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A Promise Kept

Guest: Robertson McQuilkin

From the series: My Decision, Part 1

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Bob: Robertson McQuilkin clearly remembers the first time he realized something was wrong with his wife, Muriel.

Robertson: We were driving with these friends, and Muriel started to tell a story. She liked to tell stories and laugh at her own stories. She had a marvelous, outrageous life – infectious. So she started this story, which she had just told five minutes earlier. This is a pretty, you know, four- or five-minute story. And I said, "Honey, you just told us that. This is a rerun." And she just laughed and went right on. And I thought, "Hey, that's funny. That never happened before." But then it began to happen with ever-greater frequency and, of course, we hadn't even heard the name Alzheimer's.

[musical transition]

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, August 11th. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. Today we hear the first part of a powerful love story. Stay tuned.

[musical transition]

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us on the Monday edition. I know one of the questions you get asked frequently – I get asked the same question – is when you think back over now almost 16 years of doing FamilyLife Today what are some of your favorite radio interviews? And I think what our listeners are going to get a chance to hear this week has to be up in the top tier of programs we've ever had the privilege of doing.

Dennis: And I thought you were going to say, Bob, one of the Top 10.

Bob: Well, it's certainly one of the Top 10, maybe even higher than that, don't you think?

Dennis: No doubt about that. Robertson McQuilkin is a rare man. He is a world-renowned biblical theologian who has served internationally as a missionary. He was, for a number of years, president of Columbia International University; has

spoken worldwide; written a number of books. But the real story our listeners are about to hear is Robertson's love for his wife, Muriel, who – well, more than 10 years from the time of this interview had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and he was caring for her and, in fact, had resigned from his position as president of the seminary and college, and he went home to take care of her. And it's just a great love story.

Bob: It is a powerful story and, again, this interview goes back now almost nine years, but it's one of those interviews that we pull out and listen to ourselves over and over again, and we wanted our listeners to hear it as well. Here is part 1 of our conversation with Dr. Robertson McQuilkin.

Dennis: Robertson, you and your wife, Muriel, met and dated during the year I was born – 1948. That kind of dates me here a little bit.

Robertson: It dates me.

Dennis: Tell us about the love story originally. How did you meet Muriel and how did you propose to her?

Robertson: Well, we were both students at what was then Columbia Bible College. Now it's Columbia International University. And I thought she was the cutest thing. Somebody asked me on a television show whether it was love at first sight, and I said, "No." I liked her at first sight, but I was only 17 years old – 16 when we first met. But in our chapel, which was required, she sat in front of me, and when I watched her lovely, artistic fingers going through the hair, lovely brown hair, I just wanted to go out and see what she was like, and I discovered she was delightful – just smart and gifted and just a great lover of people and more fun than you can imagine.

Bob: Now, did you just tap her on the shoulder in chapel and say, "Would you go out for a Coke with me on Friday night?"

Robertson: Well, I talked to her afterwards. We were in conversation before, but, I mean, that really got me going.

Dennis: So you proposed – how'd you do that?

Robertson: It happened several times.

Dennis: It took you a while to win Muriel's love, huh?

Robertson: I think she was faking it, actually. But, at any rate, yes. The first time was in the lobby of the school, and she had this – she wouldn't hold hands or kiss or anything, and I said, "Let me hold your hand, I want to tell you

something." And she said, "Well, tell me what you're going to tell me." But she let me hold her hand, and I told her I loved her, and that was the first time.

Dennis: Yeah, and you told her you wanted her to be your wife?

Robertson: I didn't say that much, but she got the drift. But we decided afterwards, since we were young – and I guess a lot of people, after they propose, then they have misgivings. So we decided to be sure it was God's will that we put it on hold for six months, and I went to seminary, and she went to teach in a school. So we didn't have any contact for six months. And they say that distance will blow out a little flame and fan a big one.

So at the end of that time – I went to Bluefield, West Virginia to see her, and it was on Valentine's Day 1947 – the day before Valentine's Day, and that's when I had my ring and asked her to marry me, and she said, "Well, I've got to pray about it." She knew all along what she was going to do. Through the years I'd accuse her, I'd say, "You just did that so we could get engaged on Valentine's Day."

[laughter]

Bob: Well, you had to be a little nervous, driving up to Bluefield, West Virginia. You haven't seen her in six months, and you're carrying the ring, and did you wonder whether that little flame had been blown out or whether the big flame was still fanned?

Robertson: Well, I don't know, I was pretty confident, I guess.

Dennis: Really?

Robertson: She'd sent me all kinds of signals. I think it was her idea in the first place.

Dennis: Well, you begin your book, "A Promise Kept," some 30 years later with the story of you all spending some time at a friend's house in Florida. And something occurred there that was the beginning of a period of suffering and drama that continues on to this day.

Robertson: We were driving with these friends, and Muriel started to tell a story. She liked to tell stories and laugh at her own stories. She had a marvelous, outrageous laugh – infectious. So she started this story, which she had just told five minutes earlier. It was a pretty – you know, four- or five-minute story. I said, "Honey, you just told us that. This is a rerun," and she just laughed and went right on. And I thought, "Hey, that's funny, that never happened before." But then it began to happen with ever-greater frequency and, of course, we hadn't even heard the name Alzheimer's back then, I don't think.

Dennis: How old was Muriel at that point?

Robertson: Fifty-five. But if we had known about Alzheimer's, it's an old-folks' disease and wouldn't have connected it with her, anyway.

Bob: When did you get to a point where you said, "There's something going on here?"

Robertson: Well, actually, she went into the hospital for a heart examination. It proved to be nothing, but then the young – I guess he was an intern – a very young doctor, I'd never met him, he called me out into the hall, and he said, "You may want to consider Alzheimer's." And I was shocked, but that started the wheels turning, and about two years after that, in '83, we went to a neurologist friend who, by the process of elimination, concluded that that's probably what it was.

Dennis: How did you handle the news that your wife of less than 60 years of age could have a disease that was progressive, and you were watching it manifest itself in various ways – how did you personally handle it at that point?

Robertson: Well, of course, there's a sense of loss, but it wasn't a crisis experience because we knew something was up. One time on a TV program, a man said, "What has God done miraculously to enable you to love her so and to hang in there and be patient," so forth? And I said, "I don't like the question. What if I said, 'I like you, but the only reason is that God has worked a miracle to enable me to like somebody so unlikable.' I said you wouldn't like that. I love her because she's lovable, she's altogether lovable." So it's never been something I try to pump up or something like that.

Dennis: I want to stop you right there – "She is altogether lovable." She hasn't spoken a word to you in how many years?

Robertson: Oh, six, I guess.

Dennis: Six years.

Robertson: Yes.

Dennis: Help me here – there are some of our listeners who want to say, "Robertson, she is altogether lovable."

Robertson: She is sweet, she's contented, she's totally dependent on me, and I just – from all the background of the wonderful years that we spent together, I have all the memories, and it's just a joy to see that I can make a difference in her life.

Bob: You understand the challenge. I mean, a lot of people listening are thinking six years of being bedfast and not speaking sounds more like something you endure than something you enjoy.

Robertson: I guess it depends on your outlook. If you consider yourself a victim, and you'd rather be – you know, I never think about "what if." I don't think "what if" is in God's vocabulary. So I don't even think about what I might be doing instead of changing her diaper or what I might be doing instead of spending two hours feeding her. It's the grace of God, I'm sure, like you said, Dennis, but it also may be the way I'm wired to live the now and not live in the past or live in the future.

Dennis: In the midst of all these things starting to progress in her life, you write in your book that she did not know what was happening to her.

Robertson: No, she didn't. One thing about forgetting is you forget that you forgot, and so she never seemed to suffer too much with it. She would know that she'd failed. She may be desperate to please or to make something happen the way it's supposed to, the way it always had, and it didn't – but only momentarily, and then she'd laugh at herself and have another go at it. That was her personality, it always had been.

Bob: Did you, at some point, say to her, "Sweetheart, you've been diagnosed with Alzheimer's?"

Robertson: I never told her. I asked my doctor if it was okay not to, because some people in the field say that you should walk through it together, but Muriel really lived for me, and I knew that if she realized what was going to happen that this would be very painful for her. So I asked him, and he said, "No, if she doesn't ask and isn't concerned, then just let it go." So she never really – she knew she was having problems, but she didn't know the diagnosis.

Dennis: I happen to know right now that there is a person who is staying with Muriel – your daughter, Marty.

Robertson: Yes.

Dennis: And Marty makes it possible for you to be able to make an occasional trip like this – a day trip – as you've had here to FamilyLife and to share your story with us. I'd like to call Marty on the phone, because she has watched you, as her father and the husband of her mother, make a remarkable commitment to her mother and to your wife. And she wrote a poem in the back of your book that – what I want to do, Bob, is I want to call Marty on the phone, and I just want to get a little bit of a glimpse from a child, an adult child, of what this has meant to her and have her share this poem with our listeners.

Bob: I think we're working to get her on the line right now – let's see.

Dennis: Is this Marty?

Marty: Yes.

Dennis: This is Dennis Rainey and Bob Lepine on FamilyLife Today.

Marty: Uh-huh.

Dennis: How are you doing?

Marty: Just fine, thank you.

Dennis: We're here in the studio with your Dad. Why don't you say hi to your Dad?

Marty: Hi, Dad.

Robertson: Hi, Martykins.

Dennis: He said you love surprises, so we decided we would surprise you.

Marty: Yes, this is a surprise.

Dennis: You're there taking care of your mom, right?

Marty: Uh-huh, yes.

Dennis: How is she doing today?

Marty: She's doing fine.

Robertson: Any smiles?

Marty: Well, no, I don't think so. But she's taking her time with her lunch still.

Dennis: I've just got a couple of things I want you to do. First of all, we're sharing with our listeners just a remarkable commitment by a husband to his wife. What's your perspective on that as one who is looking at a man who is committed to your mother?

Marty: Well, of course, I grew up in this family with the two of them, and they always were in love. I mean – the two of them were always kissing and

hugging in the kitchen and in the living room and in the hallway. I mean – my memory from my childhood is two people that were always – not only did they love one another, but they were in love. They really thought that each other set the moon, and so it didn't surprise me at all. I mean, this, to me, is just the natural thing that would happen with these two particular people. All she ever wanted was to be with him, and all he ever wanted was to be with her, and it never changed, never diminished. I mean, you know, they had disagreements, and they had discussions and things, but it didn't affect the relationship. So, to me, this is just the way it ought to be, you know what I'm saying?

Robertson: Thank you, Marty.

Dennis: Marty, you've written a poem that Robertson put in his book, "A Promise Kept," and I shared with our listeners a few moments ago that we were calling you to ask you a question but also to read this poem that you wrote as a Christmas gift in 1994. Would you mind – see if you can't find a copy of the book there in the house somewhere and read it to our listeners. Would you mind doing that?

Marty: Okay, hold on a minute, here. I'm not sure where in the book it is.

Dennis: It's page 72, Marty.

Marty: Okay –

"Wild roses grew in Mother's mind,
Seeds fell from her hands,
and laughter ran like a mountain brook
out of her heart to water our gardens.
She gathered stones and sunlight, moonbeams and melodies;
no smallest bit of loveliness was passed without the sweet caress of her happy
recognition.
She gleefully uprooted pretense and tossed it in the sea.
She danced and ran where others walked,
and now the snow falls deep around the place she spun and shone,
scattering godlight from her hair."

I don't know if when you were talking to Dad, he described the kind of person Mother was, but she was imperturbable, loved life, and totally disliked any sort of inauthenticity or elitism. She would think nothing, if she saw a beautiful house, of walking up and ringing the doorbell and asking the owner if she could look through it because she thought it was so beautiful. She embarrassed us enormously.

And she did – she collected rocks, she collected flowers. I mean, when she would be walking along and see dead flowers along the side of the road, she would collect the seeds from them and bring them home and plant them.

And she would sing. She would sing if she was washing dishes, she would sing to us when she wanted us to do something instead of asking us. She had her little songs that she would sing to get us to come and help her sweep the floor or whatever. So I see her as a garden that is covered with snow, but is not gone.

Robertson: Yes, yes.

Bob: Marty, thanks for taking time out to share with our listeners a little bit about your dad and your mom. We appreciate it.

Dennis: Yes, Marty, thank you for setting us straight, because we'll not refer to him as a saint or a hero anymore.

Marty: [laughs]

Dennis: Bye-bye.

Marty: Bye.

Bob: You know, I had to hear a little bit in Marty's laugh some of what Robertson has described as that infectious laugh of Muriel.

Dennis: And you think, Bob, of what a daughter has seen as she has watched this love story emerge. I think one of the most profound statements she made is that, "Hey, what's abnormal about this? This was always the commitment, always the love that we saw in our home from day one. So what's the big deal?"

Well, it just looks like a big deal today, because there's not enough faithful men and women like Robertson and Muriel who are faithfully loving one another, and, Robertson, I know you don't like the attention but, nonetheless, I'm truly grateful that you have continued to weather the storm, even to this day, 22 years later, and that your love stands strong and firm and steadfast for a woman that you love – present tense.

Bob: You know, I hate to break it to you, but I don't think you kept your word to Marty. I think you have referred to her dad as a hero.

Dennis: Yes, I really have.

Bob: On more than one occasion.

Dennis: I really have, and I still refer to Dr. McQuilkin as a hero, because – well, it's what Marty observed. It's just a great love story. I mean, Hollywood tries it, but they seldom get it right, and this is just a magnificent and may I use the word "holy?" Just a holy story of a man attempting to nourish and cherish his wife in the midst of a disease that was robbing her of her personality and her memory and ultimately of her life.

Bob: And it's stories like this that we need to be reminded of from time to time. That's one of the reasons we wanted our listeners to hear it – some of them for the first time, and some of them hearing it again. But, you know, this is one of those stories you ought to listen to again and again.

I was thinking about the couples who have attended our FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences, and it may have been four or five years or longer since they have been to a conference, and they may be thinking, you know, "I've been there done that, don't need to repeat that experience."

And yet I think all of us need to be reminded regularly of what sacrificial love and service look like in a marriage relationship. We need to be reminded of what God's calling us to and how we can build the kind of marriage relationship that can go the distance.

We are about to kick off our fall season of FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences here next month, and we're starting to hear from listeners who are getting the dates, blocking out the weekend, and making plans to attend one of these two-and-a-half-day conferences designed to help couples strengthen and deepen their marriage relationship, to provide help, to provide hope, and to give them a fun, relaxing getaway.

For many couples, it's a refresher or a tuneup. For some couples, it's a turning point in their marriage. And I want to point our listeners to our website, FamilyLife.com. You can go online and get more information about the fall season of Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences. I was just visiting with a friend, and he was asking about locations and dates, and I was recommending some spots where he and his wife may want to travel to attend one of these conferences.

If you'd like more information, go online at FamilyLife.com. You can go ahead and block out the date and register now for one of these upcoming conferences, or if it's easier just call us at 1-800-FLTODAY with any questions you have, or if you'd like to register over the phone, again, it's 1-800-F-as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY or online, again, you'll find us at FamilyLife.com.

And when you get in touch with us, be sure to request a copy of Dr. McQuilkin's books, which is called "A Promise Kept." It gives you additional insight into the heart and the character of this man. We have copies of the book, "A Promise

Kept," and you can request them from us either online at FamilyLife.com or when you call 1-800-F-as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY.

Let me also encourage you – I think one of the ways you can strengthen your own relationship is by spending time together each day praying and talking together about what the Scriptures say about your marriage relationship, and I know a lot of couples would like to be able to do that and don't feel equipped to be able to do that.

This month when you make a donation of any amount for the ministry of FamilyLife Today, we would love to send you as a thank you gift a copy of the book by Dennis and Barbara Rainey called "Moments With You." In this book, Dennis and Barbara provide you with a daily devotional that's designed to bring you together, to give you an opportunity to pray together and to look at God's word together and to help you grow closer together as a result.

Again, the book, "Moments With You," is our way of saying thank you when you support the ministry of FamilyLife Today with a donation this month of any amount. If you're making your donation online at FamilyLife.com, when you come to the keycode box on the donation form, type in the word "You," y-o-u, and we'll send you a copy of Dennis and Barbara's daily devotional or call 1-800-FLTODAY, you can make a donation over the phone and just ask for a copy of the devotional, moments with you, or Dennis and Barbara's devotional book. Again, we're happy to send it to you, and we appreciate your financial support of this ministry.

Tomorrow we're going to hear part 2 of our conversation with Dr. Robertson McQuilkin, and you will hear is very moving comments that he made to students the day he stepped down from his responsibilities as president at Columbia Bible College and Seminary. That's coming up tomorrow, and I hope you can be back with us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We'll see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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