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Week 27: WFL

Sheila Walsh

Joni Eareckson Tada

SHEILA: Hello! Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh. I'm so glad that you are tuning in for this program today because I have the privilege of having a conversation with one of the women I love and admire most on the entire planet. You know her too and you love her. It is just a joy to welcome Joni Eareckson Tada to *Life Today*. Joni, hello my friend!

JONI: Oh I'm so glad to hear that word *my friend* because Sheila, everything you just said, I'm going to mirror it right back to you. You are a precious friend and I love serving the Lord Jesus in the kingdom with you.

SHEILA: I do too! Do you know one of the things I've always loved about you? Almost every single time that we've been together you always say, "Let's sing." Has that always been part of your life?

JONI: Well, Sheila, every time I see you, I want to sing, Chin up, you saints of God, you've nothing to worry about. [Laughing] One of your favorites -- it's a Scottish ditty, I don't know. But I remember the time, Sheila, you and I were at Billy Graham's memorial service, and of course, it was packed, jammed, crowded. But when I arrived at the parking lot there you were about five rows over and you came running across the parking lot. And the first words you said were, "Joni, can we sing a hymn?" Do you remember what we sang? I would think we would have sung: When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout in victory.

SHEILA: Amen, friend. Amen! I was very excited to see there was this timeless classic,

your book, *JONI*: "An unforgettable story" is getting an update. But I want for the two people on the earth who don't know your story, do you mind just giving us a little brief where it started?

JONI: Sheila, it was almost 55 years ago next month. In July, it will be 55 years ago. Wow! 55 years ago that I took that really silly dive into shallow water and didn't check the bottom. You're a teenager, you think you can do anything you want to do, and you don't appreciate the risks you take. Then suddenly, through a reckless dive into shallow water, you crunch your spinal column and sever it and become a quadriplegic, with no hands, no use of hands or legs, and suddenly, your life is just broken.

What can I say? It is absolutely, down for the count, decimated, falling face flat on the floor broken. I just catapulted into depression and couldn't understand why a good God would allow something so awful to happen to such a young Christian. In fact, a Christian who just months earlier had asked for a closer walk with you, Lord Jesus. I would love to be drawn closer to you! And then I end up breaking my neck.

You know, Sheila, forgive me but I think that's one of the reasons I resonate with you because you understand brokenness. I remember something you once said and correct me if I don't have the right words. You talked about when you were in that psychiatric institution, you were flat, face down on the floor, and you said something to the effect that God met me on the floor.

SHEILA: Yeah!

JONI: I just bet every one of our viewers has been there or maybe they are there, and there is nothing more sweet, tender, near, real, than finding the God of the universe down on the floor with you. Or sitting next to you in the chemo chair in the cancer clinic or the rehab center learning how to write and type on a computer keyboard with a stick between your teeth. There is nothing more wonderful than seeing Jesus in your utter, utter weakness.

So being with you today and talking about this 45th-anniversary edition of the *Joni* book means so much. Maybe it is timeless -- I think you used that word *timeless*, maybe it is timeless because it is everybody's story, isn't it, Sheila?

SHEILA: But you helped me understand that because I was speaking once at one of your retreats and we were just grabbing a moment backstage, just the two of us. And you said something to me that I've never forgotten. You said, "We're both handicapped but it is just easier for you to forget that you are." You made this profound statement that because of your physical limitations you don't get to forget. And honestly, Joni, that was a marker in my life.

JONI: Thank you. I think that is a good thing that I am forced daily to recognize my weaknesses. I wake up in the morning and I've told you this before, I am so utterly overwhelmed with one more day of quadriplegia. One more day of somebody giving me a bed bath, doing my toileting routines, wiping my backside, wiping my drippy nose, brushing my teeth, feeding me breakfast. It is just Jesus! I do not have the strength for this anymore. But you do and I can do all things through you as you strengthen me. It is my mantra and I think it should be anybody's mantra. That wonderful verse from Philippians, we cannot survive on our own strength and so God is constantly forcing weakness and disappointment or immense difficulties on us so that we might see that the weaker we are, the harder we have to lean on Jesus, and I don't know the harder we lean on him the stronger we discover him to be, and that is such a good thing.

That's kind of the story of the *Joni* book. Maybe that's why it is still around after all these years, 45 years.

SHEILA: Have you updated it at all? Have you added any of the more recent parts of your story?

JONI: Yes! Thanks for asking, Sheila. I did. Lots of new photos, of course. But I

included a lengthy epilogue and a closing chapter to update the reader on my two battles against Stage 3 cancer which I still am dealing with that cancer. But honestly, harder than cancer, and even harder than my quadriplegia is the battle I deal with chronic pain. Before we went on the air today, I was confiding in you that man, I need prayer because pain is just so overwhelming.

Honestly, Sheila, there are so many times at night, I've learned to talk to my pain. Maybe that's my way of defanging it so it doesn't terrorize me. I've familiarized myself, I've familiarized myself with its nuances and so I understand it. I know what it is I've had it so long. And I say to it, pain, you think you're going to crush me but Second Corinthians chapter four, verse eight says: Though I am hard pressed on all sides, I am not crushed. So you're not going crush me! I'm going to walk into the middle of you, fiery pain, as though we're walking into the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. And I just bet like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, I'm going to find one like the Son of God walking beside me. It's my way like I said of defanging this wicked serpent of pain. And in it, strangely enough, I find the sweetness of the Lord Jesus.

Why is it, Sheila, that God always chooses to show us his lovely face in the midst of such overwhelming hardship? I don't know. That's just the way it is. When we think of our Savior who was -- he hung on his cross like butchered meat on a hook in a slaughterhouse. That's what Jesus looked like according to Isaiah 52, people didn't even recognize him as a human likeness. And so I think that's how we come to know him best when we suffer in some measure, small measure as he once suffered on his cross.

SHEILA: But I have to say, Joni, more than anybody that I've known in my lifetime, you have stewarded your suffering in a holy way. It has impacted how you reach out to the world through

Wheels for the World. But tell us a little bit about -- I know that we have three homes in Ukraine, we've had them for 20 years at *LIFE*, but you've been reaching out to those in Ukraine who are struggling with a disability I can't even imagine.

JONI: Well, let me paint a little bit of a preface to that ministry that we're having in Ukraine right now. When you suffer and when you experience the grace of the Lord Jesus and his sustaining power, the first thing you want to do is tell other people about it. You want to help other people get up out of their suffering. You want to pass on the blessing to others who are hurting worse than you are and that's the plight of millions of people with disabilities in Ukraine.

So when the Russian missile strikes began, we thought of those who were most vulnerable. Of course, that's always people with disabilities; women and children are the ones who are often forgotten, left behind. It's always those with disabilities in a war that suffer the greatest. They're the most vulnerable; they're shell-shocked, exhausted, and separated from families and friends. You've got to imagine, somebody in a wheelchair on the fifth floor of an apartment building when the air raid sirens go off, it is not like they can jump out of bed and rush down the steps and quickly go for the bomb shelter. No, they're stuck.

So we began working with our in-country partners in Ukraine to begin evacuating a lot of these Ukrainians with disabilities. We've evacuated well over 340 people with disabilities and their caregivers. Our in-country partner, her name is Galena, we're working hard to get these people to safety in Poland.

But the story doesn't stop there. Oh my goodness! Once these people with disabilities come to Poland then you're going to find accessible welcoming homes for them. And so our ministry at Joni and Friends is looking at some long-term care solutions for these dear people. Oh, my heart goes out to them. And I encourage all of our friends watching to be praying for our efforts.

SHEILA: We will. We've been watching Galena on your Instagram page and watching her updates from there. But I also watch you on Joni and Friends, and you gave a little update. You've been on the radio for like 40 years but you're giving like a fresh coat of paint to your podcast, a fresh title.

JONI: Boy, you do follow me on Instagram! Oh my goodness! Well, I've been doing radio for 40 years. I can't believe that. When I started, it was okay, so I'll probably run out of stuff to say after eight months. And here I am 40 years later. But Sheila, like you I continue to find my solace in the Word of God. If I had hands that could, I would press my Bible against me and take it to bed with me every night. I just eat the Word of God, I drink it like Jesus said in John six. He wants us to look at him as though he were our flesh and blood, and that we drink him in. We feast on him. The Word of God means everything.

So I'm always learning new stuff. I'm experiencing new challenges. This battle with chronic pain has me on the front lines. And so I still have lots to say. Actually, it is mostly about -- what can I say? Heaven is not far beyond the horizon for us all and so I love sharing hope. Those hopeful messages in the Word of God help us put our own suffering here on earth in context. So the new title for the Joni and Friends radio program is, Joni Eareckson Tada Sharing Hope. That's what I love to do!

SHEILA: And if anybody has earned the right to share hope with authenticity, it is absolutely you. Because I know some of our viewers are thinking this, why when you are paralyzed why do you still experience such constant extreme pain?

JONI: Well, you know I've heard it likened to people who have had amputated limbs, it's a neuropathic pain that's hard to describe. And so a lot of it is neuropathic. Sheila, to be quite honest, a lot of it is degenerative disc disease and arthritis, and I don't know how it is that a quadriplegic can feel pain, but I do. But then I feel hungry, and then again, I can feel nauseous. So there are a lot of things going on in the inside that I can still feel, and unfortunately, pain happens to be one of them. Yet, it is that -- I like to often call it a sheep dog snapping at my heels, driving me down the road to Calvary where I know otherwise, Sheila, I would not be inclined to go. I really wouldn't. But pain is that which pushes me into the arms of Jesus.

So it is a strange friend. It's a nasty but-you've-got-to-live-with-it neighbor. It's a bruising of a blessing. But a blessing, nevertheless, because it draws me closer to Jesus.

SHEILA: So your book -- great new version after 45 years! When this book was first published, did you have any idea of how God was -- it sold over five million copies!

JONI: Oh, my goodness! No way! I wrote that book -- I wrote that book a little over nine years out beyond my diving accident. What did I know back then? [Laughing] But actually, the good thing about the *Joni* book is that I did then, and I still do now, anchor myself to the Word of God. There are plenty of scriptures in those pages that will help the reader grapple with his own limitations from a godly perspective.

But back then, never ever would I have dreamed that we would be sitting here talking about its 45th-anniversary edition. And I just don't know what would have happened had I not had that diving accident. I'd be on my second marriage. Maybe I'd be maxing out my credit cards. I'd be -- I don't know what I'd be doing but I know I wouldn't be delighting in the Lord Jesus and talking about him with you, Sheila.

SHEILA: Well, I want every one of our viewers to get, even if you have a copy of this book, you don't have this copy, you don't have this new edition with these new photos and all this incredible, timeless, severe mercy, and wisdom. But first of all, I'm going to tell you how you can get your copy.

But we also have a heart here for those who are struggling in all sorts of ways around the world. We would love to invite our viewers to help us, as you have done before, but we're coming to you with a fresh call to help us once again. So please watch this and then I'll let you know how you can get your own copy of *JONI*: "An unforgettable story."

On the mission field

[Rooster crowing]

Announcer: Life -- carefree, nurturing, loving, secure. Universal needs for children and parents alike, yet in many places of the world such qualities are threatened every day by a simple and basic need -- water!

Open Captions

>> During the dry season, water is very hard to find. But our water source, year-round, is dirty and diseased. Sometimes our whole family gets sick. As a mother, it is so painful to be unable to provide for your kids. When my daughter was three years old, I gave her the water. It caused her to start vomiting. She became very, very sick. She had diarrhea and her stomach was bloated. I didn't know what to do.

Announcer: At that point, nothing could be done. Her daughter fell unconscious and never again awoke. Nown knew the cause.

Open Captions

>> No words can express the regret I feel for giving her that water... But what choice did I have? Now, I'm so afraid the water will also take my son. If I lose my son, I will have nothing to live for.

Announcer: The lifesaving solution of clean water is so incredibly simple. However, it is one we can only deliver with your help today.

End of clip

In the studio

SHEILA: Her suffering comes in so many different forms. Joni talked to us about the physical suffering and the pain that she endures every single day. But even as I watched that piece, and I watched that mother, there is something very fresh to me. A few weeks ago, my son got very sick. He ate something and had an immediate severe allergic

reaction to it. And I, I got him in the car, I drove a mile down the road and we're in the emergency room. And within no time at all, they're giving my son the medicine that he needs to save his life, to remove the pain.

When I was sitting, I sat with him in the dark through the night when he eventually fell asleep, and what was on my mind was all the stories that we bring to you of mothers in parts of the world where they don't have that option. That mother that we just saw would love to get in the car and go to the store and bring back fresh water, but she can't. This is the only water that she has access to. It's taken the life of her daughter.

As you look at that precious little boy, now she is afraid for his life, and she feels guilty because she gave the water to her daughter. But it was all they had. Water for LIFE, this mission is literally that. It is water so that they can live.

Having been in so many nations, we work in over 20 nations bringing fresh water and the difference it makes is night and day. I've been to some of the villages where they're drinking the water that you just saw there. I mean it is like, as a mom I can't imagine handing my child that thinking, this is all we have, and you need water. But I don't know if this is going to kill you or not.

We've got to do something about this. You and I are the body of Christ on the earth at this moment so we're responsible for what's going on at this moment. And we're committed at *Life Today*, we've been drilling wells for many, many years but we have made a commitment to our partners who are on the ground right now to be able to drill 350 new wells in over 20 nations.

How that breaks down, we have a very efficient system. For about \$4800 that will drill a well in a village and provide clean water for about a thousand people for their lifetime. The average life of a well is about 70 years. Some of you can do that and have done it before and you can do it again. Some of you can't do that but if we all do what we can do we can change this. If you're able to give \$48 that will provide ten people with clean

Water for LIFE! \$144 clean water for 30 people.

So please, let's do something. When you give any gift at all say, "I want to read Joni's book. I want to learn how to stand strong in the midst of suffering." But even as we stand strong, let's reach out to those who are suffering, and let's do it now. Please call. Please just give the best gift you can and let's bring hope as Joni talked about to those who need it so badly. Thank you!

Begin video clip

ANNOUNCER: Across the globe, hundreds of thousands of lives are lost each year to waterborne disease, and nearly half of those are children under the age of five. Through Mission: Water for LIFE, you can give mothers hope and children a future as we provide clean, life-giving water for thousands of children and their families before it is too late.

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 of any amount, we'll send you the *God's Daily Promise* devotional set. These four seasonal devotionals each contain a daily scripture, inspirational message, and room to journal your prayers and insights from God's Word.

With your gift of \$100 or more, please request the "Faith, Hope, and Love" coaster set. All four beautiful sandstone coasters come in an elegant natural wood holder and artistically display the words of First Corinthians 13:13.

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, "Let the Children Come."

Please call, write, or make your gift online.

End of video

In the studio

SHEILA: Thank you so much. And remember, for any gift at all, we want to send you this remarkable book.

Next week, Joni, you're going to be celebrating, you and your darling husband Ken are going to be celebrating a very special anniversary.

JONI: Yep! My 40th wedding anniversary! I cannot believe it. Ken Tada and I will be married four decades next week. And oh, my goodness, are we going to be celebrating! You know, Sheila, really quickly, people ask me, what is the success of a 40-year marriage where you and your husband just think the world of each other? We have been reading through the Bible every year for more than 17 years. If Ken were here beside me right now, he's down at the supermarket, he would tell you it is the Word of God. It is those anchors in the Word of God. So I'm very grateful for the fact that Jesus has given us great joy for 40 years.

SHEILA: What's your website where people can connect with you? And not just connect with you, but can help you and support your work?

JONI: Thank you for asking that. It is at JoniAndFriends.org. That is J-O-N-I AndFriends.org. You can watch lots of videos about our retreats for people with disabilities all around the world. We take wheelchairs and bibles to many disabled people, and you'll get updates on Ukraine.

I'm going to ask some of your viewers to volunteer with us. We're going to be holding 36 family retreats this summer across the U.S. We need lots of help so come and volunteer with us!

SHEILA: Okay, you heard it, people! It will be life-changing for you. Dear friend, thank you so much for being with us. Tell Ken when he gets back from the supermarket that we love him too.

JONI: Absolutely! Thanks for having me on, Sheila, and blessings to all of our viewers.

SHEILA: Thanks for being with us. We'll see you next time on *Life Today*.