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A Promise Kept

Guest: Robertson McQuilkin

From the series: What God Has Done

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Bob: In the late 1980s, Robertson McQuilkin's wife Muriel was first diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Over time, her condition became worse and worse. Here is Dr. McQuilkin.

Robertson: It's like I was traveling away from her in the olden days, and I would recount our times together, our love times, our fun times, our crisis times. I'd rehearse those, and it was just delightful. It was like I was there. I was living it over again. And so now I'm on a little longer journey.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Wednesday, August 13th. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. We'll hear about a long journey and about a promise kept on today's program.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us on the Wednesday edition. Often, when I have the opportunity to speak at one of our FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences, which I'm going to be doing in Philadelphia, by the way, coming up in November. I'm looking forward to going in early for a cheesesteak and then spending a weekend at the conference in Philadelphia.

Dennis: We'll have more than 60 of these events throughout the fall. And I just want to say, Bob, and excuse me for interrupting here, but ...

Bob: That's all right. I'll just think about the cheesesteak, you go ahead.

Dennis: I know, I know, you're all over the cheesesteak and trying to find a Cheesecake Factory to go visit. Number 70 – or which one is it now?

Bob: It will be close to that by the time we get there, I think.

Dennis: Number 70 – think about that, folks. Anyway, this is serious. We've got to get – we've got to have intervention for Bob, I think.

But, you know, I run into listeners all the time who have been listening to FamilyLife Today, some for a few months, some for several years who still have not been to a Weekend to Remember Marriage Conference or those who went a number of years ago and whose lives have dramatically changed because of just the water that's under the

bridge. And it's time, folks, it's time to go back, it's time to get a wheel alignment and to go take a weekend, a Friday night, all day Saturday, half-day Sunday, to sit and soak and have some fun, build some romance, build your relationship. You're not going to be asked to do anything publicly. You're just going to have a blast together as a couple.

I just want to ask you a question – when it the last time you really did something great for your marriage? And if that means going to Philadelphia to hear Bob, then join him at the Cheesecake Factory and get over there, but get to one of our 60 Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences this fall and take advantage of what I believe is the finest biblical training in the world on marriage and family.

Bob: You feel pretty strongly about this, don't you?

Dennis: I do. I've given my adult life to strengthen marriages and families, and I don't know of a better weekend for couples to spend. It's going to enrich their marriage with the right thing.

Bob: Well, what I was starting to say was that whenever I get the chance to speak at one of these Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences, I tell folks about Dr. Robertson McQuilkin and share with them his example of sacrificial, unconditional, 'til death do us part love that he demonstrated for his wife, Muriel.

Dennis: One of the things you've said that has kept you going are all the memories – memories of her wit and kind of how she would flash back at you. And there is one story I want you to share with our listeners where she rebuked you. That's just a classic story that I think points out the differences between men and women in a beautiful way.

Robertson: I think you're referring to the time we were – in the evening in bed discussing some earth-shaking theme, which I do not remember. And I was just demolishing her arguments with superb logic.

Dennis: Are you saying you were arguing with her?

Robertson: Discussing. If I ever do seem to be prevailing in a situation like that, then I start feeling bad about it. But she didn't wait for any sympathy or pity. She just reared up on one elbow and flashed those gray-green eyes at me, and she said, "Well, let me tell you something. Logic's not everything, and feeling's not nothing."

Dennis: When I read that story, I thought, "That is a great statement," especially for a man to hear.

Bob: You know, those stories, and Dennis talked about how there is comfort in those memories, but I would think, mixed in with the comfort of those memories, would be an ongoing sense of loss. I mean, that's how she was. But that's not how she's been over the last seven years.

Robertson: No. It's like I was traveling away from her in the olden days, and I would recount our times together, our love times, our fun times, our crisis times. I'd rehearse those, and it was just delightful. It was like I was there. I was living it over again. And so now I'm on a little longer journey, or she's on a journey, and, no, it's pure pleasure to recount those.

Now, if I was wire up, if I was programmed in my head so that I was thinking about, "Oh, but I don't have this anymore," "Oh, but what if it hadn't been this way," then, sure, I could get bent out of shape. And I don't take any credit for it. I give the Lord credit for anything good that I ever think or do, but I don't feel any immediate intervention on God's part. It's just that's not the way I am. I know you'd like to have me feel an agony and a pain and a wrestling and a battle, because that would help a lot of people, and I wish I could, but, frankly, that's not been my experience.

Bob: Well, you don't ever go to bed at night and pray and say, "Lord, just tomorrow, one day, where it's like it used to be."

Robertson: I've never done that. When I go to bed at night I thank the Lord for my sweetheart, and she's just lying there – actually, when she's asleep, it's just like the old days and I say, "Lord, keep watch over in the night and don't let her have any bad dreams. Speak peace to her spirit." My daughter, Marty, has a theory that the Holy Spirit bypasses the mental and the – since her brain is all tangled up, He just bypasses all that and speaks to her spirit. Now, I don't know what the theology of that is, but I like it.

Dennis: You know, in 1992, you did have a down period, though. You had resigned your seminary post two years earlier, your eldest son had been killed in a diving accident, and your joy, in your own words, had "drained away." And you said that your passion and your love for God had frozen over. It took a retreat for you in a mountain hideaway to refresh that, and in the process of that you said, "The heavy heart is lifted on the wings of praise." Explain that to our listeners.

Robertson: I had discovered it earlier in life, but I'm a slow learner, and when I had these heavy blows, I wasn't asking God why. I never asked why. That's His business, and we're in a fallen world, and I often say, "Why not? Why not me? They're dying of cancer?" So that wasn't a problem with me. But I was just bunged up emotionally – all these poundings, and it was more like the passion had gone out of our relationship. It was more like your number-one lover was silent, and I knew I was in ...

Dennis: You're speaking of your love for God at this point.

Robertson: Yes, yes, and so I knew I was in trouble, and whenever I'm in trouble, big trouble, I try to get away for a few days of fasting and prayer. So I went away, and it took me about 24 hours to pull my focus off of my own traumas and troubles and problems. My faith at that point was more like resignation.

Dennis: What do you mean by that?

Robertson: In other words, "I'm resigned, okay, God, whatever you want, that's okay." But it's not faith, it's not a buoyant tight connection with God. It's not joy in your confidence and trust. So – I finally got my thoughts away from that as I read the Psalms and as I sang the hymns. I took a hymnbook with me. And as I did and got my focus on Him and began to list all the things about Him I liked, all the wonderful things He's done in the world, all the wonderful things He's done for me, that's when I discovered a heavy heart lifts on the wings of praise. So it was through praise that I was reconnected. Of course, He'd never broken the connection, but I sort of got deaf.

Dennis: You know, as you were talking, I was thinking about Psalm 103 – "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His Holy Name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits who pardons all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion, who satisfies your years with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle." Now, you just hit on a profound theological principle that's taught throughout the Bible, and it's the theological principle of remembrance – that we need to recall what God has done, and if we forget what God has done, we'll forget to trust Him today. We'll forget who He is, and we'll grumble in our tents.

Robertson: I started to say, "Amen," but actually it's bad news if we do that, and that's one of the things God has been teaching me in recent times. Back in the early days before I resigned, He taught me about love from a different end. It was how much Muriel wanted to be with me; how much she depended on me; how she expressed all day long her affection for me, and her gratitude for every little thing.

Dennis: Actually, she would go in search of you, right?

Robertson: During that stage – we were half a mile away, the office from the home, and she would walk. She's a speedwalker. Sometimes she walked up to 10 times a day, round trip. That would be 10 miles.

Dennis: In search of you?

Robertson: In search – coming to my office to find me – where I might be inaccessible, but she would come. And one time I was helping her with her shoes, taking off her shoes at night, and her feet were bloody from all that walking. And I thought to myself, "God, is that how I love you? I must be with you no matter what it costs; to constantly express my love and my appreciation and my thanksgiving and my trust." I'm secure in Him, and I asked Him to help me love Him the way she loved me.

But now, of course, that's all gone. I think she may be a little more content when I'm around, but she doesn't really know anything much. What's subterranean, we don't know, but ...

Dennis: ... she doesn't speak to you?

Robertson: Not for about seven years, six years. So He's taught me a lot about love for Him in my relationship with Muriel.

Dennis: There was a moment, however, on a Valentine's Day, and the reason Valentine's Day is so important is it goes all the way back to when you proposed to her back in 1947.

Robertson: Right, that's right.

Dennis: Yes, so Valentine's Day had a very special meaning in your relationship.

Robertson: Very special. Actually, if you had a few hours, I'd tell you about some of those Valentine's Days. Some of them were really extraordinary, but she had come to the place where she wasn't – couldn't say a sentence, and even words were just occasional, and they didn't always make good sense. Sometimes "yes" when she meant "no," and so forth.

This particular Valentine's eve, I was contemplating an article I'd just read that said in Alzheimer's care, it's the caregiver that's the victim. And I thought, "Hm, strange, I don't feel like a victim." I never did feel like a victim. I wonder why? And she doesn't feel like a victim." We sort of missed that. And then I began rehearsing all these Valentine stories.

The next morning I was on my exercycle at the foot of the bed – I threw that away, I can't stand it.

[laughter]

Bob: Amen.

Robertson: But I do run. At any rate, I was then on an exercycle, and when she woke up there, as she often did during those days, as soon as she saw me, she'd break into this big smile and, of course, that made my day. Actually, when she smiles, I hang a flag out front so that my friends and neighbors can tell that's a smile day. So this was a smile day, she smiled. And while she was looking at me and smiling, she paused, and just as clear as a crystal chime, she said, "Love, love, love."

Oh, I hopped off the – I came over and hugged her, and I said, "Oh, honey, you really do love me, don't you?" And she couldn't do words like she wanted to, of course. She was looking for an affirmation, and she said I'm nice. And almost the last words she ever said – about six or seven years ago.

Bob: Do you wonder if – and I've heard this – I've heard of people who have been in comas for a long period of time and right before they go home they come back out, and they talk, and they're lucid. Do you wonder, do you think ahead and think, "I wonder if I'll have that?"

Robertson: One time when we were talking – my sister and I were talking about Muriel. And – of course, she didn't understand, didn't know anything – and Amy said, "You know, when we get to heaven I wonder if she's going to say, 'You turkeys didn't think I knew what was going on, but I heard everything you said.'"

[laughter]

But, you see, the coma experience is quite common, at least you hear of it often, but that's a totally different physiological thing than having your neurons in tangles up there. So, really, there's no connecting going on. Of course, I'd love to have it, but I'm not waiting for it.

Bob: Not holding out hope.

Robertson: No.

Bob: You know, it was not longer after Muriel died that Robertson wrote another article about her homegoing, and we have a link on our website at FamilyLife.com to the article that he wrote so that listeners can reflect on that transition in his life as well.

I think the thing that just stands out and has always stood out to us is the remarkable character. And, you know, Robertson always thought, "I'm not doing anything extraordinary or special. I'm just doing what I promised to do." And I guess the thing that makes it remarkable and extraordinary is because so few people today would do it with good cheer and with grace and with compassion and with sacrifice as he did it.

Dennis: And, you know, Bob, what he was talking about there at the end was really missing a relationship, missing being connected, heart-to-heart, mind-to-mind, soul-to-soul with Muriel, and that's what marriage is. It's the mingling of two souls. It's not just two bodies coming together. Marriage is a commitment body, soul, and spirit, of two people to one another, husband and wife.

And I just want to take you back where we started the beginning of this broadcast when I exhorted our listeners to come to a Weekend to Remember because what we will help you do is reconnect body, soul, and spirit to one another because that's what makes a great marriage. And if you haven't been to one of our conferences in a few years, or if you've never been, or if you're a single and contemplating marriage, there is no better way to invest in your marriage and the future of your family than to spend a weekend with us and to get the biblical blueprints for how two people can truly connect like Robertson was talking about.

Bob: We've got all of the information about the upcoming season of FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences on our website at FamilyLife.com. It lists not only Philadelphia, where I'll be speaking, but, actually, we've got conferences East to West, North to South. I was looking last night. We're going to be in Palm Beach

Gardens in Florida, and in Blaine, Washington, which is about as far north as you can go without being in Canada. We're going to be in San Diego, California, and I saw we're going to be in New York state as well.

If you'd like to find out when the conference is coming to a city near where you live, or a city you'd like to travel to, go to our website, FamilyLife.com, or call 1-800-FLTODAY, get the weekend blocked out on your calendar and then make reservations to attend one of our FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences when it comes to a city near you this fall.

And be sure when you get in touch with us to request a copy of Dr. Robertson McQuilkin's book called "A Promise Kept." I know couples who have given copies of this book as an anniversary gift. It really is a great telling of a great love story, and you can find out how to request a copy when you go online at FamilyLife.com, or you can call us at 1-800-FLTODAY, and we'll make arrangements to have a copy of the book sent out to you.

And then let me also ask you when you do get in touch with us, if you are able to help with a donation this month of any amount for the ministry of FamilyLife Today, we would like to send you a copy of Dennis and Barbara Rainey's devotional book, "Moments With You." FamilyLife Today is listener-supported, and it's folks like you who help keep us on the air in this city and in other cities all across the country, and if you do make a donation this month, and you make it online, when you come to the keycode box on the donation form, just type the word "you" in there, y-o-u, and we'll know to send you a copy of the devotional from Dennis and Barbara, or call 1-800-FLTODAY. You can make your donation over the phone. That's 1-800-358-6329 and just ask for a copy of the devotional book from Dennis and Barbara Rainey, "Moments With You." And, again, let me say thank you for your financial support of the ministry. We appreciate your partnership with us.

You know, as we conclude today, one of the things that I think most impressed us in our conversation with Dr. McQuilkin was just his commitment to perseverance to finishing well and to doing the right thing, and he wrote a prayer that he included in his book, "A Promise Kept," called "Let Me Get Home Before Dark."

We asked him while he was here to share that prayer with our listeners. Here again is Dr. McQuilkin.

Robertson:

It's sundown, Lord, the shadows of my life stretch back into the dimness of the years long spent.

I fear not death, for that grim foe betrays himself at last, thrusting me forever into life, life with You, unsoiled and free.

But I do fear

I fear the dark specter may come too soon

Or do I mean too late?
That I should end before I finish or finish but not well?
That I should stain Your honor.
Shame your name, grieve your loving heart.
Few, they tell me, finish well.
Lord, let me get home before dark.

The darkness of the spirit grown mean and small
Fruit shriveled on the vine bitter to the taste of my companions
Burdened to be borne by those brave few who love me still.
No, Lord, let the fruit grow lush and sweet
A joy to all who taste
Spirit's sign of God at work
Stronger, fuller, brighter at the end
Lord, let me get home before dark.

The darkness of tattered gifts, rust-locked, half spent or ill spent
A life that once was used of God now set aside.
Grief for glories gone or fretting for a task God never gave
Mourning in the hollow chambers of memory
Gazing on the faded banners of victories long gone
Cannot I run well unto the end?
Lord, let me get home before dark.

The outer me decays, I do not fret or ask reprieve
The ebbing strength but weans me from Mother Earth and grows me up for
heaven.
I do not cling to shadows cast by immortality,
I do not patch the scaffold lent to build the real eternal me,
I do not clutch about me my cocoon, vainly struggling to hold hostage a free spirit
pressing to be born.
But will I reach the gate in lingering pain
Body distorted, grotesque
Or will it be a mind wandering untethered among life fantasies or grim terrors?
Of your grace, Father, I humbly ask
Let me get home before dark.

Bob: FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas – help for today; hope for tomorrow.

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