

4/15/24

Week 16: Spring Mission Feeding

Randy Robison and Tammy Trent

Ronald Olivier

In the studio

RANDY: Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Randy Robison. Tammy is with me. How are you doing, Tammy?

TAMMY: I'm good. Today is a good day.

RANDY: It is a good day! And you know it is encouraging. That's what I like about today's program. We see stories on the news all the time of mainly young men caught up in the streets, maybe in drugs and gang activity. Often it ends in tragedy and I think we get a little numb to it.

TAMMY: Yeah, I could say that too.

RANDY: But there is always hope.

TAMMY: There is always hope, Randy. I love how the Lord brings people across our paths to remind us of his hope, to remind us of a redeemed life. How he can take somebody's life and change it and turn it around for good. So many times we say, oh, that person is so far gone. There is no hope. There is no way.

But I'm telling you, you will love the testimony that we have today. It will bring you hope; and especially maybe to a mama that is a praying mama that might say, Man, does

God hear my prayers? Should I keep praying? I think you should and I think you'll hear why.

RANDY: You will and it is told in a book called *27 Summers* written by Ronald Olivier, and he joins us now. Ronald, great to have you on *Life Today*.

RONALD: Great to be here. Great to be here!

RANDY: So I kind of gave them a little bit of a hint, growing up, tough circumstances, father walking out, the streets, the gangs, the drugs. Tell us where that led, and how you got to that point that will explain the title of your book.

RONALD: Yes, well, I grew up in New Orleans, the inner city in a neighborhood that was filled with a lot of crime. A really great transition took place in the late 1980s. It was the crack epidemic that came into our neighborhood and it completely destroyed it. So with a lot of drugs comes a lot of violence. I can remember the birds wouldn't even come out anymore. It was that bad.

During that same period of time, there was another great transition taking place in my life, my dad who was my hero—I come from a broken home so my dad was remarried and decided he had to move to Jacksonville, Florida. When he moved oh man, I was very broken. I was angry, I was hurt. I couldn't wrap my mind around what was going on and how to define what was happening in me.

And so when I really needed a father to go through that, to navigate me through all that he wasn't there—and the streets were there. So the streets began to father me. And consequently, I found myself in prison at the age of 16.

RANDY: Let's explain that a little bit. What happened that landed you there?

RONALD: Prior to the altercation that took place that got me there, I had gotten in a

fight with some guys, well, one guy. We actually jumped him. It was several of us behind something crazy. And the next time he sees us, we all are on Canal Street, and it's actually Christmas day. I was kind of outnumbered. He was with more guys than I was with, and so we got into it.

During that time, I had on a starter jacket. When you wore a starter jacket during that time it was very dangerous, you had to have a gun on you. People were robbing you and killing you for your jacket. So we saw them out there and really tried to avoid them. Tried to get on a bus to leave and they tried to snatch me off the bus, and I turned and shot.

So two guys were shot. One, the guy who survived, who I actually had the altercation with, who tried to snatch me off the bus, I think, he was shot four times. Another guy who was with him was shot twice, and that's the one who died. This happened on Christmas day.

And so later, two days later I find myself in a juvenile bureau. I'd been there quite a few times. My mother would come to sign me out, and I was looking for my mother to sign me out of this. But she couldn't sign me out of that. So later, I went to a juvenile detention center. After going to court several times, they decided to charge me as an adult and send me to an adult prison.

Now I went from facing juvenile life, which was to the age of 21, to facing the death penalty. So I found myself on trial at the age of 17 for first-degree murder. I'm facing the death penalty. I think this is where everything got real. And that's where I felt the weight of it all.

So I began to realize 12 people are making a decision upon whether I live or die, and they really don't know anything about me. And then I heard so clearly, my mother said this years prior to me being there. I believe God was bringing this back to my memory. She said, "Baby, if you're ever in trouble that I can't get you out, you call on Jesus."

And at that moment I got on my knees and just cried out to God. Was crying tears. I was really scared, I didn't want to die. I prayed a separate prayer. I made a deal with God. They say don't make deals with God. I made a deal with him. My prayer was, Lord, if you don't let them kill me, I promise you I'll serve you the rest of my life. And man, I'm here. He kept his end of the deal and I'm trying to keep mine.

TAMMY: So when you called on him when you surrendered your life in that cell, what happened next?

RONALD: Oh man, for the first time in my life, I didn't know what it was, but for the first time in my life I felt the peace of God. There was a calmness that came over me and I just had an inward reassurance that I was going to be okay. Couldn't explain it, didn't know how, just knew I was going to be okay.

So we go back out into the courtroom. The jury comes back with a guilty verdict on the lesser offense, which is the—to second-degree murder. What I didn't know is it carried a mandatory life sentence without the benefits of parole. In layman's terms that means you die in prison. You never get out. I was kind of relieved I was living but I was still stunned that I had to spend the rest of my life in prison. I can remember listening to the judge saying that. It kind of stunned me. But I like to tell it like this, in that holding tank, man, I received two life sentences. The state was giving me one, well, God was giving me one. The state had no benefits, but the life sentence that God gave me had so many benefits that he reminds us in his word not to forget him.

RANDY: I love that. You know what? The story after this just continues. I want you to hear what happened to Ronald after he started his life sentence in prison because that's an amazing miracle too. But first, we want to show you a situation where, unfortunately, some people feel like they may have a death sentence. But you and I have an opportunity to reach in and give them life. Watch this.

On the mission field

Open Captions

>> "If you want your prayers answered, be an answer to someone else's prayer."—James Robison

TAMMY: When I'm on a mission trip I can't help but feel the pain a mother has when she sees her child suffering because there's no food for her.

Open Captions

>> As a mother, I feel like a failure because two of my children died. It starts with a lack of food. Then malnutrition leads to other terrible diseases. It's really hard for me to think back to the times when they passed away.

TAMMY: This is Armita. Can you begin to imagine the crushing impact of losing your children because you couldn't feed them? It was devastating for Armita but she knows she must carry on for her other children. How does she manage it? Through fervent prayer.

Open Captions

>> Jesus is the only hope we have. When we go to sleep, we pray, Jesus, thank you for sustaining us for another day.

TAMMY: I would love to tell you Armita's story of losing her children because the lack of food is rare—but it is not! These women by show of hands shared how many children they each had lost. They well know the same heartache as Armita. Mandelena lost five children. Yngo, two children. Margarita, one child. Julia, three children.

One thing all these precious mothers have in common through prayer is they put their hope for tomorrow in the hands of Jesus. My heart is always moved by all the precious mothers I meet here in Africa. And I'm especially moved because I know we share the same hope in Jesus and the way he provides. Today, you and I have the opportunity to be

his hands and a direct answer to these mothers' prayers. God is truly on the move in Africa and I invite you to be a part of it.

Open Captions

>> "If you want your prayers answered, be an answer to someone else's prayer."—James Robison

End of video

In the studio

TAMMY: It's—it's very fresh for me because I just got back from Ethiopia. Their loss is devastating. Their suffering is enormous. The heartache is almost unbearable.

Many mothers feel like failures when they lose a child. And sitting here with you today, I don't want to fail them. I don't want to fail these mothers. When I'm sitting with them, when I'm talking with them, when I'm walking with them, when I'm praying with them, I just keep thinking I don't want to fail you. How can I help?

That's why I love doing what I am privileged to be able to do. What an honor for me to speak for them in their greatest time of need and to share that need with you today. Together, we can make a difference in and impact the lives of these families, especially these mamas who don't want to lose another child.

We are feeding right now 350,000 children every day. And we want to do more, we need to do more. As you saw in that piece, we have to do more. It is not that hard to come together and make a difference starting right now by doing something today. \$30 will feed three children for three months, \$50 will feed five, \$100 will feed ten, and \$1,000 will feed 100 children for the next three months. This is something we need to do, we have to do, we must do. We must do this as God's children. He's asking us to stand in the gap today right now for these families.

Would you go online or would you make a call? Would you give the very best gift you can today? Let's not fail these mothers.

Begin video clip

ANNOUNCER: Right now across the continent of Africa, children are suffering facing severe malnutrition and even death. Severe drought and famine, including in crisis areas like Ethiopia, means we must replenish food supplies immediately to keep feeding 350,000 children and help reach more people in desperate need.

Through *LIFE's* Mission Feeding outreach your gift of love can be an answer to prayer for a hurting and hungry child in their time of need. Call now with your lifesaving gift of \$30, \$50, or \$100 to help feed and care for three, five, or ten children for three full months. With your gift of any amount, we'll send *The Blessing of Taking Communion*. In this book, discover how the sacred ordinance of communion helps to feed your soul and reminds you of the transformative power of receiving the Lord's Supper.

With your gift of \$100 or more, you may request the LIFE Legacy Journal. This beautiful journal and pen will help you write your personal story and share the experiences that made you who you are. One day, the generations that follow will be able to look back and learn from the legacy you've left behind.

Finally, with your gift of \$1,000 or more to help feed and care for 100 children, be sure to request our inspiring bronze sculpture, "A Cup of Water." Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of video

In the studio

RANDY: As you hear what God can do in the lives of anyone, I hope you will be that person to extend God's grace to someone in need right now. So please do go to the phone,

go online, make the best gift you can. You really will be intervening in someone's life in a miraculous way.

Tammy, this story, we're only halfway through it. What a miracle!

TAMMY: Seriously. And Ron, I want to ask you. You talk about surrendering your life to Jesus, "I'm going to give you my whole life," but now you're in prison for what you feel like and have been told is the rest of your life. One, how do you stay alive in prison? How do you find hope? And how do you serve Christ in prison? Like what happened that kept you on that path of serving Jesus no matter what the outcome was going to be.

RONALD: Yes, ma'am. Well, I think it took me like two years to look like something happened to me.

TAMMY: Yeah, I kind of wondered how long that took. If it happened right away or if it took some time to find that?

RONALD: Right. I was still doing some of the same things, still talking the same way but the difference was that I wasn't comfortable doing it anymore. I was being convicted. I felt bad about it. And so I had no one to really disciple me or show me how to walk this Christian life out. Until I ended up in Angola, man, God brought me around some of the most awesome men of God that I have ever met.

RANDY: In prison?

RONALD: And they began to disciple me and teach me how important it was to read my Bible, to update my mind, what happened in any spirit. They told me about having a prayer life, how essential that was to me being staying connected to God, and how important it was to fellowship together.

And so, as I began to do that, man, the closer I got to God and the more things began to

just fall off of me. And just like a newborn baby that comes out of the womb, it doesn't look like the little pretty Gerber baby. It comes out with all types of afterbirth. It has to go through a process. And so that's how I was. I looked like what I had come out of.

So these guys began to help me and clean me up and feed me until I was able to feed myself. From that moment, God began to really change me and change my heart and my thinking. And my perspective began to change in life. I start to see and search for purpose, and what God created me to do and to be. And that led me to later going to Bible college.

TAMMY: In prison. This is what I love. Tell this story, it is fantastic!

RONALD: So in 1995, New Orleans Baptist Theological Center established an extension center in Angola, where professors would come off the street, lecture us, test us, just like any other college. It was amazing! It was so awesome and I learned so much. I was born again but Bible college gave me a toolbox in how to really function in ministry.

And so, after you graduate you have an opportunity to be a missionary to go to another prison in Louisiana and assist chaplains and pastor churches. And so I sensed God calling me to do that. I accepted the call and I later went to a prison in Cottonport, Louisiana, which was a boys' correctional center. I assisted the chaplain and pastored a church. It was a phenomenal place for me and taught me a whole lot about leadership.

I believe this here with all my heart of hearts that if you can pastor a church in prison you can pastor anywhere. Because we live with our members. You never go home.

RANDY: What a great testimony of you surrendering in that moment of duress and God taking bad things and making something good. But there is something else that happened because you were rightly convicted of murder. What happened when you had the chance to speak to the mother of your victim?

RONALD: And so in 2012 the United States Supreme Court came out with a ruling that said it was unconstitutional to give a juvenile under the age of 18 a mandatory life sentence. They said they violated our Eighth Amendment, which is cruel and unusual punishment. We should have some type of meaningful opportunity for freedom on it.

It also talks about the frontal lobe of the brain. How it's made up and how it is not fully developed until you hit 25. And how that part of the brain helps you appreciate risks and consequences. And so that's why juveniles do some crazy things.

So that opened the door for me to go back to court to be resentenced. Because when that ruling came down that meant that my sentence was now illegal. So they had to resentence me. So I go back and forth to court. I'll never forget when I got to court, my lawyers were very nervous. They came over frantic like, man, the victim's sister showed up. And I was like, oh.

I noticed when I got there, on the front row right across the aisle, a lady just kept staring at me. She looked familiar but I couldn't place her. I didn't want to stare back because I looked kind of scary with handcuffs and shackles on. So I was kind of looking at her through my periphery and saw she was still staring.

So when they came and brought that to me, I was like no, that is not the sister, that's the mother of the guy that I killed. And I remember her face because out of anybody in the courtroom, I didn't remember how the judge looked, didn't even remember how my lawyer looked, and definitely not the D.A. But her face was branded in my mind throughout the years. So when I developed a prayer life, I prayed for her more than I prayed for anybody.

So my greatest desire was not to get home. Above that was that I could have this dialogue with her and just let her know how sorry I was for what I'd done. And so when they came and gave me that news in the courtroom I said, "Well, see if I could talk to her." So they go over there and get with the D.A. and talk with him. They came back with a message

with her saying that she didn't want to talk to me. And that everything she was going to say, she was going to say it on the stand. So I said okay.

But they ended up setting the court date back a month. So that gave me a month to pray! Again, I began to pray for her. And consequently, when we went back to court, she requested that I talk to her. And so when we had this dialogue this was like the hardest conversation I have ever had in my life. And so I turned around to her, they sat her behind me next to the D.A. and I broke the silence with, "Ma'am, I'm just sorry. I'm sorry. I take full responsibility for the death of your son."

She was—her arms were folded tight and she was staring. But when I said that, her arms came down. She took a deep breath, she exhaled and she leaned toward me. And I asked her to forgive me. She said—and by this time there were no dry eyes, both of us were crying. It is a very emotional conversation. She says, "I don't hate you. I forgive you."

Man, it was just the most awesome moment in my life. Although I was handcuffed and shackled, I felt that come off of me. I felt free. It didn't even matter what happened in the proceedings of the court after that. I was just man, it was just a weight that came off. I could see a weight come off of her also.

And so later she got on the stand and echoed what she said to me in private and put it on record. Later, they resentenced me and gave me parole eligibility.

RANDY: And now you're out after *27 Summers* in prison.

RONALD: Yes.

TAMMY: The power of forgiveness, Ronald. The power of forgiveness. "I don't hate you. I forgive you." I think so many people carry so much for so long, even feeling like we can't come to the Father and ask the Father to forgive us of things. And so we just carry it around. And the weight that I think that takes on year after year after year because

we just keep hanging on just thinking maybe we've got too far and our lives aren't worthy of forgiveness.

But your life was worthy of it. You are proof of that today. The hope that rises up within you. How God has used your life is spectacular. And it is a reminder that God wants to use all of our lives in such a powerful way. Forgiveness is a gift from God. And if you are carrying a heavy weight today, come to the Father, lay it at the foot of the cross, and ask Jesus to pick that up for you so you don't have to carry it any longer. He wants to forgive and give you a brand-new life, a redeemed life, a transformed life so that he can do beautiful things with your life. You are a living example of that. What a gift to us all.

RANDY: Yeah! And we have a gift for you. If you want Ronald's book, *27 Summers*, request it when you support the Mission Feeding outreach. Your gift of \$30, \$50, \$100, whatever you can do will make a huge difference.

Tammy, such a great story. One last question if I can get this in. What do you do today on the outside of prison?

RONALD: I'm a client advocate for the Louisiana parole project. We help guys who have been in prison a long time, especially over 20 years, make a transition from prison to society. We have wrap-around services where we help them with housing, clothing, food, and just all the essentials. And help them get jobs, of course.

Since it's been in operation since 2016, we have, I think, we're right at 600 clients we have helped. And we have a less than two percent recidivism rate, which means that if somebody comes through our program, they're more than likely not to go back to prison again.

RANDY: I love it! Tammy, the freedom, the forgiveness, the redemption.

TAMMY: Absolutely! God is building up an army inside the walls and outside the walls.

RANDY: And outside the walls. By the way, if you're praying for that someone, that young Ronald in your life, keep praying! Don't give up! Lord, we pray with them right now that you'll give them strength and hope and know that nobody is beyond redemption.

Keep praying. We'll see you again next time on *Life Today!*