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A Promise Kept

Guest: Robertson McQuilkin

From the series: My Decision, Part 2

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Bob: When Muriel McQuilkin was first diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, it meant a dramatic re-ordering of priorities for the McQuilkins. Eventually, her husband, Robertson, stepped down from his role as the president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary.

Robertson: A student asked me one time after I had resigned, a new student, came over and visited me. He said, "Do you miss being president?" And I said, "Well, you know, I never thought about it but, no, I don't. I like my assignment. I've learned to cook and keep house and garden, and I take care of Muriel. I love it."

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, August 12th. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. Robertson McQuilkin's life changed when his wife, Muriel, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, but his priorities didn't. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us on the Tuesday edition. I remember the first time I read the story of Robertson and Muriel McQuilkin, it was in an article, I think, in "Christianity Today," and I remember thinking, "That's powerful. That's a great demonstration of commitment and love." You remember reading the same article, don't you?

Dennis: I do, I do. I wept as I read it. I mean, it's just a great story of a man's covenant commitment to his wife and, Bob, if there has ever been a day when there needed to be stories like this told on radio, it's today, because we have diminished marriage in terms of its covenant and its commitment and what love means to such a degree – well, divorce has replaced it all, and I think, as a result, as a nation, we suffer from a profound mistrust of one another because we can't trust each other to keep the most sacred promise two people ever make to one another.

Bob: This week we're giving our listeners an opportunity to hear an interview that we recorded, actually, a number of years ago – almost nine years ago now – with Dr. Robertson McQuilkin. This is one of our all-time favorites, it's a classic, because it is such a profound love story.

Dennis: It really is. Robertson McQuilkin is an international speaker. He's written a number of books, he served as an international church planning missionary for more than 12 years in Japan and was president of Columbia International University for 22 years before he resigned in 1990, and you know that's the story, Bob. He resigned because he wanted to go home and take care of his wife of then more than 40 years, Muriel, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Bob: And after we read the article, we contacted Columbia and asked them if there was any audio recording of his resignation speech, and we're going to play an excerpt from that, and then we'll pick up with part 2 of a conversation we had nine years ago with Dr. Robertson McQuilkin.

Dennis: And as you listen to this recording, this is less than two minutes long, but I want you to listen to the resolute commitment of a man to his wife. This is some of the most profound audio you'll ever hear.

Robertson: [from audiotape.] I haven't, in my life, experienced easy decision-making on major decisions, but one of the simplest and clearest decisions I've had to make is this one because circumstances dictated it.

Muriel now in the last couple of month seems to be almost happy when with me, and almost never happy when not with me. In fact, she seems to feel trapped, becomes very fearful, sometimes almost terror, and when she can't get to me there can be anger, she's in distress.

But when I'm with her, she's happy and contented. And so I must be with her at all times, and, you see, it's not only that I promised in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part, and I'm a man of my word. But as I have said – I don't know with this group – but I have publicly it's the only fair thing. She sacrificed for me for 40 years to make my life possible. So – if I cared for her for 40 years, I'd still be in debt.

However, there's much more. It's not that I have to, it's that I get to. I love her very dearly, and you can tell it's not easy to talk about. She is a delight. It's a great honor to care for such a wonderful person.

Bob: That powerful, moving announcement has as much power today as it did when it was originally made. And, Dennis, I'm sitting here watching the man who made it, and it's moving for him to hear his own words 10 years later.

Dennis: That's right. Robertson McQuilkin joins us on the broadcast, and, Robertson, I've got to tell you, as I listen to your words, maybe it's because I'm meeting you face-to-face, but every time I hear those words, I get emotional because this is where life makes up its mind at home. It's a man keeping his word with his wife, and those were words, back in 1990, but we now have a

decade that has followed where you have put shoe leather to those words, as you did resign, and as you did step away from being the president of a seminary and college that you loved; that you profoundly served in and for a number of years and had a great ministry. You had a speaking ministry around the country. You had a writing ministry, and you gave that up to go care for your wife, and as one who is a younger man aspiring to be a covenant keeper, and on behalf of many of the male listeners, and, for that matter, Bob, many of the female listeners, too, I'd like to say thank you – thank you for doing what you did. You did the right thing.

Robertson: Well, if God can use it, then I praise Him. It seems very unexceptional to me – just the natural thing to do. But thank you.

Bob: As you listen back, and I know you haven't heard that resignation announcement. It's not something that you play on your car stereo from time to time – it had to bring back that memory of being in front of the students, of making what you described there as an easy decision, and yet for a man to walk away from something you've invested your life in for more than two decades, it may have been an easy decision but a hard process to have to make it, wasn't it?

Robertson: Well, someone asked me when I began to make career plans, and I said, "No, no, I've never been career-oriented. It's cause-oriented. The touchstone for me always has been how can I – whatever God has put in me or will put in me, invested in me, how can that count to the max for what He's up to in the world.

So all decisions, then, major decisions of my life, have been what would advance the cause? "What is God's will" is another way to put it. So when I say "simple," I mean it was not hard for me to discern what God's will was. But a student asked me one time after I had resigned, a new student came over to visit me, and he said, "Do you miss being president?" And I said, "Well, you know, I never thought about it but, no, I don't. I like my assignment. I've learned to cook and keep house and garden, and I take care of Muriel. I love it."

So that night before I went to sleep I thought about his question, and I said, "Now, Lord, this is fine. This is Your assignment, and I like it, but if the coach puts the player on the bench, and it means He doesn't need him in the game. Now, You're under no obligation to tell me, Lord, but if You'd like to share with me, I'd love to know why You didn't need me in the game." And I had a troubled night that night.

The next morning – at that time, Muriel could still walk – sort of wobbly, so we'd take a walk out in the neighborhood, and I'd have to hold her hand to be sure she wouldn't fall. We were walking along a narrow sidewalk with a high embankment on one side and a very busy thoroughfare on the other. And, fortunately, we never met anybody there, or somebody would have to get out in that traffic. But

this day I heard footsteps behind me. I looked back, and here was a local derelict weaving along behind us. I said, well, he'll never catch up, but he did. And he just sort of wobbled out into the traffic and back up in front of us, and he turned around and looked at us up and down. And then he said, "I likes that. I really likes that. That's good. That's real good." And then he turned around, and off down the street in front of us, mumbling to himself, "That's good. That's good. I likes it."

Well, we got back to our yard and sitting there in the garden, and I was chuckling over it. You know, I'm happy for the affirmation. And then, all of a sudden, I said to myself or who knows, I said, "God, could you talk through a half-inebriated old derelict?" And I said yes, it's God that says, "I likes that." And, Lord, if you like it, that's all I need.

Dennis: Yeah, yeah. You know, I read that story, and I thought, "Isn't it interesting how God could use such an unlikely source?" If he could speak through a donkey, he could speak through a man who is drunk. So you don't have any sense, as a result, that you're on the bench; that you're on the sidelines?

Robertson: I do have a great sense that He didn't need me in that game, but I never did think I was essential, anyway, you know? In the big scope of things, what is my little contribution? God doesn't need me.

Dennis: It's not been easy loving Muriel since that time. I mean, you share a story about how Muriel had an accident near the toilet, and you were cleaning up the toilet, and you lost it with her.

Robertson: Yes. You're saying that I have not always acted in love.

Dennis: I didn't say that. You wrote about it.

Robertson: I understand, but that's what your question was.

Dennis: What happened that day in the bathroom?

Robertson: Well, that was back when we hadn't gone to diapers, and she was still – tried to make it in time to the toilet, but she hadn't made it, so I was kneeling there trying to clean up the mess, and she kept trying to help and making matters worse and kept moving her feet and her legs, and I said, "Stand still." And she didn't stand still. So just that short temper, I just slapped her on the calf. Not really a hard slap, but she was startled, because it had never happened before. I had never touched her. And it startled me. And I just dropped there on my knees in that mess and pled with her for forgiveness. Well, she couldn't understand words anymore than she could speak them, but I pled

with her for forgiveness, and then I decided I better turn to the Lord, and I cried out to Him to forgive me.

Bob: Robertson, you know that a man – there's great fulfillment in your work when you're employed vocationally, when you're doing what you feel like God called you to do and what He gifted you to do. There is a sense of reward and accomplishment and fulfillment. To make a decision to lay that aside and go home and do what God's calling you to do now, it's got to feel a little bit like being moved out of your natural gifting and strength to the sidelines, like you said. There have to be days when you go, "I want to be back in the hunt."

Robertson: Yes, but remember, Bob, I didn't think up that question. It never occurred to me until that freshman asked me. That got me on that track to thinking just the one night until God gave me the answer the next morning. So, no, I didn't, really, and maybe occasionally when decisions are made in the school that I wouldn't have made that way.

[laughter]

Dennis: You know, I'm thinking, Bob, of how, by all practical observations, to the average human being, you'd think here's a man who has been sidelined. And yet if you think about it, his story has been told to more people. We've shared it here on the broadcast probably two or three times to several million people. We have shared it at FamilyLife Marriage Conferences. It's been shared at Promise Keepers event. I know personally that I've shared it at a Promise Keepers event with more than 60,000 men at Texas Stadium a number of years ago and then again in Colorado Springs to another 10,000, 12,000 men, and, Robertson, when I read that story the first time, I got on the phone, and I called Barbara. And, Bob, I could tell this story right now but, instead, I wonder if we couldn't go to a clip where Barbara shares what her response was when I told her your story, Robertson, and read her your words of resigning from Columbia Bible College and Seminary to go home and care for your wife, Muriel.

Barbara: [from audiotape.] I was standing in the laundry room, and I was ironing. Dennis called on the phone, and he read me that story, and I stood by the phone, and I was watering the clothes, like I'm watering the notes right now, and he said, "Should I tell that story?" And I said, "Yes." I said, "I just have one question." I said, "I need to know will you love me like that?" And he said, "Yes."

There's not a woman in this room who doesn't want to know the answer to that question. There's not a woman in this room who doesn't need to hear from her husband "Yes, I will love you like that." That is a demonstration of commitment and of covenant. It's what we were made for, it's what we long for, it's what we need. God built it in us.

Dennis: Robertson, as Barbara was retelling that story, I still remember where I was standing when I called her, and I was unprepared for her question. It really caught me off guard.

Robertson: I imagine.

Dennis: You've told the story a number of times – this is what women want to know, isn't it?

Robertson: You know, I've not told the story a great many times, but I've written about it, and what you have said has happened over and over again. I can't tell you how many times I've heard that same scenario. But, unlike your scenario, often, as it's reported to me, his response is "Don't put me on the spot." Sometimes it's half jest; often it's dead serious.

Dennis: Well, when Barbara asked me the question, I was stunned for a moment. I mean, I was sharing a story, and it was obviously emotional for me to share it. Her emotional response, first of all, took me off guard, and I remember saying to her, "Yes. With God as my witness, I would hope I would be that man." And He is the one who enables, isn't he? I'm looking across the table at you, and you've shared, over the past couple of days, He has been the one who has enabled you to make that commitment.

There is a verse that I have been wanting to share over the past couple of days on the broadcast that I want to read here. It's found in Job, chapter 23, verses 10 through 12 – "But He knows the way I take. When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held fast to His path. I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not departed from the command of His lips. I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food."

When you think about hunger, whether it's ambition, whether it's career or a job and what we would characterize as success in life, this book, the Bible, this talks about how to live in the blessing, how to live life as God designed it. And when you step outside of it, when you break your promise, you're stepping outside of that blessing. You're a blessed man today because you have stayed within the confines of the commands of this book, and you are attempting to live life according to His Word.

Robertson: Well, I am blessed, that I will say – not that I deserve it, but I am blessed.

Bob: That's part 2 of a conversation recorded back in 1999 with Dr. Robertson McQuilkin. At that time, Dennis, he had been at home caring for his wife for almost a decade, and she lived another four years before she went into eternity. He was faithful to care for her all the way to the end.

Dennis: Yes. Think of celebrating a golden anniversary in a setting like that. And the question I have for the listener is do you want to be a blessed man? Do you want to be a blessed woman? The little statement, don't let it run past you too quickly, this book, the Scripture, living according to the boundaries that it places and the relationship with Almighty God that it represents, that's how you live a blessed life. Even in the midst of tragedies, deep disappointment, and profound suffering, you can be a blessed man, a blessed woman.

Bob: And one of the questions is are we ready for those trials when they come? You know, Dr. McQuilkin was ready because of his relationship with Christ that had been built over the years. The question is what kind of foundation we going to have when the winds come in our direction, and one of the reasons we've encouraged couples to attend a Weekend to Remember Marriage Conference for many years is because that's part of how you build your foundation. You keep coming back to what the Scriptures teach about marriage, about resolving conflict, about sexual intimacy, about communication, about what a husband's responsibility is, what a wife's responsibility is.

These are topics that get addressed each weekend at our FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conference, and we're about to launch our fall season. We want to encourage our listeners – if you've never attended one of these conferences, go on our website at FamilyLife.com, or call 1-800-FLTODAY, find out when the conference is coming to a city near where you live, and make plans now to be a part of that weekend, to make the investment of time and resources to get away and build into the foundation of your marriage so that when you face challenges and struggles, you're ready for them.

Again, if you'd like more information about the Weekend to Remember Marriage Conference, you'll find it online at FamilyLife.com, or you can call us at 1-800-FLTODAY, you can register online or by phone, and remember when you get in touch with us as well to consider getting a copy of the book that Dr. McQuilkin wrote about his love for Muriel. A book called "A Promise Kept." It will give you additional insight into his relationship with his wife and his love for her.

You can request a copy of the book from our website at FamilyLife.com or call 1-800-FLTODAY to find out how you can have a copy of the book, "A Promise Kept," sent to you.

We hope you will keep in mind that FamilyLife Today is a listener-supported ministry. That means that it's folks like you who not only listen to this program but who, from time to time, will call and make a donation to help support the ministry of FamilyLife Today. You are the ones who keep us on the air on this station and on other stations across the country. You need to know that summer months are often a difficult time for ministries like ours. The expenses of operating the ministry stay pretty much the same, but we see a decline in

donations during the summer months, and that has been the case again this summer.

So if there is anything you can do to help with a donation to support FamilyLife Today this month, we would love to hear from you, and we want you to be sure to request a copy of Dennis and Barbara Rainey's book, "Moments With You." It's a daily devotional guide for couples that we'd love to send you as a thank you gift when you make a donation of any amount this month for the ministry of FamilyLife Today.

If you're donating online, and you'd like a copy of the book "Moments With You," type the word "You," y-o-u, into the keycode box you'll find on the donation form, or call 1-800-FLTODAY, make your donation over the phone and simply request a copy of the devotional book for couples, "Moments With You." We're happy to send it to you, and we do appreciate your support of FamilyLife Today.

Now, tomorrow we'll continue to hear from Dr. Robertson McQuilkin as he describes what life was like and how it changed when he came home to care for his wife, Muriel. I hope you can be 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 next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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