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Week 46: Fall Mission Feeding

James and Betty Robison

Jeremy and Suzanne Stalnecker #1

(Veteran's Day banner)

Studio discussion:

JAMES: I am so glad you joined us. Betty and I have been praying for a long time that God would give us an opportunity to show our personal gratitude and appreciation as individuals, as a family, and as a ministry for the individuals who served in the armed services and all of our first responders here for the appreciation, admiration, and love we have for them for risking their lives and limbs and the separation from their own family. And oftentimes, the loss of even being a part of a family anymore because they give their lives for freedom. They give their lives for us.

When I heard about Mighty Oaks, a ministry that was giving recovery to people who basically had reached a point that looked like there was no hope. If they didn't find hope and help, they were going to end their lives. The ministry is called Mighty Oaks. As I look at this, I know what a mighty oak does. It does cast a great shade, by the way. It is an incredible inspirational source of health to the whole nation. I wondered about this ministry and I looked into it.

And I want to introduce you to Suzanne Stalnecker; is that right? And it is Jeremy Stalnecker. Betty and I welcome you to *Life Today*.

I want you to cut to the chase and I want you to tell us about your journey. But how in the world this ministry, which has the smile of God and the blessing of God, and the blessing of people when will they hear about it because it does express, would you agree, appreciation and love for our first responders and the military and the armed service members?

JEREMY: Yes, sir. That's exactly right. It does. Our story is not unique but it is our story. I served in the United States Marine Corps. That was a dream I had from the time I was very young.

My parents, my dad was a pastor and so they said whatever God wants to do in your life we'll support it but we want you to go to college first. So I went to a Christian college; that's where I met Suzanne. And in the process, was able to go through a commissioning program. I was commissioned as an infantry officer in the Marine Corps.

We were married right before our last year of college. So before I was in the Marine Corps, we were married and we quickly had a daughter. Did a lot of wonderful things in the Marine Corps. Really enjoyed our time. I think we enjoyed it as a family too. It was an exciting time. We got to move around and meet great people and do wonderful things.

And then the world came to a standstill on September 11th, 2001, and we're all familiar with that. That changed everything. Eventually, what that meant for our family was in January of 2003, I deployed with a unit that I was part of to Iraq. We were eventually, on March 19th of that year, part of the initial invasion into the country. We breached the border between Kuwait and Iraq; and went into the country, our battalion, about 1500, 1200 Marines. Secured the southern objective, made our way to Bagdad, did all that, and then came home.

It is interesting, that the only thing I'd ever pointed my life toward was military service and if you want to be an infantry Marine, which I did, and infantry officer, which I did, being a part of something as historic as that was the pinnacle. That was the Super Bowl. That was what we got to do. We came home from Iraq. God had been working in our family and I had already made the decision when I came home I would get out of the Marine Corps and went to work on our church staff, which seems like a great place to land, a local church. And for those who are not part of local church ministry, I think that's harder than the Marine Corps. [Laughter] Combat is easier than the local church.

What happened quickly in our story, it didn't take long, a month after getting back home from

Iraq, so I was leading Marines in combat, a month later I was working as an associate pastor on a church staff and I lost myself in all that. We talk about identity, and we talk about purpose, and this is something we talk about in our program all the time. I couldn't get over what I had done and where I had been and so that caused me to continue looking back over my shoulder and saying things like, "I wish I was still there." Or "The people at this church have no idea what I've been through or what I've done."

Now remember this is 2003, so conversations about trauma and post-traumatic stress weren't conversations anyone was having. I went from not knowing who I was and how I fit to being very frustrated, to becoming very angry. That first year home was horrible. I was extremely disruptive on a church staff of all things. It's crazy to even think about but to the point that eventually, my pastor had to call me into his office and say, "Look, I love you, I love your family. But this is just not working. You're just so disruptive here."

But I wasn't just disruptive there, I was disruptive at home. I never put my hands on my wife and my kids but I did everything short of that. You know the screaming, the yelling, the knocking things over. Creating an environment where your kids don't want to talk to you and be around you. Little kids, we had two little kids at the time. That was that first year coming home.

JAMES: How was this affecting you? Because you had to be seeing it very clearly.

SUZANNE: Yes, it was difficult because we were on a church staff position. So we were in the very position to be able to help other people. And the church that we were a part of was a lot of military families, a lot of other military couples. And being in a church leadership position didn't feel like we could talk about that; that we were struggling.

It just kind of started to, the longer that it went on, we started living separate lives. So for me, I was like he's got to figure himself out. He's got to figure -- whatever he's going through, he needs to figure that out. I'm just going to do my own thing. I had served in a couple of the ministries at the church as well so I just kind of kept, I feel like we were living separate lives.

After probably sometime within that first year, we were living in southern California and Jeremy learned how to surf. And I loved that because when he was surfing a lot, he was happy and everything was good. That became an outlet for him. So he started surfing in the morning, he was surfing in the evening, he was surfing on the weekends and it was great. I love going to the beach. So we would go to the beach and that was our happy place. It was very fulfilling for him to learn something new but also to be physically doing something really helped him. And it helped us.

So over a period of time it just kind of got better. I was felt, great! This is good. We're on the other side of it. We've gone through it. Like we never talked about anything. We never talked about --

JEREMY: We never dealt with any of it. We never really addressed it.

SUZANNE: It just kind of went away. I felt like okay, everything is fine now. But I think we still kept living separate lives.

JEREMY: Yeah. And during that year, I got to the point where my pastor had to say, look, we've got to figure something out. That was a confrontation that I needed and it pushed me to a place of taking responsibility. Other people spoke into that as well. It was crazy looking back on it because I was the military guy on staff so I was counseling young military couples. Meanwhile, our marriage was as close to falling apart as it probably ever was.

This is the struggle when you come home. You don't know where to go for help or who to ask for help or where to get that help. So you do, you try to find ways -- for me, that physical outlet was self-medication, for a lot of other people it's drugs, it's alcohol, it can be a lot of things to just deaden the feeling, and to deaden the pain to just get to the other side of it.

Well, me getting to the other side of it meant I became a pastor. So left that church; we'd been there for a number of years. Kind of moved past it, kind of strung it together, and then I started pastoring a church. I think that's where things got really, really bad, which is again, it is crazy to

think about that.

BETTY: Did you not ever feel like you could open up to her about how you were feeling? Or that she wouldn't understand? Did you understand more than he thought you did?

SUZANNE: I didn't. That's the interesting thing. I talk about this a lot. Even after all this time, it still makes me feel really -- I never asked him, like what's going on with you? Like why are you being like this? Do you need to get some help? Do you need to talk to someone?

Like what Jeremy said, it wasn't really, there was not a lot of help for the guys that were getting out at that time. There was not a transitional period where let us get someone for you to talk to or anything like that. So I never really thought -- like he must know what he was going through. So whatever that is, he needs to figure it out. I never really asked him. Even now, I feel -- I do feel a lot of guilt for that because I am the person that should have come alongside him, and that should have said, hey, can I help you with this? Do you want to talk about this? Or find someone for him to talk to. I never even thought that. I just thought, whatever he's going through, he needs to figure it out.

There were definitely times when I thought, if I'm going to be extremely honest, he had a gun that he kept in his truck, that was under the front seat of his truck. He would drive around and sometimes after he was done at the church I knew he would go and just sit at the beach. There were a lot of times when he didn't come home until really late. I was scared. I don't know what he's going to do. There were really times I thought he's going to take his own life because I didn't know what he was going through. It was kind of unknown at the time. I didn't know.

I don't know if you felt like you couldn't talk to me but that was definitely for me, something that I didn't think about at the time that I should be the one to come alongside him to encourage him, to help him, or to help him try to find help in that. So it was just --

JEREMY: I don't think that would have -- I guess I wish you had but I don't think I would have responded to that either.

JAMES: Do you think you were actually going through what you now are helping other people get out of? You were experiencing the very problem that impacts so many military. PTSD they call it. Do you think that's basically --

JEREMY: I think that's it, yes. I didn't know that. I didn't talk to anyone like Suzanne said. There weren't organizations like Mighty Oaks. And then you move on with your life. So whether you're in business or for me in the ministry to even express that I'm struggling with that, felt like untouchable -- I couldn't do that.

And so Suzanne would say, I'm preaching at this church that I'm supposed to be leading, and she didn't even want to be there because what I was telling other people to do was definitely not what I was doing, and it was not how I was living.

SUZANNE: And that was, I felt it came to a head for us when we left that church for Jeremy to pastor a church. That was quite a ways from that support system that we had. Any kind of pieces that were put together then, completely fell apart when we left that support system. There was a lot of stress for us, this new ministry, and he was pastoring then at that time. To me, it was like I don't -- it started to kind of spiral again. Because we had never put the pieces together correctly to begin with, I just felt like I don't want to do this anymore. And so I did get to the point where I didn't want to be in this marriage anymore. I don't want to be in ministry anymore. I don't want to have any part of this.

So I did start to go through the process, at that time of just wanting to leave. I did want a way out of this relationship. Because I'm like I don't want to do this again. I don't want to be like how it was then again. So I did go through that process. I still remember thinking, I can leave and he can continue to do his thing and I'll do mine, and I'm fine with the kids. So that did come to a head for us at that time.

JEREMY: I knew I had problems but I thought I was the only one that had this problem. I wouldn't have even said it was because of Iraq. I just had problems. My wife was the problem,

other people were the problem -- but I had problems. I had not kept in touch with anyone I served with for about ten years. Then one of the guys I served with reached out to me. He said, "I met this guy. He's starting this program called Mighty Oaks. His name is Chad Robichaux. He and his family, similar background, served in the Marine Corps and they want to help other veterans from a faith perspective." This isn't a clinical program. This is something else. That guy introduced me to Chad and his family. We got to know their family. Mighty Oaks was getting started. Chad said, "I'm trying to get this thing going. You've pastored, you've taught, you've developed curriculum, you've done all this stuff, can you help us out?" So that was in 2012.

What I realized for the first time in that meeting and talking to those Marines was that I was not the only one. I had this picture hanging in my office of my platoon in Bagdad. I've always looked at that with great fondness and pride that I brought those guys home.

What I realized ten years later was that I may have brought them home but I deserted them when we got home. I heard about suicides, I heard about broken marriages, I heard about some of the same problems that I was struggling with, and realized that putting the uniform in the closet for the last time is not the end of my responsibility to those guys. And that was in 2012.

That turned something in my heart that began giving us the tools, as we were working through this to try to help other people, giving us the tools to put language around this, to understand it, and to put those pieces in place for us to move forward as well.

So the story of Mighty Oaks, and everyone who helps in our program, everyone who leads in our program came through as a student because we all started in the same place of brokenness, hopelessness, and understanding that God the creator has a plan for us. That our trauma, whatever it is in our past doesn't need to define us. There is a path forward and that path aligns to the life God has called us to live. That was so powerful in our lives and thousands of other lives since then.

JAMES: So would you say the transition in your life that began when you realized all this, about how long did that transition take to where you reached the place that you knew help is possible,

can be experienced, and you need to be in a place with where you helped it happen for others?

JEREMY: I think the realization took about one conversation when I sat with Marines that I had not seen in ten years and I started to hear their stories. It was a Holy Spirit light bulb moment. The Holy Spirit of God got a hold of me and said, you have been negligent -- and this is me being honest -- you have been negligent in not sharing with these men the hope that you have as a Christian, the understanding that you have of God's plan for your life. That was a moment, I think the process of healing for us, and even learning how to help other people was much longer.

An interesting part of the story is you can understand God has a plan and begin taking the steps forward, allowing God to work in your life but that process is a lifelong process. And for so many men and women who are struggling with post-traumatic stress, they hope they can make the decision and now they're better. You make the decision and then over a lifetime God works in your life.

JAMES: So you moved into actually a leadership role with Mighty Oaks. Now a lot of these men had been through several different programs, but the thing you saw as a pastor and as a Christian, both of you is that if they didn't have Jesus where they were they didn't even have the way to the Father, they don't have the way to life and truth, and so there needed to be a program where when you take a person through what some people might call "rehab," but you call it a -- let's just say a miraculous recreation of who God intends and will enable you to be and become, and you went there.

How long did it take when you went there and you began to deal with these people? I think you said and you even have it in your material and some of the testimonies that the men and women who come there realize if this doesn't work, when this is over, I'm going to kill myself because I have no other way to even have hope. And how long did it take for you then to begin to see the incredible effect?

JEREMY: It is amazing and it is so hard to explain. Unless you've been through it and seen it, it is hard to explain. Like you said, we'll have people show up on a Monday for a five-day

program. We have a long aftercare process in how we support people after our program. But we'll have people show up on a Monday for a five-day program and they'll make the statement, I've tried medication, I've tried the clinical programs, I've tried everything else. And if this doesn't work, then when I get home on Saturday I'm going to end my life.

And we lead with testimony, this is my story, this is where I am and this is how God's worked in my life. We point people to the creator. That gives them the understanding of their identity and their purpose. That transformation, as you know, when someone aligns their life to the life God created them to live, when they can understand they can have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ the Son, that moment happens in their heart where they have hope for the first time, perhaps in their life.

BETTY: Suzanne, I also know that God helped you through Mighty Oaks too. It is not just for men, it is women too that are struggling.

SUZANNE: Exactly. I was able to be a part of the team that started the women's program. That was in 2014. I think it was through that that there was a lot of healing that took place in my life, the same was with Jeremy, coming alongside other women who were willing to talk about their struggles and things they were going through. And now we're able to share that with other women as well.

So we did the same thing. Every woman that is on our women's program's team has been through a program as well to bring them to the place where they are today just to get on the road of healing. So that's really when God continued to do a work in my life as well when I started to see my heart soften towards some of the things that Jeremy had been through and just talking to other women.

We see that a lot. Women are really good at isolating themselves and so through our program that's one of the things we talk about. Talking about the things that we're dealing with, coming alongside other women who are dealing with the same struggles in their marriage, in their families, and even in their life. A lot of it is childhood trauma, as well, that then gets brought into

combat trauma. And we have the opportunity in our women's program to serve female veterans and first responders as well, along with spouses. So just coming alongside them and helping them understand that they do have identity, they do have purpose, and that is the relationship with Jesus Christ and just to have the hope in that.

So yes, there was a lot of healing for myself as well just to be able to come alongside other women and to be around other women who have struggled in a lot of the same ways.

JAMES: How long have you been doing this now?

JEREMY: We've been at it since 2012, so I guess that's 12 years.

JAMES: All right, has the program Mighty Oaks expanded throughout the country?

JEREMY: It has. We have five locations across the country. We have close to 900 students a year, men or women who will come through one of those in-person programs from all over the country. We serve them, not only in that five days but we serve them on the other side of that.

JAMES: I was looking at some of the information that I've been given and I think you'd be interested in knowing it takes \$3500 for a person to go through the entire transformation process to be taken care of. They stay there. And they are looked after and they are guided.

What we're really asking God to let us do, Betty, because we're finding thousands of children that need food, and what we do if we cease to do it or don't do it they die. So for us to be doing what we're doing because we have sent money to help with whether it is Tunnel to Towers or different things, we don't talk about that. We've always told you, if we go over a goal we will take the money that goes over and put it to similar useful meaningful outreaches and effective projects. We always do that and that's what we'll always do.

When we saw this, we felt like this is a way that we can help and help something grow that when you take -- this is the last step, these military people tell us, these first responders tell us. If this

doesn't work, it's over. And what so we ask God to let us do is in a week to raise the funds to put 30 men through the program.

Now if it is \$3500, wouldn't it be wonderful if you could send a man through the program? Could you possibly do that? Just go online, get your bank card, or write a check to it and let us know it is coming. But if we do this for the 30 people it is \$105,000. Now that's above all the other responsibilities that we have to hold.

God, we're asking you to do that this week. We're asking you to give 30 men a new life. They risk their lives for our freedom, for us, and they do the first responders do. Lord, the people in all the military services do. God, we need to show the love and appreciation and admiration that we have for them. And this is a way to do it; in Jesus' name.

Just simply let our people know that if they'll make that gift how effective it can be.

JEREMY: That gift is the difference between a life saved and a life lost. It's beyond that, it is generational. It is kids having families that they can grow up in and become productive adults. It is husbands and wives restoring a relationship. And that \$3500 number is important because we, years ago made the decision to remove every obstacle for those who need to get the help. That means we don't charge for our program. If you attend our program, there is no charge to you. We have people from all over the country as you mentioned. We fly them there. That means it is very important that we raise that \$3500 per person. It changes individual lives, it changes families, and it changes legacies.

JAMES: You know, I pray God, let everybody that just heard that will do what they can.

I don't know whether you could by the blessings of God in your life and just what he put in your heart to say thank you for risking your life, maybe losing limbs for our freedom. And I can do this. But if you gave \$35 or \$350 or \$1,000, whatever you could do, we're going to do this.

Betty, this week, you and I have been praying, please let us as a ministry do something

significant for the first responders to let them know how much we love them. So would you respond even now? Get your bank card, go online, call, and make the gift. Use that card like a check. If you write a check, make it to *LIFE*. Please do it!

Cause Spot:

ANNOUNCER: We live in a country with nearly 23 million veterans. Sadly, many of those who have served come home carrying the invisible scars of war. With 22 veteran suicides each day, and so many of our nation's heroes, including first responders, suffering posttraumatic stress, these men and women often live in despair.

But you can help make a difference today and offer these warriors a bright new future. *LIFE Outreach International* is excited to honor our nation's bravest men and women as we partner to send 30 veterans and first responders through the legacy program offered by Mighty Oaks.

Here these heroes will be equipped with tools to fight through life's challenges and uncover their God-given purpose in life. At a cost of \$3500 per participant, a total of \$105,000 is needed to make this possible. Please give what you can as a way of providing hope and saying thank you to those at the core of the freedoms we enjoy. Call, write, or make your gift online.

Studio good-bye:

JAMES: Well, I just called to repentance. Betty said James, it is for men and women. And I do know that. You're so awesome. Isn't she so sweet? Even when she corrects me she is so sweet.

BETTY: Well, there are so many lives and families affected through this program. I really do believe it can bring families back together that they thought were lost.

JAMES: I know y'all are going to be praying that everybody that can help will help. I wish we could just run way past what we're asking for. And I know you say, oh boy! And give me a call, and say, let's go beyond that. You have rolled out miracles. When we started out feeding

thousands, you ultimately had us saving millions of lives from starvation and death. You have saved so many lives and led so many to Christ. Thank you for making the gift to help Mighty Oaks.

Don't miss the program tomorrow. You're going to meet some other folks that are involved in this. Tell your friends to watch. Be sure now you make that gift.

Endorsement montage:

>> You're not dead until you're no longer breathing, and yet there are a lot of people who are breathing who are living like they're dead.

>> I started listening to them. Everything they said just kept hitting me in the heart over and over and over again. It is like all the things that I didn't know that I needed to hear. I opened my heart to God that week. I've been a different person ever since. I can't even describe how quickly all that emptiness that I had that I couldn't fill with women, with drugs, with liquor, with anything -- [snaps fingers] Boom!

>> I was immediately greeted by a staff of men that knew what I was going through, had been in my shoes.

>> You could imagine a rope with a thousand knots and little by little each knot was being undone.

>> Everything that I was told here just made sense to me. It's given me like a new lease on life.

>> I thank God for saving me.

>> They're exposing the pain for you to understand where it is coming from. And for you to move forward.

>> This is the first week in a long time where I've laughed and I smiled.

>> When I think about my husband, I can't imagine the man that he was before. And now, he is the one that brings the peace in our home. In the past two to three years, we've been through some of the hardest things personally as parents and just a lot of trials that we've ever been through, and I know it would have wrecked our marriage if we didn't have Mighty Oaks.

[Cheers]