. Thank you so much for watching. And Michael, thank you for being here and sharing your story.

MICHAEL: Absolutely! Thank you for having me.

RANDY: We'll see you again next time.