

# FamilyLife Today® Radio Transcript

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## A Promise Kept

Guest: Robertson McQuilkin

From the series: Our Future

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**Bob:** What's the right response, the biblical response, when someone you love has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease? Do you take care of that person? Do you hire someone else to be the caregiver? For Dr. Robertson McQuilkin the decision was simple. He chose to take care of his wife Muriel. He realized it was his responsibility, not a responsibility that his children should bear.

**Robertson:** I've told Marty, who is my oldest daughter and who stays with Muriel when I have to leave town, I said, "Marty, now I do not want you to rearrange your life to care for your mother if I die before she does. I've got it fixed so you can put her in a care institution." She said, "I'm not going to do it. God put me here to take care of her." And I said, "Marty, I really want all of the children to go on with their life, and Mom won't know anything, so just" – she said, "Well, Dad, when you're dead you won't have any say, will you?"

[laughter]

**Bob:** This is FamilyLife Today for Thursday, August 14th. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. We'll talk today with Dr. Robertson McQuilkin about a Christian's responsibility in providing long-term care for a loved one. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Thursday edition. As we have been reflecting this week on an interview that we actually recorded nine years ago, Dennis, with Dr. Robertson McQuilkin, the former president of the Columbia International University and Seminary, who stepped down in 1990 to care for his wife, Muriel, after she had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. I've been thinking about the alcove down the hall from the studio where we have pictures of Dr. McQuilkin, and where we have a lighthouse that stands there to commemorate his sacrificial love for his wife, and we've had the opportunity over the years to honor a number of people who have demonstrated that same kind of sacrificial love and give them an award that bears his name.

**Dennis:** Right, and that lighthouse, Bob, that's down in the hall from here, stands on a 50-pound chunk of polished granite, and we picked out that granite because of its hardness, toughness, weight, and just the sheer mass that it represents, because the story we've been listening to all week here is a story of a light being set on a hill. It's the love of Christ being demonstrated between a husband and his wife when his wife couldn't care for him, couldn't speak with him, couldn't connect with him emotionally and spiritually.

And, you know, we have a lot of privileges here on FamilyLife Today, and when we get a chance to tell a story that exalts Jesus Christ; that talks practically about a tough situation where a husband fulfills his promise and his pledge to care for his wife, Bob, it just doesn't get any better than that, and that's why we created that award for Dr. McQuilkin and, as you mentioned, we've had a chance to give it to a half a dozen other people and honor them for toughness in their commitment and really keeping their covenant. That's what marriage is all about.

**Bob:** We're going to hear part 4 right now of the interview that we recorded back in 1999 with Dr. Robertson McQuilkin and, again, at that time his wife Muriel was still alive. She went home to be with the Lord in 2003. It was a real privilege to be able to interact with him about his selfless sacrificial love for her.

**Bob:** We've talked about this all week. We've talked about your decision to step down, to come home to be the full-time caretaker for your wife. We have folks listening to the broadcast who have made different decisions about care for a loved one, whether it's a husband, or a wife, an aging mother or father. They have chosen to bring in professional help or to provide for full-time care in a nursing facility. Do you think that's wrong for somebody to make that choice?

**Robertson:** Of course not. The touchstone for me is what is best for her. When there comes a time, either because of my health or hers, that someone else can care for her better than I, then painful as it will be to be separated – because, you know, her loving presence is there all day every day. I would miss that. But that's the touchstone. What would love do in this case? For example, if the roles were reversed, Muriel couldn't lift me. She couldn't put me in a wheelchair. She'd hang on as long as she could, but roles are different. It came at a time in life when I could do it. So, no. In fact, this is just a story. I'm not pushing an agenda, I'm not setting an example. I mean, you can kind of pick and choose and try to make something of it, but I'm just telling a story, and that's the way of joy for us.

**Dennis:** Yes, I think that's healthy for you to say – you don't have an agenda here – because, Bob, I think we have a generation of men and women who are part of the baby boom generation who are watching their parents age, and they do wonder – what is God's will here? How can I best care for my mother, my father and, in fact, I'm asking that question myself. My mom is 87 years of age, still able to live in her home, primarily because my brother lives near her. I think

that's a good standard you've given us – the standard of what is best for the object of the love.

**Robertson:** Well, Dennis, you bring in the parental thing. I've told Marty, who is my eldest daughter and who stays with Muriel when I have to leave town. I said, "Marty, now I do not want you to rearrange your life to care for your mother if I die before she does. I've got it fixed so you can put her in a care institution." She said, "I'm not going to do it. God put me here to take care of her." And I said, "Marty, I really want all of the children to go on with their life, and Mom won't know anything, so just" – she said, "Well, Dad, when you're dead you won't have any say, will you?"

[laughter]

**Bob:** She is a chip off the old block, isn't she? The oak did not fall far from the tree in that case.

**Dennis:** Exactly right. Let's go back to when you first found out she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. If someone could have sat down with you at that point and told you three or four things ...

**Robertson:** ... a couple of things ...

**Dennis:** ... yes, what would you say to that person who today is maybe facing this brand-new?

**Robertson:** This is what I say to people who – of course, everywhere I go people tell me their stories, and if they ask me for my opinion, I say, "Well, the first thing is to realize that no two experiences are the same." The time of onset, the length of time, the rate of downward progression, the functions that are lost – all are different. About the only thing that's the same is memory loss. But, from then on, it's unpredictable. I tried, early on, to read what my doctor gave me – the medical papers on this – and tried to plot my life accordingly – how long she was going to live, what was going to happen next and so forth – none of it panned out that way, it was all different. So don't build your plans and expectancies on this happening like someone else. You just have to learn as you go along.

The second thing I tell people, and this is so critical, Dennis – it's your expectancies that will ruin you and her and your relationship. In other words, she's losing function, right? But if you always lag a month or six months behind in what you're pushing on her, what you're trying to get her to do and so forth – it's dreadful. I remember one time when Marty said, "Dad, you're not holding Mom to it. She could remember if she tried." And I said, "Honey, she can't." And when Marty came to that position, where she recognized that Muriel can't – that she wants to but she can't – she came to such peace and overflowing love in

that relationship. So expectancies – this has destroyed many – and it will destroy your own peace.

**Dennis:** Yes, let me read a verse here that came to my mind while you were talking – Romans 15 – "Now, we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves."

**Robertson:** Amen.

**Dennis:** If you think about what he's saying, Bob, it's no different in a new marriage. There are couples who start out who don't have the capability. They can't. They are unable, and what he has come to is he's come to the point of embracing Muriel's limitations, her weaknesses, and you're strong – "be strong in faith"...

**Robertson:** ..."and hold them."

**Dennis:** Yes.

**Bob:** You said on an earlier broadcast that you made the decision when you received the diagnosis not to pursue experimental procedures, protocols, vitamins, trips to Mexico, getting rid of the aluminum in the house, all of the things you had read about or heard about. Why not? Why not see if there's maybe something out there that could prolong the interaction?

**Robertson:** I think it's an individual choice. I have friends with other illnesses as well who have spent the last years of their life, which they should have been savoring, running here, traveling there, getting hopes up on this, getting hopes up on that, cancer, whatever – and in the end it wasn't any different from others. And that's where I'm coming from. Other people have other backgrounds where they're coming from. But, for me, that's where I'm coming from, and I'm saying, "I just don't have to spend the rest of my life tracking down everything." So the medical people in my world, I said, "I'll just go along with what they have to say."

**Bob:** You know, you haven't had to face what some people have to face with a prolonged illness, where there are respirators or where there are feeding tubes or where there is care that goes beyond what you are able to provide today for Muriel. If that day were to come, do you know what you'd do?

**Robertson:** Oh, yes. Muriel and I agreed many decades ago that when we come to that last descent to the grave, and God is calling us home, we pledged to one another that we would not use what is called "heroic means." She's on "no code" as far as the hospital is concerned – no resuscitation, no artificial means to sustain life.

So, yes, but it might not come in that kind of a package. I was interviewing a talk show host on the West Coast. It was supposed to be about another book on ethics, which I had written, but he'd just read an article in "Christianity Today" telling part of my story, and that's what he wanted to talk about.

So, all of a sudden, he said, "Open line." I didn't know it was an open line show. And this lady came on and pretty aggressively she says, "Why don't you let her go?" And I said, "What do you mean let her go?" And she said, "Well, do you feed her?" And I said, "Yes." She says, "Well, why don't you quit? She'd be a lot better off with Jesus." So I'd never do that, would I? I don't know. I wouldn't do it just like that, but several years ago I read that the next stage for Muriel will be that she forgets how to swallow, and we'll have to put a stomach PEG in. Well, is that part of heroics? Not very heroic – five-minute outpatient operation. And what am I going to do? I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it, but when I do, it's a dilemma. I don't know the answer. Knowing me, I just may put in the PEG. But what I'm saying is God has provided the wisdom for each choice until now, and I'm just going to trust Him to guide me at that time.

**Bob:** Folks who are regular caregivers to Alzheimer's patients are encouraged to have time out of the house once a week, twice a week, when somebody else watches your wife, in this case, and you just get away to clear your head and take a walk. Do you do that?

**Robertson:** Well, you see, once again, if I answer the question truthfully, somebody might take it as a model, and it's not a model. But I've never felt the need of that. In fact, when I'm away, I have a longing to be back with her, if anything, as much if not more than what it used to be in the olden days. I just like to be there with her. I want to get back to her.

However, I'm no judge at it, because when I step down, I expect to be a full-time homemaker, nothing else. But she changed enough, and my circumstances changed enough, so that I could keep my speaking engagements for two or three years in advance. I didn't have to cancel any of them, which I thought I was going to cancel them all, because my sister first, and now my daughter, come and stay when I travel. So I can't judge. I am away quite often for no more than three days usually – two or three days, and that is a break. So if I say I don't need a break, well, wait a minute, how do I know?

**Bob:** You get breaks from time to time, yes.

**Dennis:** One of the things our listeners don't get a chance to see is the facial expression on our guests, and on one of the earlier days on the broadcast this week we called home while Marty, his daughter, is taking care of Muriel. And I just wish our listeners, Bob, could have seen Robertson's face when Marty answered the phone. The first question that Robertson asked, and he asked it and leaned forward in the microphone, and there was – I can't even explain it, but

it was a glow, it was an expectancy, but he asked this question – "Has she smiled today?" And you could tell he had missed that smile. That's true, isn't it?

**Robertson:** Oh, yes.

**Dennis:** That's important to you even now, isn't it?

**Robertson:** Oh, yes, because it happens when our eyes connect. Usually it's vacant but once in a while we connect, and she really is looking at you. And after she starts looking at you, she smiles, that's great.

**Dennis:** And you put the flag out on the front porch to let your neighbors know that she smiled today.

**Robertson:** That's the way it is. It doesn't fly as much as it used to.

**Dennis:** Let me ask you a question – what are you going to do when there's no flag to fly?

**Robertson:** I'll just have to trust the Lord for that day. And it is much less now than it was, but as long as He – I have asked, on occasion, Lord, let me keep her a little longer. I really want her.

**Dennis:** Yes, in fact, I want to read something to our listeners. This is the – well, it's the last page in the book that he's written. It's entitled, "My Precious."

Well, you know what? I'd rather you read it, I think. You wrote it. I think you might be able to read it a little more effectively than how I would read it, Robertson. So page 85, share it with our listeners.

**Robertson:** "Twenty-two summers ago, Muriel and I began our journey into the twilight. It's midnight now, at least for her. Sometimes I wonder when dawn will break. Even the dread Alzheimer's disease isn't supposed to attack so early and torment so long. Yet, in her silent world, Muriel is so content, so lovable, I sometimes pray, "Please, Lord, could you let me keep her a little longer?" If Jesus took her home, how I would miss her gentle, sweet presence. Oh, yes, there are times when I get irritated but not often. It doesn't make sense. And, besides, I love to care for her. She is my precious."

**Dennis:** You know, Robertson, as you were reading that, I was thinking that's a much better picture of love than anything Hollywood ever created – ever! That's love right there – loving someone who really is incapable of loving you back. But you've loved her with the love that God has loved you, and you've cared for her, and you can tell it's the real deal. And I just want to thank you again. I've thanked you almost every day you're on the broadcast, but I want to thank you again for making the journey over here. You had to travel to get over here and to

share your story and Muriel's. But thanks for being a great lover of your wife and for being a covenant keeper, and I want to make a promise to you. As long as God enables us, we're going to tell your story at our FamilyLife conferences and here on the broadcast.

**Robertson:** Thank you, Dennis. You have a wonderful gift of affirmation, even if it sometimes borders on – what shall I say – exaggeration. But I appreciate your affirmation and the honor of being with you on this great program.

**Bob:** You can't listen back to that without, once again, thinking here is a guy we can all learn from, can't we?

**Dennis:** Oh, yes, yes, and need to learn from. I mean, some of us have gotten angry with our spouses over the most trivial issues and things, and here is a man who comes alongside us said, "Would you kindly get your head up? Would you realize the privilege you have to care for another human being for a lifetime?"

I just was listening to him. He began there at the end saying, you know, "Twenty-two summers ago, Muriel and I began our journey toward twilight, and it's now midnight for her." He cared for her all the way to the end, and we need love stories like this.

And, Bob, I just want to say thank you to listeners who support our broadcast, because when they give, that's what they're making possible, and in a very real way in a culture that doesn't promote selfless love, that doesn't promote lifelong commitment, and covenant-keeping love. I think it's the right thing. It is so right, it is so wholesome, so good, and so needed in this generation. We need to be reminded that love is a covenant, and I think I just want to encourage our listeners when you go home tonight or even if you are home, just maybe turn off the TV and just go sit on the couch together and just say, "You know what? I'm going to tell you I love you again and if I had it to do all over again, I would. I'd marry you all over again, 1,000 times out of 1,000."

**Bob:** And then you can follow it up by saying – and I was thinking maybe we ought to go this fall to one of those FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences.

**Dennis:** That's a great idea, Bob.

**Bob:** Get a weekend away together, just the two of us and focus on our marriage and on each other. We are hosting these conferences in cities all across the country this fall. I'm going to be speaking at one of the conferences in Philadelphia coming up in November, but I was just looking recently, we're going to be in Monterey, California, we're going to be in San Antonio, Texas, with the conference. We're going to have conferences in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and

Chattanooga, Tennessee. In fact, there's probably a conference in driving distance for most of our listeners.

You can find out all the information on the website, FamilyLife.com, find when the conference is coming to a city near where you live, mark that date out on your calendar, and go ahead and get registered now. Some of these conferences fill up, and sell out in advance. So make your reservations, make your plans, you can register online, or you can call 1-800-FLTODAY. We'll answer any questions you have, and we can get you registered right over the phone. 1-800-F-as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY, that's the phone number, or go online at FamilyLife.com, and if you are interested in getting a copy of the book Dr. McQuilkin wrote called "A Promise Kept," you can order that from our website as well, or you can order it when you call 1-800-FLTODAY.

Then, again, I want to encourage you to take time in your marriage each day to spend time with one another, praying, looking at the Scriptures together, and if you need a tool to help make that happen, the book that Dennis Rainey and his wife, Barbara, have written called "Moments With You," is a wonderful daily devotional that we'd like to send you this month as a way of saying thank you for your financial support of the ministry of FamilyLife Today.

Because we are listener-supported, we depend on folks like you to make a donation from time to time to help support the work of this ministry, and if you make that donation this month, feel free to request a copy of "Moments With You." If you are donating online, when you come to the keycode box on the donation form, type in the word "You," y-o-u, so we'll know to send you a copy of the devotional guide. And if you are calling 1-800-FLTODAY to make your donation, just request Dennis and Barbara's devotional or the book, "Moments With You." Again, we're thrilled to send it to you. We trust it will help you strengthen your marriage, and we appreciate your partnership with us and your support of FamilyLife Today.

Now, tomorrow we want to invite you back as we begin a conversation on youth ministry with the director of student ministries from a church in North Carolina. Steve Wright is making changes in how he does youth ministry, and he thinks changes need to be made. We'll talk about that tomorrow. I hope you can be with us.

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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