

# Unfavorable Odds

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## Episode 19: A Journey of Hope Through 9/11

Guest: Shelly Genovese-Calhoun

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And of course, thirty minutes later the north tower collapsed. When that tower collapsed, I collapsed to the ground with it. I mean I just laid on the floor sobbing in hopeless despair.

**Kim:** From the FamilyLife podcast network, this is *Unfavorable Odds*. I’m Kim Anthony.

*Unfavorable Odds* is all about finding hope and help in those seasons of life when things get pretty difficult. Jesus has promised us that whenever we walk through those dark valleys, *He* will always be with us. So, on each episode of this podcast, we’ll be talking with people who have learned how, in those dark places of life, to draw their strength from Jesus.

I still remember the Tuesday morning my husband called me downstairs because something had happened. The television was on and it showed a high rise on fire. It took me a while to register that our country was under attack but when I did, I immediately began to pray. I prayed for the people in the building and I also prayed for the families and the friends of those who would be lost.

Well, here we are almost two decades later, and I’m honored to have had the chance to sit down with one of those family members I had actually prayed for. Her name is Shelly Genovese-Calhoun. She lost her husband who was at work in the twin towers on 9-11. In her book, *Twice Blessed: A Journey of Hope Through 9-11*, she shares about how God not only gave her the strength and the healing she needed to get through the difficulty of losing her husband but also how He has continued to remain faithful to His promises.

Let’s start off by talking about the earlier years. What was it like for you growing up?

**Shelly:** Well I grew up outside of Dallas in a small town. I grew up with not necessarily a Christian family but a very, very loving family who supported me in everything. When I was a young child, we had a lady who worked at our house—she cleaned our house

like once a week. She would walk around the house and she would sing, and she would hum, and her joy was just so contagious. She would tell me about Jesus. So, at a very young age—I was only in fourth grade—I started wanting to know more and more about this Jesus that just gave her so much joy and happiness as she cleaned.

She'd asked me one day if I had asked Jesus into my heart. At that point, I had not. So, she said, "I want you to go into a small place just to be alone with Him and you can just talk to Him like He's your friend." So, as a young child, I asked Jesus into my heart, in a dirty clothes hamper, in my parents' room. I feel like my life was forever changed by just a sincere heart and a sincere prayer of just a child.

**Kim:** What were things like for your parents?

**Shelly:** Well at that point, my mom and dad—we didn't really start attending church at that time. Even though I had accepted Christ as my Savior, we weren't really growing in a relationship with Him. Soon after that, a couple of years later, a friend invited us to go to church with them. It was a friend day, so it was a big event at their church, and they asked our family to go. We went to church and that was the start of a new something in our family and in our relationship with Christ because we continued to grow in Him. My mom rededicated her life to the Lord. It was amazing.

**Kim:** There was a point when you talk about, in your book, how you would stand in the mirror and look at yourself and strike poses—things like that. Tell me about it. [Laughter]

**Shelly:** I think I just had a really good imagination as a child. I would sit in my bathroom sink, too, and I would just sing songs and make up monologues and pretend like I was a model. I would always try on clothes for my mom and dad and walk around and pretend like I was a model. I think I wanted to model since I was a young child and even tried to do acting for a while, but you can tell with my southern drawl that did not take me very far. [Laughter]

**Kim:** So, you had this desire to model and you ended up following your dreams. How did that happen?

**Shelly:** I just think nothing is by chance. I think God opened doors for me at a young age. I believe that He put modeling in my life so that I could meet my future husband who was not saved at the time that I met him. I believe that meeting him and putting the seed of the message of God in his heart and he eventually accepted Christ. I believe that God just opened doors for me honestly.

**Kim:** Well let's talk about the night you met your husband. Take me through it. I want to hear the details. [Laughter]

**Shelly:** Well I was doing a convention in the Dallas area. I worked for an agency here in town and I was doing a convention. My husband actually walked in late and there was only one seat left and it was on the front row right in front of me.

**Kim:** Okay. So, he wasn't your husband at the time but—

**Shelly:** My future husband, yes. Steve walked in and he sat on the front row and we started just kind of looking back and forth at each other. Just kind of making eye contact and looking away.

When I walked out of the convention that day, I told the girl that I was modeling with—I was like “I think I'm in love.” I knew just right away that there was something kind of charismatic about him. I watched him walk in. I watched how other people interacted with him. I just could see that he was liked, and he had a really infectious personality. I loved he had a really big smile and I thought I was in love already. [Laughter]

**Kim:** So, when did you actually get a chance to talk with him?

**Shelly:** That night there was a dinner at a nice hotel in Dallas. The lady who had hired us said “Hey, if y'all want to come along for dinner tonight, of course, y'all are more than welcome.” I told my girlfriend we had to go because I had to have a chance to meet this Steve that I was so, so fascinated with.

So that night at dinner he made me feel so comfortable. I was eight years younger than he was. He just had such wisdom and he was knowledgeable, but he didn't make me feel awkward about being young and naïve. He just made me feel like I was the most important person in the room that day.

**Kim:** So that marked the beginning of this wonderful romance I take it.

**Shelly:** It did! After that we started dating. We started dating long distance. Of course, this was long before cell phones and facetime and all of that sort of communication was even around. We wrote letters back and forth to each other and we would talk on the phone for hours and hours a night just getting to know each other. That was just definitely the beginning of our whirlwind romance.

**Kim:** But there was something missing. He had all of these qualities that you had looked for in a man but there was one thing missing. What was that?

**Shelly:** Right, right. Well I mean he was an unbelievable man. I mean he was probably the best man I had ever met. He had every quality that I could ever look for in a husband. But when I had really been dating him for a while, God started, honestly, just convicting me. I mean the Holy Spirit was just in me tugging at my heart. I knew he went to church on Sundays. He had grown up going to church, but he truly did not know

Jesus as his Lord and Savior. We of course started talking about it and the more that we talked about it, the more that I realized that we were not on the same page.

So, of course, I started praying about it. I knew that I could not spend the rest of my life with a man who did not truly know Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Our views would be different. I knew that the Bible and the Word told me that we were supposed to be evenly yoked. I knew—I kind of set a date in my mind and I thought I'm going to have to end this relationship if at some point he does not make a decision to ask Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Eventually, he started asking more and more questions about the Lord. He started attending church with me. I think the Holy Spirit really started tugging at him and one Sunday after church—we were in Dallas and we walked to a creek bed near my parent's house—and he said “Shelly Renee,” he said, “I want you to know that I would do anything for you, but I want you to know that I'm doing this for me. I want to ask Jesus to be my Lord and Savior—that I believe He died on the cross. I believe He died for my sins and I want Him to rule over my life forever.”

I mean I don't think that I've ever been more excited or filled with more joy in my entire life because I knew a hundred percent at this point that this was the man that God had for me. It was completely His will and I knew that I would be able to marry him one day if he asked and he did. [Laughter] Very soon.

**Kim:** And he did. Well I want to ask you this: as you're dating, you're this Christian woman dating a non-Christian man and I'm sure you had some boundaries as a Christian woman, was he okay with that?

**Shelly:** Well, of course, in any relationship it's difficult being a Christian or a non-Christian. Of course, we all have temptations and desires, but maybe being a Christian, I knew where my boundaries were, and I told him from the very beginning that I was a virgin. That I was saving myself for my husband in marriage and he was unbelievable about it. Actually, I think he really respected that. He really respected me. He continued to say, “I've never met anybody like you before.” To me that was just—it made me respect him more because he respected me.

**Kim:** Yes. I think that's so good that you're sharing that part of your story. Because there are a lot of women out there, young women, who will give in to that temptation and will change their minds about that purity in a relationship because they think they're going to lose that guy. They're going to miss out and they're afraid of that. So that takes a lot of courage. I commend you.

**Shelly:** Well, I'm not going to say it was easy. I mean, it's definitely not an easy job when you are in love with someone and even know that you're going to spend the rest of your life. Even after we were engaged, it was very, very difficult. I had to continue to not put myself in compromising situations and he would fly to Dallas and he would stay

with my parents. You just have to put those boundaries where they belong so that you're not tempted to do things that you know are not the will of God.

**Kim:** Right; so good; so good. Then he proposed to you.

**Shelly:** Yes, he did. He proposed to me, actually, on the very same creek bed that he had asked Jesus into his heart, which was so, so important to me. Steve was this big Wall Street guy and we would go to these beautiful places together / beautiful restaurants. He had the means to fly me to Paris or anywhere else that he would have wanted to, to impress me or to win me over but he honestly knew what was most important to me was that creek bed.

That was the most defining moment of our relationship and he knew that asking me on that same creek bed would mean so, so much to me. So, on that same creek bed he got down on one knee and said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me and of course, I was overjoyed and said yes.

**Kim:** Yes, and then you moved to New York to be with him. Tell me what it was like being married to Steve *and* working as a model in New York City.

**Shelly:** Well it was very terrifying, at first, when I was flying home from our honeymoon—knowing that my luggage and everything that I ever owned in my life was being flown across country at the same time. I remember even looking out the airplane window and thinking “My life is about to change completely.”

So, of course I arrived in New Jersey and unpacked my bags and life couldn't have been more fun. Of course, the excitement of New York City—everything at your fingertips. I mean museums and plays, and I loved musical theater and wonderful restaurants and fun things like Krispy Kreme's at 1:00 in the morning and we were—

**Kim:** I love Krispy Kreme. [Laughter] The hot sign—when the hot sign comes on.

**Shelly:** Yes, yes. The sign would come on and we were like “we've got to go to Krispy Kreme,” but you know a lot of excitement at that time in my life. I just felt so blessed being in this wonderful relationship, meeting new people and of course, modeling in New York City was a dream of mine since childhood.

So, God had just honestly opened doors for me. Some clients I had worked for back in Dallas. I had worked for JCPenney for years and years and He just opened the doors for me in New York to do catalog work and things for JCPenney. So immediately I had clients to work for and some familiar people around me that made me comfortable in that environment. It was definitely an exciting time of life.

**Kim:** That is exciting. As you were talking, I can't even believe that I'm just thinking about this: when I first got married, we too had to move to New York. My husband was

already there. My first year of marriage was taking the train into Manhattan and working, and it was exciting. So, I can imagine the difference between moving from Texas to New York and the excitement, and then you're away from your mother with whom you have a very close relationship.

**Shelly:** Yes, that was the hardest. That was definitely the hardest. She was my best friend. I spent so much time with her. She was the person I had always confided in and she was also my rock. She was a wonderful Christian woman at this point in her life and she was just so important in my life. So, it was very hard being away from her.

It was exciting living in New York but there was something missing in my life—that I felt like there was still a void in my life. I started to go through a little bit of depression being away from my environment; being away from my home church; being away from walking into Starbucks and seeing people do Bible studies and being—just the familiarity of home—being away from my mom; being able to run to TJ Maxx with her or go have coffee or lunch. I started going through a little bit of depression.

**Kim:** Did your mother have a chance to come visit you often or did you visit her often to kind of help with that?

**Shelly:** Oh, my goodness, yes. My mom would come up to New York at least once a month. She visited a lot. She visited with friends and she would come, and they would stay with us. When I wasn't working in Manhattan / when I wasn't—of course, I actually worked several days a week which was a blessing, but I didn't work every day.

So, when I wasn't working, I was in a precious, cute little town called Basking Ridge, New Jersey. But in Basking Ridge, New Jersey it's not a lot of young people. It's a lot of families. I wasn't meeting a lot of friends just outside of modeling. When I worked in Manhattan, most of them lived in Manhattan. But others lived in Connecticut or just pretty much all over. I didn't have any girlfriends to really hang out with so my mom would come to town and just hang with me a lot during the day and help me get settled there.

That helped me a little bit with being depressed but what really, really helped me was getting back to my roots. I knew that I had that void in my life and I knew I needed to fill that void with things that were going to fill me completely and not leave me more empty. That was being back in church; that was being back in Bible studies; that was being back in the Word of God that was, ultimately, going to fill me and not leave me more empty than before.

**Kim:** So that void came from you drifting away from the Lord; is that what you're saying?

**Shelly:** I believe so. I believe that when I first got there, we were so busy with life. We were newlyweds and we were flying to the Hamptons for the weekend and we were

going to the Jersey shore and we were really, really enjoying being young people in love—which is wonderful and was a wonderful time of life, *but* I wasn't grounded in church. I wasn't hearing the Word of God on a regular basis. I was not in a Bible study and it definitely affected me and who I was.

**Kim:** Absolutely. Was it during this time that you started to think about growing your family and having children?

**Shelly:** Definitely. I think that there were years I thought “I want to be back in Texas. I want to be back in Texas.” I knew that, finally, I needed to just grow where I was planted. We decided to build a house / a beautiful home. Of course, I was super, super excited about that and we were excited about starting a family. We'd been married for five years and we couldn't wait to start our own family.

**Kim:** Did having a baby bring you the joy that you hoped it would?

**Shelly:** Oh, I mean, of course, having a baby just makes everything complete. She was just an addition to our perfect little world that I lived in. I loved dressing her up and getting on the train and taking her to museums in New York and strolling her around. She was my little playmate. It was wonderful to have her.

Of course, Steve was an unbelievable dad. He doted on her and he was very, very protective of me but then when he had his own daughter, he was super protective of his little princess. Every electrical outlet was covered in that house months before she was born. He would research highchairs for weeks before we would buy one. He was just very doting father and protective of her.

**Kim:** During that time when you were home with Jacqueline, did you start to sense a feeling of loneliness being at home with her and not having people around you who were young moms as well, or did you have a support group?

**Shelly:** At that point when Jacqueline was first born, I felt like my support group was, honestly, still back in Texas. I think that that's probably where the problem lied. I think it was really difficult. Even though we had so much fun together and I loved spending time with her, of course, it's more fun to have your best friend and for them to have their babies and stroll down the mall together and go to play dates and do all those things.

**Kim:** In your book, you talk about how there became a strained relationship between Steve and your mother because of the amount of time she would spend visiting or perhaps, you visiting her. I'm not sure if I remember exactly, but can you talk a little bit about that?

**Shelly:** Right. It was really a difficult thing to write about. Honestly, it's so hard to be vulnerable about truth honestly. I wrote it and I wrote it many, many different ways and I left it out in the beginning, and I thought nobody wants to hear a story about a perfect

world. Nobody has a perfect life, and nobody lives in a perfect world here on earth. I wanted to just be real and truthful and open up about it.

But yes, my mom and my husband, I think that they both had really, really strong personalities. I think it was I continued to put my mom in front of my husband for a really long time. That was something I had struggled with. Not that I completely put her in front of him, but I would just not always put him first. I would choose her other times and I would leave him on weekends to go visit.

If there was a chili cook off going on in Dallas, I'd be like "I'm going to the chili cook off." [Laughter] I didn't want to miss anything that was going on in Texas when I really needed to have my life with my family in New Jersey.

**Kim:** I am so glad you left that in the book. I think it's very important for all of us. I remember my relationship with my mother. Oh, we were very close, and it is easy when you have a good relationship with your parents to put your parents first before your husband. Because he's new and you're getting used to him. Your parents are there to support you.

In Genesis 2:24 it says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." My husband and I, we attended, just this weekend, FamilyLife's *Weekend to Remember*®—their marriage conference—and it was an important reminder of how leaving and cleaving is absolutely necessary for a marriage to work.

We've been married for 27 years. We're on the other side of that. I think it was probably our fourth or fifth conference; but now that we have grown adult children, we have to remind ourselves that when they get married, we're going to need to let them leave and cleave.

So, thank you for adding that into your story because I believe it will help a lot of young women *and men* as they seek to have a godly marriage.

**Shelly:** Yes, yes; thank you.

**Kim:** So, what changes did you make to deal with that strained relationship?

**Shelly:** The summer before 9-11, we were in Florida and there was a really, really big blow up between my mother and my husband. Words were spoken; feelings were hurt, and I tend to try to pretend like things don't happen. I actually, after the blow up, I went shopping like crazy, right.

I went into this little precious shop. It was called The Magnolia House. It was a real peaceful environment and there was music playing and there were candles lit and it smelled just wonderful. The lady there that owned the shop you could just tell she was



very, very genuine and that she just had something about her. She just had a peace about her. So, we kind of just briefly talked. She, of course, had no idea what was going on in my world back home at the condo. She handed me a notecard when I checked out. I think I purchased a small candle and she handed me a notecard. She said I want you to have this.

As I got into the car, I read this little notecard. She had written this beautiful poem about moments flying away and that I would not be in this season of my life ever again. It was like God had just completely spoke to me through this poem. I had to live in this moment. I had to put my husband first. I had to do everything I could to make everything right in that relationship with him. He was my world. I loved him so much. Why was I allowing this to happen in my life?

I went home, and we went back to New Jersey. We got into marriage counseling / a Christian counselor. Honestly, it just made us stronger. It made our relationship stronger. God was good to just completely heal everything that had been broken during that time. I remember going—looking at him after that and having a greater sense of love for this man and knowing that he was my person. I was just so in love.

**Kim:** It really is so God that you were able to come to that point because not to long after that was when your life was changed forever. Tell me about the days the moments leading up to 9/11.

**Shelly:** Well so the weekend before 9/11 we were in Dallas actually. So, we were in Dallas. My brother was turning 21 and my parents were having a birthday party for him at the house. Actually, that weekend Steve—he had had a hard week at work. It was just a really busy week. So, he said “I’m not really feeling well. I think maybe you and Jacqueline should go to Dallas by yourselves.”

I said “No, I don’t want to. It’s going to be such a fun weekend; I really want you to be there be with us.” I packed his bag and said, “You’re going to Dallas with us.” Of course, that Friday afternoon we all flew to Dallas and we had a great weekend in Dallas. We celebrated my brother’s 21<sup>st</sup> birthday on Saturday night. On Sunday morning, Steve went to church with us that Sunday morning and then Sunday afternoon, he flew back to New Jersey.

On Monday morning, Jacqueline, my daughter—she was 16 months old at the time—my mom, and myself, we were going to all fly back to New Jersey. My mom last minute decided to ask her best friend. Her best friend of like 20 something years. She said “Hey, I’m going to be babysitting all week. Come with me to New Jersey.” Of course, she was really, really persuasive and of course, last minute—I call her my godmother—so she decided to come with us. Big Momma decided to fly to New Jersey with us. It was the four of us and we all flew back to New Jersey on September 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Kim:** Tell me how you found out about what had happened with the twin towers.

**Shelly:** The morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> we had gotten in late the night before. Of course, it was by God's grace that my mother was with me and my godmother was with me and we'd even flown into town. It was simply God's grace. We got there and there was a new grocery store that had opened—a Texas sized grocery store in New Jersey which was like a big thing.

So, we got Jacqueline in bed and said "Hey, we're going to run to the grocery store real quick." We went to the grocery store and we went up and down every aisle and had all kinds of fun. But we got home and of course, by the time we got home, Steve was already in bed and Jacqueline was fast asleep. I crawled into bed with him and of course, I wanted to wake him up and say "Oh, we had so much fun at that grocery store. It's so cool." But I thought in my mind: there's always tomorrow. I can just always tell him about it tomorrow.

Of course, I didn't wake him up. I just cuddled up next to him and went to sleep. The next morning, he got up early. He always got to the train station early. I felt him reach over and turn the ringer off on the phone that was lying on my nightstand. I felt him gently kiss me goodbye. I just continued to sleep. It was early in the morning.

A couple of hours later the phone had obviously been ringing but I didn't hear my phone because the ringer had turned off. But the phone had been ringing. I didn't hear the nearby guest room phone ringing, but my mom did. Finally, after it had been ringing several times, she got up to answer it because she thought "Wow! Somebody must really want to get ahold of us." She got up to answer the phone and it was a good friend of mine and Steve's. She said "You need to wake Shelly up. Somethings happened to the World Trade Center."

"Hey, Shelly, wake up. Something's going on with the World Trade Center. Turn on the television." The first thing I saw was my husband's building. I knew it was his building because I would always say to my daughter: "That's Daddy's building with the antenna on the top," and I would always just point to her. So immediately I saw this building. I saw flames and fire coming out of it and of course, had no idea what had happened.

So immediately, what do you do? Of course, I started frantically trying to call my husband. I just called him over and over with no answer. Then my mom said "Hey, you need to check your messages. The phone rang several times, why don't you check your messages."

At that point, I retrieved my voicemails and I had a frantic call from my husband and with fear in his voice that I had, honestly, never ever heard. He was a strong man and he had always been this pillar of strength to me and he was scared. He was terrified, honestly, and he just was like "Shelly, answer the phone. Answer the phone. Wake up! Somethings happened to my building. Somethings happened." And then just complete silence.

Of course, I was devastated that I had missed that phone call from him. It was devastating, but I thought “He’s okay. I heard his voice. He’s okay.” We knew that the phone lines had been inundated with calls from the region. Of course, nobody could get through to anybody in that building at that point. I just continued to try to call him over and over with no success.

**Kim:** What types of things went through your mind as you were watching the news, seeing the pictures, hearing the reports?

**Shelly:** You know at that point everybody just thought that it was an accident. Everybody just thought that some private plane had run into the building by accident. So of course, I thought “Okay, he’s just coming down the stairway.” But of course, when the second plane hit the building, we knew immediately. We knew immediately that our country was under attack and that part was terrifying. Being a Christian you’re like: is this the end of the world? What is going on?

I mean it was absolutely terrifying, but all I could honestly think about was Steve. All I could think about was him getting out of that building and getting home safely. And since I had heard his voice, I honestly believed that he was making his way down the stairway. I knew that it would take him three hours and the reason that I knew that it would take him three hours is because he had been in the building in 1993 when there was a car bomb that went off under the World Trade Center.

That day the car bomb went off, he said the stairways were filled with smoke and fire and everybody was panicking. *But* he was able to get out of the building in three hours—go down from the 104<sup>th</sup> floor in three hours—get out of the building, come home, pack his bags, and he went skiing for the weekend.

I thought that’s what’s going to happen. Steve is going to come home. He’s going to make it out and we’re going to have a party. Everybody’s going to be here because by that time our house was filled with friends and family. They just continued—neighbors came over / friends came over—everybody trying to figure out what was going on in our country and in that building.

**Kim:** Were you watching television when the buildings collapsed?

**Shelly:** I was. We had no way to pause the tv screens at that time / no technology to pause the tv screens. So, every time the media would point to the World Trade Center / to his tower, I would try to count from the top floor down to find out where the plane had hit. I just knew that he was making his way down, so I never even feared anything else.

But when the first tower collapsed, of course, I was devastated for the lives lost in that building but I continued to only think about Steve. I continued to think “Thank God that that wasn’t Steve’s building. Thank you, Lord for giving my husband time to escape.”

You know, just bring him home. And of course, thirty minutes later the north tower collapsed. When that tower collapsed, I collapsed to the ground with it.

I mean, I just laid on the floor, sobbing in hopeless despair, uncontrollably. And of course, there was something that came over me that just was a peace like I never—I have chills right now.

As I laid on that floor, it was like Jesus was calming the raging sea and a peace came over me that I could not humanly explain. At that time, I believed that the peace that came over me was God telling me that my husband was safe and that he was going to be okay. Of course, when I fell down to the ground, I cried out “Save Steve, Lord Jesus, save Steve.”

I know now that as those towers collapsed, when I called out for God to save Steve, the peace that came over me that Steve was in heaven and Steve had been saved. He was saved many, many years ago. Not how I wanted my prayers to be answered that day, but God had answered my prayers and Steve was in the gates of heaven at that point. God had just lifted him from the 104<sup>th</sup> floor and just he was with Jesus.

**Kim:** Hmm, I love how you describe the peace that surpasses all understanding that God gave you in the midst of it, and even though He gave you that peace, He didn't save Steve's life so that you could be together again. But his soul was saved that he would be together with Christ for eternity.

Speak to the person who is out there and maybe, they've lost a loved one. They've lost their husband and it was unexpected, totally unexpected. They were thinking “tomorrow we will be doing this. Tomorrow I'll tell him about the great store that I just went to,” and tomorrow never comes. How do you comfort that individual?

**Shelly:** It's funny because I feel like I'm supposed to have this wonderful advice and know all the right things to say but honestly, it's just a feeling. It was just abiding in Christ. It had been abiding in Him since I was a young child. It was knowing His words that were hidden in my heart that when I was in that place that they were brought back up to me.

I started remembering that He was the Father to the fatherless and that He would never leave me or forsake me and that He would bind my broken wounds and I remembered all those promises and I clung to God's promises even when I didn't feel like it. I didn't feel like praying and I just cried out to the Lord: “

Just help me Lord. Help me Lord.” I just spent days and weeks in my closet just hiding in the shadow of the Almighty and He comforted me. He was just there. My only advice is just put your trust and your hope in the God who can comfort you—who is the God of all comforts.

**Kim:** Now I lost my mother two years ago, unexpectedly.

**Shelly:** Oh, I'm so sorry.

**Kim:** Thank you. And we were very close like your mother and you are, and I still have voice messages from her on my phone today. I don't know, I guess, maybe, somehow, I think it brings me comfort to know that at a push of a button, I can listen to her voice again. But for you, erasing the message that Steve left for you that morning was what you needed to do. Tell me about that.

**Shelly:** Right. It's really a difficult time. I just sat in that closet and I would listen to that voice message over and over and I never ever wanted my daughter to ever hear that message. I never wanted any of his friends to hear it. I didn't want people to remember Steve like that. I just didn't want to hear it ever again.

I wanted to remember him how strong he was and just everything he was, and everything he was, was not that message. I erased it. Definitely, I had regrets over not answering that phone that I really had to deal with but erasing that message was something that I will never regret.

**Kim:** Shelly, I'm very sorry for all that you've gone through; all that your daughter has gone through; all of the families who were affected directly that day in our country. I remember that day. I remember coming downstairs and seeing my husband watching the first tower on fire and I remember seeing the second plane hit the tower on live television and I can't believe—I can't even begin to understand the pain you must have been feeling during that time knowing that your husband was in one of those buildings.

You talked about the peace that God has given you and gave you in that moment, yet you still held on to hope. You were still holding on to the hope that maybe, he is there. Because when God gave you that peace, He didn't tell you why He had given you that peace.

**Shelly:** Right. I had that peace and so at that point in time I didn't know that that peace was he was at home in heaven. The peace that I thought that He had given me was the peace that Steve was coming home, and I thought home was here and we were going to have this big celebration.

I went upstairs; I got dressed. You know I'm a southern girl. I curled my hair. I put on makeup and I was just ready for my husband to walk through the door. One of the things he always would say to me was "Shelly Renee, you're a sight for sore eyes." I wanted him to walk through that door and say those words to me.

I started cooking dinner for him and preparing for him to come home. I believe that God had just honestly you know I was in shock. I was in denial, but I do believe God had

placed me in a protective cocoon and He was protecting me from all the pain that would have come so, so, so quickly.

I believe that my spiritual gift had always been faith. So even though it seemed impossible for anyone to make it out of that building, I thought “I serve the God of the impossible. God can do anything.” I knew that my God was bigger than what I could see. So even though I saw the towers crumble to the ground / even though mathematically there was no way he could have made it out, I knew that my God could do anything, and I held onto that faith that God could bring him home. Of course, sometimes our stories don’t turn out the way that we want them to. Sometimes God’s got different plans for our lives.

**Kim:** When did it hit you that Steve wouldn’t be coming home?

**Shelly:** It was almost a week. My birthday had come, and Steve had wonderful friends. They were just always at the house supporting me and one of his friends came over and brought me a beautiful bouquet of roses and said, “Steve would have wanted you to have these.”

Of course, that day I was looking at him and he told me “I want you to know the tower the plane was hit around 80/88 and anything above where the impact of the plane was hit, Shelly, nobody was able to make it out.”

I just would not, and I could not believe that. The only reality that I wanted to be in was the reality of listening to my praise music, being in my closet with the Lord, and praying to Him and praising Him—praising Him in the storm.

Here I was in the midst of the biggest storm of my life, but I just continued to not listen to the world. I had to block that out completely. I didn’t have a tv on. There was no tv going on in my house for over a week. Once the towers collapsed, I wouldn’t listen to it. I would only listen to the little voice in my head that just quietly calmed me day after day.

But that September 17<sup>th</sup>, there was an article written in the newspaper and that night after Jacqueline was in bed—and of course, my dad was in town to be with her—my mother and my godmother and I went out to see the article. We drove up—several of the newsstands actually the article was completely gone. We drove up and there were no newspapers to be found.

But we found a newspaper stand. I got up and as I approached the stand, I could see a big photo of my husband on the front cover and it said “Husband, Father, Friend Not Coming Home.” The reality that I never wanted just stared me in the face and I knew it to be true.

I sobbed in the backseat of that car as I read that article until I felt like I ran out of tears. I honestly felt like I *could* not cry anymore. I was completely and mentally and physically

exhausted. My mother cried with me. Big momma cried with me. We all just sat there and cried.

Then we again just started remembering those scriptures that God had planted in our hearts. I stood on those promises. It was all that I had. I knew that I would not be able to get out of bed a day in my life if I did not hold onto God's promises and know that His Word was stronger and bigger than anything in my life and that His Word does not return void. I knew that God's words were true, and I knew that His promises were true, and I held onto them.

**Kim:** What do you think were some of the most important lessons God taught you during that time?

**Shelly:** He continues to teach me even through writing this book He's continued to just grow me into, I believe, the woman I was created to be. Of course, He who began a good work will be faithful to complete it and to this day I'm still growing. [Laughter]

But God is good. I learned to just depend on Him completely. He was my all in all through this. He was my shelter and my strong tower, and my hiding place and He redeemed my life and He restored things that were lost. He's taught me so much, mostly, about how faithful He is / how faithful He is to stand true to His promises and to get me through and you cannot see happiness in size.

All I could see was: how was I going to raise this child on my own? How was I going to be a strong mother? I wanted to be the best mother to daughter I could possibly be at that time in my life. I just continued to just get out of bed every morning and be the best mother to her I could possibly be and be in God's will and be in His Word.

**Kim:** On page 112 of your book you wrote this: I hadn't realized until much too late that I should have embraced New Jersey and my wonderful life there. My lack of contentment had caused me to wish my life away and now I just wanted to have it back. There's a young married woman listening right now, and she's had to leave the life that she's known to move and be with her husband. What do you say to her as she's experiencing lonely days difficult days the tears missing that support system that she had at home?

**Shelly:** I just say to her to grow where God plants you. I was given this wonderful husband and this wonderful life, and I took it for granted. I took it for granted because I tried to wish my life away and want to be back in Texas. I wanted my precious little world. I wanted my husband and my beautiful daughter and our beautiful home, but I wanted it all to be back in Texas and that's not where God had planted me. That's not where I was supposed to be.

I needed to get involved. There were people in New Jersey who were just eager to be my friends, but I kept thinking all my friends are back in Texas. Those are my golden

friends. Those are the friends I'd grown up with, but there were all these precious people who were waiting to have awesome relationships with me right there.

My advice would be to get involved—get involved with a church—be around God's people. They're there for you. They want to help and just grow and spend time with your husband and grow in that relationship and just continue to put it first. I feel like God will bless them so much for putting Him first and obviously, for putting their relationship with their husband second.

**Kim:** That's great. That's great advice, Shelly, great advice. What were some of the most helpful things people did for you during this time?

**Shelly:** I would say the *most* important thing that people did for me was pray even when I did not have the physical ability to pray or say complete sentences to God. People were praying. People were intervening for me and they were standing in the gap for me. They were praying for me and that is what got me through—the strength of other people's prayers. Of course, the Holy Spirit intervenes for us in ways that we could never even understand. I believe that's the most important is prayer and I believe just being there for them.

I believe we never know the right things to say to comfort somebody but it's not what you say, it's being there for them. I believe even when they don't ask for help, just show up. Bring them meals. Pick up their dry cleaning. Bring them some bread and some milk over; paper plates and paper napkins so they don't have to do dishes. People took Jacqueline on walks just to give me time. The body of Christ was just such a blessing to me.

**Kim:** I'm so glad that you had those types of relationships around you: the family and friends who showed you such incredible love. So now you're a widow and a single mother, what did you do next?

**Shelly:** I took one day at a time. I just got out of bed the next day. That's what I did. I continued to pray and be in God's Word and surround myself, you know, around people who were uplifting and were Christians and that I knew were praying for me. But at that point in my life I knew that I—I had been in New Jersey for a couple of months and it was honestly painful to be in that place.

Everywhere in New Jersey and New York we were surrounded by everybody had lost someone whether it be a husband a wife, a father, a brother, a mother everybody had lost someone, and I just felt like I needed to get away from that. I would walk by in my house and there would be certain rooms I didn't want to even walk into.

I just knew, for me, moving back to Texas was going to be the right thing to do. I believe that God just opened doors for me for that. So right before—it was honestly about November—we were in Texas and one of my favorite things to always do was going to



look at like home tours just touring vacant houses. We had just built our house a year before and so I just loved looking at: what tile did they choose? What paint colors did they choose? Oh, that's a cute chandelier. I loved all of that.

Of course, my mom always tried to do things to keep my mind occupied. She knew that there was a home tour in Texas and so she was like "Hey, let's go on this home tour" and of course, I was never opposed. Honestly, I tried to stay busy.

We went to a home tour and I saw this beautiful home that actually, the summer before Steve and I had been in Dallas and we had gone on the same home tour and we had seen this house. We walked through this house. Of course, the prices in Dallas, in that area, are much less than the prices in New Jersey so when Steve saw this house months before he was like "Wow! I think I'll buy two of them." Of course, he was kidding. He just couldn't believe that the market prices were so different than New Jersey from Dallas.

At this time in my life—it was November after Steve had passed away—I was in the same home that we had looked at. It was honestly, God just opening doors for me to be there. He just gave me a peace about it. It was painted in the same colors that my home was painted in in New Jersey. The guy who had built the home was there and he ended up knowing people that we knew, and they were also planting pansies in the front yard of this home.

My mom and her prayer group had always prayed when they would see pansies, they would pray specifically for people in their prayer group. Seeing these pansies being planted in the front yard was a reassurance that God was going to take care of me no matter what was going on and that I was going to be loved and prayed for in this season of my life. So, a leap of faith, I actually bought the home and then went back to New Jersey and said I've probably gone crazy, but I need to sell this home in New Jersey and I'm moving out—before Christmas, I'm moving out.

**Kim:** Oh wow.

**Shelly:** I was blessed. I sold the home quickly in New Jersey and moved back to Texas and got settled in before the Christmas season.

**Kim:** I want to go back to your daughter. How did this affect her? I know she was very young. She probably didn't know exactly what was going on, but she had to have missed her daddy.

**Shelly:** I think that there's pros and cons to your children—of course, any age to lose a father is not a good age, but I believe for me personally, I was protected because she wasn't able to ask a lot of questions. Of course, it was heart wrenching for her to go to the back door every day. She would stand at this sliding glass door where he would walk in each night at 5:00. She would run to that back door and yell "Daddy."

Of course, that was heart breaking for me to watch night after night. But she wasn't a 12-year-old child who had this relationship that was laying in her bed crying. I feel like your pain for your children is almost worse than your pain for yourself because there was so many times, I thought I cannot fathom growing up without a dad in this world that we live in. How in the world are we going to do this? But God is good. God is good.

**Kim:** God is good. So, you and your daughter start over. You moved back to Texas. And then you run into someone. Who was that?

**Shelly:** So, I ran into a friend that I had had when I was 19. When I was 19, I had met this man and I wouldn't say dated. We went on a couple of dates. We never kissed. We never held hands. We just went on a couple of dates. I thought he was adorable when I was 19 but at that season of my life, I was definitely not ready. He had a very outgoing personality and kind of playful and I just could not handle that at that time in my life.

But I ran into this man that at least I was friends with. We had kept up with each other through our modeling agency back in Dallas. She would say "Oh"—his name was Heath—"Heath is doing this. He moved to LA. Heath moved to Tyler to open a gym." She would just kind of keep me updated. Then he knew about my daughter and I and the death of my husband.

One day when I was modeling—I was back to work in Dallas—I heard—he also has a pretty southern accent, and I heard his voice form the other room and he said "Shelly? Shelly, is that you?" I was like "Heath, how are you doing?"

And of course, we just had great conversation with each other and we both were just catching up with each other on all the years past and he was really, really sweet and said "I heard about the loss of your husband. I want you to know I've been praying for you and your daughter."

Of course, I thought that was so sweet. He said "Hey, do you want to go grab coffee sometime." I was like "Yes, of course." An old friend just catching up. We went. We actually ended up going to dinner. He realized that I was not a morning person after trying to connect with me a couple of times over coffee. He said "Hey, do you want to go to dinner?" Of course, I felt like that was innocent enough. I was definitely not ready to date at this time in my life and honestly, would feel very, very guilty about dating.

But we went to have dinner that night and we just had wonderful conversation and just laughed and talked about old times. Honestly, it made me feel alive again. It just made me feel like Shelly again and not so much a 9/11 widow. I'd felt for years that I'd been looked at as a 9/11 widow and that wasn't something I wanted forever.

We started dating after that for a couple of weeks and I said, "I can't do this." I just felt such guilt. I was very, very worried about what people would think. I worried that people

would think I hadn't loved my husband if I could date again. There was just so much that came along with dating after the loss of someone. It was really hard to deal with.

**Kim:** So, would you say the hardest part of dating again was what people thought?

**Shelly:** Yes, absolutely. I mean those little voices in my head just what would people think? Because when I was with Heath, I definitely had feelings for him. I would start to get those little butterflies with him. But the guilt that I felt of what people would think / of what people would say was just so much that I continued to push him away. We dated off and on. We dated probably four different times and I continued to push him away and say "I can't do this. I can't date. I'm not ready to be in a relationship."

I don't know why in the world he continued to just let me come back in his life, but that was God. In the end, finally, when we got together at the very, very end, it was just kind of one of those things that I was finally ready. I was finally ready to not let Satan put lies in my head anymore and I was just ready to listen to God.

I was going to be able to be happy again. God did have a future for me, and Steve wouldn't have wanted for me to spend the rest of my life alone and he would want that father figure in Jacqueline's life.

**Kim:** When did you realize that you and Heath would get married?

**Shelly:** Well we had dated off and on for a couple of years and even had gone two years before the last time I actually went out with him again. I had a friend who had come in town from New York who was actually her fiancé was killed on 9/11 and we had become really, really close friends through the whole tragedy. She had met a wonderful man and she was getting married and they were coming to Dallas. She wanted me to meet him.

I was actually dating another guy at the time, just casually, but when she asked me to meet them for dinner, immediately, my mind went back to Heath. I didn't invite the guy I was dating. I hadn't seen Heath in two years, and I thought I should invite Heath. So anyway, I just thought "He's easy. Everybody loves Heath. We'll be able to have a good time. I won't have to worry about conversation or anything like that."

So that night when he came to dinner and met my friends, Melissa and her fiancé, there was immediate chemistry there. I'd just had always felt this chemistry with Heath and I reached over and grabbed his hand under the table, and I held his hand for the rest of the night.

I think it was at that point I knew I was going to finally allow myself to love again and I was going to finally put down my guard. I was going to finally not listen to all the little voices in my head that were lies that were telling me that I shouldn't be happy, and I was going to allow myself to be happy again.

**Kim:** How did he propose?

**Shelly:** He'd actually had this wonderful plan thought up that he was going to rent— He'd actually gone to New York film school and he was going to rent out this movie theater. He'd already contacted the theater and he was going to take me to this showing, and he was going to make a video.

But a couple of days before, we were sitting at dinner—he's just a big jokester and so he said, "I've got your ring in the car." I thought "There is no way that he'd leave an engagement ring setting in a car in a parking lot somewhere." I was like "Okay, show me where it is."

We walked to the car and he goes "it's under the seat." I reached under the seat and I pulled out a little box. Of course, my heart was just beating out of my chest. But opened the box and it was empty and I was like "you are so bad." Anyway, he goes "oh baby, I'm kidding. It is on the passenger side."

So, then I go over to the passenger side and I do the same thing. I pull out a box and of course, my heart is just racing, and it was empty again. And as I opened up that empty box, he pulled a ring out of his pocket and said, "I couldn't wait" and so anyway he was just as excited as I was, and he asked me to marry him that day.

**Kim:** But he also asked your daughter something.

**Shelly:** He did. He had such an unbelievable relationship with Jacqueline. That's, honestly, one of the reasons I was able to fall in love with him so quickly is because he was so good with her. He was adopted when he was a young child. I believe that unconditional love of his parents loving him enabled him to love her even though she wasn't blood. It enabled him to love her as his own and he would play with her and she just adored him.

He wanted to ask her the same thing. He wanted to ask if he could marry her mama. So same way he did it to me, he hid a box in the car, and she opened it and she had a precious little something from him.

**Kim:** What does your family look like now?

**Shelly:** I just feel so blessed. It's so funny because people were like "how can you say you're blessed after everything you've been through?" But I feel like God has continued to be with me and never leave me. I feel so blessed. I have a son who is 12 years old. My husband is a wonderful man who loves me. The relationship is very, very different from my first relationship.

I thought in the very beginning when I first started dating again that I needed to have someone who was just like Steve. Someone who did the same things and acted the

same ways. Steve did everything for me. He filled up my car with gas. He paid the bills. He just did everything for me.

When I met Heath, he wanted me to grow. He knew that I could be more, so he pushed me. Sometimes that's not comfortable but I'm so, so happy that he did because there's such empowerment in knowing we can do anything and of course, I get my strength from the Lord and know that I can do anything through Him.

Even writing this book was just such a powerful testament of that. I was not a writer. There was no way. I modeled my last years of high school. I didn't go to college because I modeled and had barely written a paper before. When God calls me to write this book, I was like "I think maybe you're calling someone else. I can't do this, Lord." He was just so good.

I continue to be so blessed by people's testimonies when they've read the book—how encouraged they are with so many different things and things that I never realized. The lies of Satan are just so many. I mean through that process he continued to tell me nobody wants to hear your story after 18 years and that was a lie.

God has just used this. Not only used this for the 9/11 story. Of course, it's not a history book. It's a book about hope. It's a book about faithfulness and we all have our own 9/11's. Everybody has tragedy. Everybody has devastation and destruction in their life that they're going to go through or that they've gone through and this is a book about how God can get you through those things and how faithful He is to redeem things.

**Kim:** What advice would you give to widows about dating after loss?

**Shelly:** I think that the most important thing would be stay in God's will. Give it to Him. Put it in His hands. If you had a Christian husband, don't settle for anything less. You want another wonderful Christian husband. I wanted someone who was going to be a Christian. Someone who loved the Lord. Someone who was going to pray with me and pray over me and love me. I just believe put it in God's hands. Seek His will and His wisdom in everything that they do, and I believe He will just bless that.

**Kim:** As I think about Shelly Genovese-Calhoun's story, Philippians 4:19 comes to mind: "And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." I know most people think about this verse as it pertains to finances, but isn't God rich in mercy? Isn't He rich in grace? Yes, He is.

As Shelly was telling her story, I kept thinking how God gave her exactly what she needed when she needed it and it was in no short supply. From the peace that surpasses all understanding that she sensed and felt early on to her second husband Heath Calhoun and God even used him to help her to experience her own personal growth. Also, he was the type of father her daughter Jacqueline would need.

But as wonderful as that is, I also want to think about the widow who hears this story and wants to claim God's promises, as well. But what happens if her story doesn't have a fairy tale ending? Does that mean that God has broken His promise? I wish I had the answers, but I don't. But one thing is for sure: we can rely on the truth of God's Word.

Sometimes God meets our needs by being a father. Psalm 68:5 says "He's the father of the fatherless and protector of widows." So, we can trust Him and lean on Him as our Provider. God has promised to heal the broken hearted and to bind up all our wounds. He will be our strength. So, when you're feeling alone, please know that God is aware of your pain and He's telling you just trust Me. I will never leave you nor forsake you.

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Next time on Unfavorable Odds.

**Terry:** We drive back into those woods and he pulls a revolver out of the glovebox and tells me to lay on the floor in the backseat. I do it because he yells at me and he leaves the car and it's dark. I'm absolutely paralyzed with fear.

**Kim:** That's Terry Wardle, next time.

I'm Kim Anthony. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Unfavorable Odds*.

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