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Week 8: WFL

Tammy Trent

Michele Cushatt

In the studio

TAMMY: Hello everybody, I'm Tammy Trent. Welcome to *LIFE Today*. So many of us have had our faith shaken to the very core and wondered where God is, in the middle of it all. I think if we're being honest, many have also felt in that place that our faith is falling apart, it is failing us, life is failing us.

Well, our guest today knows all too well about suffering and truly being robbed of life. Yet, she has fought for peace and a knowing that God is still in the hard stuff through it all every single day. Michele Cushatt is an author, a speaker, a Bible teacher, and a three-time cancer survivor who has just released a brand-new book titled, *A Faith That Will Not Fail: Ten practices to build up your faith when your world is falling apart*.

Welcome, Michele! It is so great to have you here!

MICHELE: It's so good to be here, Tammy. I have been looking forward to this.

TAMMY: Have you? Me too! We're both looking forward to it. We have high expectations. So tell me your story. I know a little bit, I know bits and pieces. But I want to know your story. Can you take me back?

MICHELE: Yeah. I grew up in the church. My parents became Christians when I was about six months old or so. So even though my parents were brand-new to faith, I've really never known life without Jesus in it, which is a tremendous gift. The downside of that is sometimes we equate

faith with a math equation. This is what I mean. We think faith is all about doing what God wants you to do, avoiding the things he doesn't want you to do, and if you do everything right then he's on the hook to give you a good life.

TAMMY: Oh, my goodness! That's so true! Yes!

MICHELE: I thought that's the way it works until starting in my 20s I had a series of consecutive losses that lasted up until this present moment that was basically my life not going according to plan. It started when I was unexpectedly a divorced, single mother at the age of 27, 28. I was in the ministry, married to a pastor, and through a series of circumstances ended up completely alone with a one-and-a-half-year-old and needing to basically reinvent myself and my life. Right?

That was big enough, hard enough in and of itself. Then following that I met my wonderful husband at church. He had two children, I had one. We thought, wouldn't it be nice and easy to make a blended family? Piece of cake! [Laughing]

TAMMY: Yeah! Real easy!

MICHELE: Needless to say, it doesn't look in real life like it does on TV. It is hard, it is challenging. We got through that hurdle and it was about ten years in and we're like, we've got this! We can do this. Very, very thankful. And on an ordinary Tuesday before Thanksgiving I got a phone call from my doctor. The first words out of his mouth were, "I'm sorry, Michele, it's not good." The short story of it is that I found out that day that I had squamous-cell carcinoma of the tongue, cancer of the tongue.

TAMMY: Oh, my goodness!

MICHELE: Crazy, huh?

TAMMY: Is that rare?

MICHELE: I had never heard of it before. I didn't know it was possible to get cancer in your tongue. It is very rare and it's usually people who are much older, have a higher incidence with males than females, all these things. I'm going, wait a second! That's not me. I'm 39, female, what's going on?

And that first diagnosis was cancer caught early, kind of a best-case scenario. However, as much as they told me that day, "We got it all, you have nothing to worry about it," I proceeded on with my life, they were wrong and so cancer came back two more times, each time more serious than the last.

I should also mention I make my living as a speaker and a -- I do some preaching, teaching, talking. I'm pretty attached to this part of my body. And so it came back three times, the third time the most serious where they basically had to take out two-thirds of my tongue, cut open my arm, my leg, my neck to try to rebuild a functional mouth so I can eat and drink and talk. And then basically, gave me a very short time to kind of get my affairs in order, at which point in time they started radiation and chemotherapy. And I won't go into the details but when you start shooting radiation at the face and the neck, it has serious consequences.

So, for the past several years since that most recent diagnosis, I've been trying to live again. Trying to figure out how to live with a permanent functional disability. How to find an identity that isn't what it was before. Basically, just like so many people have gone through, my story has cancer and divorce, and all this other stuff. But everybody has their cancers and when it happens, it kind of rips the rug out from under us and eats us alive. What do we do with our faith in those places?

TAMMY: Absolutely! Can I ask you a hard question? What is life like for you every single day? The challenges, the disappointments -- you've been through it. And here you are today, you're writing books to try to help other people. I'm sure your own faith is shaken to the core. But what is it like every day for you?

MICHELE: It's very hard. I want to be super transparent. I think it is so important when we talk about faith that we kind of pull back the curtain and tell the truth about the struggle, the difficulty. Because faith in theory is one thing but real faith in the middle of real life is something else entirely. You know this better than most.

So every day for me is hard. I had a friend ask me a couple of years ago, "What is the hardest thing for you right now?"

I said, "It is a choice I make every day to wake up and choose to live."

TAMMY: Every day. Every day!

MICHELE: To choose to live, to believe that there is still a good God working out a good purpose even when your life doesn't look good. And that's it, a daily momentary choice.

TAMMY: You talk about lamenting a lot. Why is that important?

MICHELE: Well, lament is an ancient kind of word and an ancient practice. I honestly feel like the modern church, the big C church has lost the art of practicing lament. Lament is very simply the vocalization of grief. It's taking the sadness, the losses, the things that we feel and putting words to it.

TAMMY: Any kind of word? I mean, like I'm mad, I'm angry, I'm upset. Dear God, why have you forsaken me? Why is this happening in my life? It's enough, I can't take it anymore! All of that, is that lament? Just like here it all is, God. I'm just letting it all out.

MICHELE: It's telling the truth. It's telling the truth.

TAMMY: And what freedom does that bring?

MICHELE: Exactly. I don't know why we have come to believe that we can't tell God the truth.

The reality is he already knows.

TAMMY: Exactly. We can't ask him the hard questions.

MICHELE: But we can. He already knows. So why not take all of this and rather than think that we need to carry it on our own, why don't we go to the one who said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest." He has asked us to bring our heavy loads to him, and that includes our anger, our grief, our sadness, our confusion, our questions and tell him the truth about it. That's what lament does. When we tell the truth about our suffering, then healing can finally begin.

TAMMY: "When we tell the truth about our suffering, healing can begin." So many of us might be at -- kind of hit a wall because we aren't honest with that process. So it's like you're healing stops. People get stuck. They think, why am I stuck? What a great word just to say, you know what? Bring it all before the Father. Be honest with everything that's going on because that's where you can begin that journey of absolute wholeness and absolute true freedom in your life. This isn't their journey or their journey, it's your journey to healing, your journey to wholeness. So be honest with it. Bring it all to God.

MICHELE: I think of Jesus as you were talking when he approached somebody who needed healing. And he simply asked the question, "Do you want to be well? Do you want to be well?" Well, the only people who can answer that question "yes" enthusiastically are people that can admit they need healing in the first place.

That's what lament is all about. Is acknowledging our desperate condition in the presence of the only one with the power and authority to do the healing.

TAMMY: That's right! Why do you think we struggle with knowing how to deal with our grief? I've always considered that one thing I could give them to help them get through it. Do you have something that you tell people?

MICHELE: Absolutely! I love to get super practical when it comes to this. I say if you have a friend or a family member, somebody who is really suffering, whatever it may be, suffering comes in all forms, always start with empathy. We too often start with wanting to fix it because somebody else's pain makes us uncomfortable. Right? Pain is contagious. So when we see somebody else suffering their discomfort gives us a measure of discomfort. So we're so quick to respond or tell them what they need to do to fix it or tell them what they need to do better or whatever. It is not helpful.

So before you rush the fix, thus make space for empathy. So basically, to say, this is a saying I use all the time. I will look at somebody who has shared a hard story and I'll simply say, "I'm so sorry for your suffering. I'm so sorry. I see your suffering and I'm so sorry."

TAMMY: That's so good. I think that I've learned that fewer words are better. Have you ever heard that before? People say actually what do I do? What do I say? It's like fewer words are better. Sometimes all I grab up --

MICHELE: Just show up.

TAMMY: Yeah! Just grab a girl at the altar that is waiting to be prayed on and I'll just hug her. Sometimes I won't even begin to pray yet. Just hold and hold and hold. And it's like you can feel them crying more and more as the embrace goes on a little longer. And it is just in that moment that you both feel like I get it. You don't even have to tell me what's going on. I can feel the burden and I'm holding you up, sister. In the name of Jesus, you're going to get through this. I love those moments.

MICHELE: What you're describing there is when a person doesn't have enough faith or belief because of their suffering, you're saying you can borrow mine. So you're entering them with empathy and saying, "I'm so sorry for your suffering." And at the same time you're saying, "I know it is hard to believe right now, but that's okay. I believe enough for both of us. You're going to be okay."

TAMMY: That is so good! It's such a great practical thing for us to do when we say how can I help somebody that's also grieving? Again, fewer words, just showing up, being available and wrapping your arms around them, and saying nothing. In that moment you're right, what a practical thing to help bring somebody closer to their healing, even.

MICHELE: Grief doesn't follow a set timeline and I think that's something important for us to recognize for ourselves but also our loved ones. It's not like, well, once a year has passed you should be over it. I just want to make sure those who are suffering right now or grieving, guess what? If you haven't followed that certain timeline or a timeline somebody has projected for you to say, well, if you're feeling sad, it's okay to feel sad. God is not telling you, you should be over this by now. He is still present with you. He sees. I do believe God weeps with us for our suffering.

He also knows the future promise so he weeps with us but he also knows what's coming. So we can take it to him and this is part of that beautiful act of worship where we hold current reality and future promise in both of our hands -- to hold them both. That's what worship looks like. The current reality, future promise, and we hold them both, intention, knowing that the God who made us is going to redeem it all.

TAMMY: Hallelujah! Sometimes we get so fixated on the past, the hurt, and stuff that we don't know how to put our mind on the redemption; how God will restore, and how he will redeem. Because the pain and the hurt are so heavy that we just attach to that and that becomes our identity rather than the redemption story of God restoring your life.

MICHELE: And I've seen the flip where we think we have to be happy all the time and paste on a smile and not acknowledge our pain. That's why it takes them both. Go back to the Book of Lamentations. It is called Lamentations so it is all about lamenting and there is so much grief. And then right there in chapter three he goes, "But this I call to mind, and therefore, I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed for his mercies are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness."

TAMMY: Hallelujah! Amen! Michele, why is it dangerous for people that are suffering, that are hurting or their faith is shaking, why is it dangerous for them to isolate? To just kind of close the door, shut the door, and say, "I don't need anybody. I'm going to figure this out myself."

MICHELE: Okay, I feel strongly about this, and I feel like this is a word for all of us right now. The gospel is a story of God exiting Heaven and entering humanity because the truth is anything broken can only be healed in relationship. The story of the gospel is about Adam and Eve in the garden, their separation from God, this break in relationship, and God sent Jesus to enter into relationship, to facilitate that healing.

Well, the same is true for us. What is wounded in relationship can only be healed in relationship. So as we go through different difficulties and our struggles, the more we isolate the more we short-circuit our own healing. God wants to bring a gospel-level redemption to us that's greater than anything we can imagine. But it happens, this is God's design, and it happens in community. It happens in relationship.

I think of God operating in the Trinity, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Father, right? He operates in community. There is something unique about that. And he created us in his image. We are made to be in relationship with one another. But that requires us to take the risk and enter in. It's what you and I are doing right here. Do you feel -- there is healing happening right here.

TAMMY: 100 percent! Just even as you say that I can get emotional about it. Yes.

MICHELE: Exactly. There is healing happening right here. And I could keep my story to myself and sit at home but I would stunt my own healing but I also would stunt yours and vice versa.

So something beautiful happens when we choose to tell the truth, not just to God but also to each other, to share in this.

TAMMY: Yes. And to seek that out. To seek that community. To seek those safe places. For us,

girls, for me, I'm always praying for that circle around my life, that community in my life. It has helped bring healing to my life. And after my husband died, right away I invited girls to my home once a month. And I said come and let's just fellowship. Let's just hang out. Let's just watch movies. Let's play Yahtzee. It brought healing to me.

What it also did was I'd gone from caretaker to Trent, my husband, and I didn't have that. It was just gone like that. So now it allowed me to care for other people. So I was taking my eyes off of myself, my own pain, and putting it onto somebody else, my energy, my thoughts. Like I was just pouring into somebody else and that was bringing me healing. That I did for an entire year, built that community, and it brought me back to life.

MICHELE: It is so critical. And they were doing it for you and it was healing them too. That's the reciprocity of this whole beautiful gospel community. That we give and take and receive and offer. And in that exchange, we find something of God.

TAMMY: You know what I love about your book? You say there are ten practices to build up your faith when your world is falling apart. So you've done the research for me. You've given me ten practices in this book. Is this, Michele, what you'd call, I feel like it is a guide, a Bible study?

MICHELE: It is a Bible study but what my goal was when I was in the pit, when I was in the pit, I had no strength or energy to kind of put myself back together so I needed something easy to reach for. And so this is good theology that is accessible for somebody that needs a lifeline of faith.

It's so easy. They're all in tiny bite-sized pieces. You can read it in five minutes; 50 tiny chapters. But the idea is if you need somebody in your ear telling you, you can do this girl, you can do this.

TAMMY: Amen. So that's the takeaway. You're a cheerleader. You're going to help us build a faith that won't fail. I think we've both kind of traveled that road where our faith has been shaken and we've had to trust Jesus with every piece. And we've watched him put things together, which

is a beautiful, redeeming story of God's love.

Michele, what is something that you hang onto every day that just kind of sets you up on that path daily?

MICHELE: Yeah, Hebrews 11:12 talks about the cloud of witnesses that cheers us along on our journey. People who have gone before, people of faith around us, all this helps us run our race well. And one of those people for me is Jill Briscoe. She doesn't even know this. I heard her speaking at a conference and she said this. She said this quote and I have it on the inside of my Bible as a reminder because it keeps me focused on why I'm here, why I still believe, and what my purpose is from here all the way to the end.

She simply said, "You go where you're sent. You stay where you're put. You give it all you've got until you're done all the way home."

TAMMY: I love that! All the way home.

MICHELE: It is that simple. You go where you're sent, you stay where you're put, and you give it all you've got until you're done all the way home.

TAMMY: Oh, my gosh! I love that so much. It's honestly how I feel when I take that mission trip with *LIFE Outreach* every time. I go where you send me, God. I'll stay and I'll gather the stories and I'll give it all I've got to help bring life in Jesus to those precious families until I'm finally home.

I want to send you Michele's book today, with any gift that you can make to Water for LIFE. Just make sure to call and request that and we'll get that to you. But first, watch this.

On the mission field

ANNOUNCER: Water sources for over 700 million people worldwide are not safe. Sickness and death result from drinking contaminated water like this. Yet mothers like Yolok continue to collect it for their families.

>> This water is stagnant and has waterborne diseases. All the animals in the area will come here to drink. I know I will be sick later.

JOHN: So why do you drink it?

>> I have no other choice for clean water. When this water is gone, I will have to dig down to get any water.

ANNOUNCER: "I have no other choice" is something every mother like Rhoda lives with. And it stands as a painful reminder for her of her losses because of this contaminated water.

>> My daughter was sick for five days when I realized she was going to die. She died with me here because the hospital is too far away. I want to remember my daughter but it hurts so much. I really miss her.

ANNOUNCER: Stories like these represent a snapshot of what mothers around the world are faced with. But it doesn't have to remain like this simply because they have no other choice.

JOHN: This is the water source for this village and so many other villages just like it all over the world and it can't keep happening. Those of us who can have got to get involved. We've got to care enough to make a difference in water. The water crisis around the world. And it doesn't have to be that way. Help us give Water for LIFE.

In the studio

TAMMY: I've sat with these mothers on countless trips with *LIFE Outreach*. I've held them.

I've prayed with them. I've cried with them over the loss of their children. I know some of what it feels like to have your heart completely shattered into pieces when you lose someone you love. Part of you is gone too. The loneliness, the depression, the pain, the struggle to go on -- feeling like you just have nothing left. Maybe you've done something to cause this, maybe it is your fault -- if only, if only, if only!

And the hopelessness that they feel can creep in when they look around and see that nothing has changed. Death is still knocking on their door every single day. They'll keep drinking that water because it is all they have. They have no other choice. To think that a better source of water is right there under their feet! They just need help getting to it.

They're not asking for much. They're just asking if we could help them change this. So when they do look around and they see a water well, they feel safe, free to thrive, hopeful for a better day, and trusting in the Lord as their healer and provider of all things.

Wouldn't it be amazing to help them live in the freedom of fear and hope for a brighter day? It is a prayer I pray over my life every day. So why wouldn't I want that for somebody else who has it way harder than I could even imagine? I have safe drinking water but they don't. I don't ever struggle with the fear of dying because of the water I'm drinking but they do -- every day.

So how can I share what I have with the least of these? We can all share a little by giving to this mission: Water for Life, to bring them the water of life.

On average, it takes about \$4800 to drill a complete well; to assess the land and find the perfect spot, and then go and bring the big machinery into those remote locations and start drilling until we finally hit that clean water source no matter how long it takes. But our team will do it. They know how to and they do it right because it will last on average 70 years, which is a lifetime, and that's why we say, "Water for LIFE."

Now, I understand that not everybody can give a well. But I do believe that we can all do something to help. And here's how we can do it. For your gift of \$48, you can provide water for

ten people. And a gift of \$144 can provide water for 30 people. We're just asking simply that you do something today because the more of us that come together as a part of this mission, the more successful it will be, in Jesus' name.

Now I know many of you have given before and I want you to know how much it means to us, to all of us at the *LIFE Outreach* team, and to those whose lives you've changed. We appreciate it so much. We couldn't do any of this without your continued support so thank you. Truly, thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

And for the one who might be watching for the first time and wondering, is this for real? Well, unfortunately, the hardship and death that these people face every single day because of the lack of clean water, yes, it's heartbreakingly real. Yes, pain is real but so is hope. And it is my hope that today will be the day that we rise up and we say count me in. I want to help. Here's my offering. Lord, multiply and use it to change the world! So that together we can bring Water for LIFE. Let's do that together today. Make that call!

Begin video clip

A: Every day, thousands of lives are lost 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's 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 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 Dr. Don Colbert's Health Zone Essentials, a road map to living a long, healthy, and energized life. With your gift of \$75 or more, we'll also send you The Health Zone Bundle which includes Dr. Colbert's Healthy Gut Zone cookbook filled

with advice, and his favorite recipes to guide you on your healing journey, as well as his special DVD Stretch Your Way to Better Health; gain flexibility, mobility, and balance through daily stretching techniques.

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 request our new bronze sculpture "A Cup of Water" inspired by Jesus' words in Mark 9:41.

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

End of video

In the studio

TAMMY: Remember with any gift that you can give today, we want to send you Michele's book, *A Faith that Will Not Fail*. I know it will bless you. Just make sure to request that. Michele, I have loved getting to know you.

MICHELE: Likewise! Likewise!

TAMMY: You've been amazing today. I'm so grateful for you pouring into my life. So grateful! I know this book will pour into so many more lives. I hope it's been an encouragement to you just knowing that you can effectively build up your faith that will not fail, and one that is rooted and grounded in the Word of God. You win, we win! Romans 8:37 says we are more than conquerors in Jesus' name.

Thank you so much for watching and we'll see you next time on *Life Today*.