



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: My Autistic Son – Part 2

Guest(s): Chuck Colson and Emily Colson

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener-supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome back to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. As we begin today's program, let's listen to these words from Isaiah chapter 40, verse 29. God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. A truly empowering verse indeed, especially for parents of kids with special needs. On today's program, we're going to hear the conclusion of a powerful conversation Dr. Dobson recorded many years ago with his longtime friend Chuck Colson and Chuck's daughter, Emily Colson. Since then, of course Chuck has gone on to be with the Lord, but the wisdom they discussed in this broadcast still rings true even today. We're about to hear Emily sharing about some difficult times that challenged her as a mom and how she overcame those hurdles with God's love and support. Now you may of course be familiar with the late Chuck Colson. Chuck was the founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries as well as Prison Fellowship International and the Colson Center for Christian Worldview.

His daughter Emily is an artist and writer who now pours her creative gifts into helping her son Max. In 2010, Emily Colson wrote a powerful book called *Dancing with Max*, where she detailed the autism diagnosis she received for her son and the journey that diagnosis sent them on from there. Today, Max is all grown up. He works full-time helping his mom with her note card and apparel line called Heart by Max. By the way, you can find that online at emilycolson.com. This is a ministry that also features paintings Max has made of a heart or a cross, and they are so colorful and so beautiful. Okay, here now is Dr. James Dobson with his guests Chuck and Emily Colson on this classic edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Emily, we were talking about your story and Max's story last time and how difficult the early days were, but actually you told us before we went on the air today that the most difficult moment was when he was nine years old and that's when things really got difficult to explain.

Emily Colson: They did. At nine years old, the autism had become so challenging that we could barely leave the house. We couldn't go to the grocery store, we couldn't go anywhere without it becoming-

Dr. James Dobson: Couldn't go to church, really.

Emily Colson: We couldn't go to church. We spent years at home not being able to go to church. It was just like everything else. We were really becoming prisoners of autism and I wasn't sleeping because Max wasn't sleeping. And at nine by the end of the day, I would come downstairs and I would sit in a rocking chair and there was nothing left of me. I would stare at the wall. I didn't want to read. I didn't have the energy to look at a magazine or watch television or talk on the phone. I really wanted it all to stop. And at that time I found a hole in the wall in our hallway and it wasn't anything new, really.

Max was always bumping into things and damaging things in our house, and I couldn't figure out how that hole happened. And I brought Max over and started to ask him questions, didn't get anywhere, and I thought, I'll bet he put his vacuum cleaner through that wall. He loves his vacuum cleaner. So I opened up the closet door to see if the vacuum cleaner handle fit because I just had to know how that hole got there. And I realized as I opened up the door, the doorknob fit exactly into that hole in the wall, but Max hadn't done it. I had done it when in the middle of the night, in one of those rocking chair moments, getting up trying to clean, the shelf had broken in the closet, and that just broke me. And I took that door and I swung it so hard that it put a hole right through the wall. And when I realized that and realized how short life is even through struggles, it just changed something for me.

And I don't know if it was a decision as much as it was a letting go, but I made a commitment that night that I would wake up the next morning and I would say this is my last day alive, what am I going to do with it? It wasn't what would I do if it were my last day? I really thought maybe I can only survive one more day. I couldn't imagine how I could keep going. I knew I wasn't going to quit, but I had no idea how I could keep going with the life we were leading. So that next morning I got up and we decided we're going to go for life. We're going to live brave. We are going to go out into the world. And why would I care if it's my last day alive if my son has a tantrum? Why would I care if people stare? Why would I care if people criticize? And if it doesn't go well, it's all right. It's one day. But if I've got one day with my son, I am going to live it big.

Dr. James Dobson: Make the most out of it.

Emily Colson: I'm going to make the most of it.

Chuck Colson: And some of the things didn't work out quite so well. She took him to a swimming pool in town the first time she'd ever done it, and she thought she's hobnobbing with all the fine people in town. She got into this club with Max, all

of a sudden she's sitting at the edge of the pool and this object comes flying through the air and she thinks, wonder what that is? Then a splat hit the water and she suddenly discovered it was Max's bathing suit and he's bopping down, because these kids are totally innocent. That's amazing thing about it.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, that's characteristic of autism.

Chuck Colson: He didn't think a thing of it. I mean the decision she made to live her life from that day forward was a huge change, and I began to see it and I began to see what happened. Instead of being sort of in the bombshell, well she was now really out living, trusting God every single day. And Max loves the Lord. I had the thrill of baptizing him in our swimming pool when he wanted to be one day. And Emily drew the pictures and made it possible.

Emily Colson: Yes. Oh, it was so wonderful because I brought Max to my dad's church. It was too difficult for him at that time. We now are in our church, which is so exciting, but at the time we really couldn't be a part of our church. But in my dad's-

Dr. James Dobson: Because he was so disruptive, yeah.

Emily Colson: Because it was just so difficult for him, and my dad's church has a wonderful lobby that we could sit in and watch the television monitor with the screen and Max saw a woman being baptized and he said to me, "Mom, I want to get baptized."

Chuck Colson: Emily drew a little picture of Jesus on the cross and then I love Jesus and then what baptism was and what it meant. So as soon as he could see that and I knew he really understood, then I took him in the pool. I will never forget that day as long as I live, nor will he. He was so joyous when they came up out of that water, the newness of life. And every time he comes to our house and goes in the pool now he reenacts it and the picture that hangs on the wall of my home, it's my most treasured possession because to be able to baptize your grandson and see that he really got it and then the story, Jim, goes on of how he got into his own church and then how he began to change people in other churches, and we tell him that.

Emily Colson: Oh, it's so wonderful. You have to kind of take a creative approach when you have a child that doesn't quite fit the norm. You have to think a little bit outside the box. And when Max was very young, I could bring him to church with me and he loved it, but when it became too difficult, we did what so many other families with autistic children do. We stayed home. The church doesn't even realize how many families are out there not coming to church because we can't get to the door. And so we stayed home and I finally, I was so sad, Max was baptized and it was really heartbreaking to think that we weren't in a church, so I thought, we're going to do this.

We're going to live each day big, so we're going to get brave. And I thought, I'm going to start with the one thing Max did love about church when he was younger. What he loved is when it was over. So I thought he loved the coffee hour. People are running around, kids are playing in the sanctuary, and so I thought we're going to go at the end. So we walked in the first day as people are coming out, we're trying to fight our way into the church and people are looking at us like, what are you doing? Well, it turned out that as we're kind of milling around and Max is having a great time, one of the men there asked him to help stack up chairs.

And at the end of the end of church, as we're about to leave, one of these men came up to Max and said, "Max, we could really use you on the grunt crew." And I'm looking thinking, what's the grunt crew? Well, the grunt crew is the team that comes in after the service and stacks up the chairs so that the youth group can use the sanctuary later on in the day. They vacuum, they clean, they do whatever kind of heavy lifting work needs to be done, move tables. I cannot tell you how proud Max was at that moment when he was needed.

Chuck Colson: Oh, boy.

Emily Colson: He was asked to be a part of this, and he's done this now for I would say six years. And Sunday mornings he bounces out of bed because he knows he's got to be right on time for missing church and he gets there. We come a little earlier now so that he can hear the music in the back. And so I brought Max to church thinking that Max really needed to be in the church. We needed the church, and it has turned out-

Chuck Colson: The church needs Max.

Emily Colson: That the church needs the Maxes. We need the Maxes. He brings out compassion and caring and honesty that I haven't seen come out in any other way. We've had just the most amazing experience for the past 10 years. I started praying 10 years ago that God would lift Max's anxiety. Just at that time a consultant had advised me to use my artistic gifts and draw things out for Max because he couldn't sequence events. He couldn't understand cause and effect, which made life really confusing and complicated. So in front of him, I just started drawing out things that were happening around us so that he could see what came first, what happened next, how did it finish.

Dr. James Dobson: Kind of a storyboard?

Emily Colson: A storyboard. And what came of that very quickly, because Max was now comfortable with that system, he knew I was going to draw out what was happening, he began to initiate what he wanted to say. He would tell me things that happened eight years prior that were still in his mind. He would dictate, I would write down exactly what he said and I would draw a picture very quickly of whatever he was telling me about. And when he saw his words land on the

page and become concrete and tangible, his language just poured out and he would tell me about his fears, his worries, his dreams that he would have, that he didn't know how to process. And always at the end of our drawings, I would help him understand it's done or in some way it's finished. We have now about 1400 of these drawings.

Dr. James Dobson: And you've kept them?

Emily Colson: They're in binders and Max looks at them every single day.

Chuck Colson: Like a book, and reads them.

Emily Colson: He opens them up to different pages, and in the early years when he was worried about something, he would run to his books and he'd flip open the page and he'd say, "I need to find CVS." And I knew what was happening. What would have been a tantrum before was now let me see that memory and let me see that it's all done. And very quickly in this process, in the early years when he was having so many tantrums, I could bring out a sheet of paper in the middle of the tantrum and say, "Max, do you want to have a picture talk? What do you want to say?" And I'd sit on the floor instead of trying to hold him or hold onto other objects that might go through the air, I'd just sit with a piece of paper. It was amazing. He would come over and sit beside me and tell me what was on his mind, and it was oftentimes-

Chuck Colson: He missed his Daddy, correct.

Emily Colson: Nothing to do with what was going on during that day. It could have been a memory from two years before that, that was swirling through his mind where a typical kid might say, "Mom, I really didn't like that thing that happened. I'm worried about that." And the mom would then reassure the child. We couldn't do that until he could begin to speak and watch his language pour out. I realized that that was God answering my prayer for anxiety and he had already given me the artistic gift and then he gave me Max who learns and processes visually.

Chuck Colson: Emily, you must feel good about the job that you have done with Max. You talked about the early days where it was so difficult and so hard and you didn't understand what was going on. And through the Lord's help, you have come to a point where you know how to communicate with this boy.

Emily Colson: There have been so many gifts along the way. I think I am truthfully a mom who is still making mistakes, a mom who is still learning. If anybody tells you that they completely understand autism, they really haven't been around that many kids because it's a journey. It's unpredictable and I'm grateful. I don't know if I always think of it as feeling good about the job I've done, but I feel really good about-

Dr. James Dobson: You ought to, because you are good at it.

Emily Colson: The child I have. That may not be the gift of art, but it's compassion or it's patience or it's all sorts of other things and creativity or the gift of teaching and just the love that pours out of parents for these kids. We are not looking for a trade in, and I know that moms like me will do everything and anything to help our kids make the progress that they need to make and can make. But boy, we love them just as they are right along the way.

Dr. James Dobson: You know, the scripture tells us that we see through a dark glass, but in the time to come, we will know even as we are now known and Max is going to know someday, he's going to understand everything that's confusing to him now, and you're going to share that with him.

Emily Colson: And we're going to be dancing even then.

Dr. James Dobson: Along that line, Emily and Chuck, we're coming down to the end of this second program that we've done together, and I would really like for you to address those people out there that are breaking in half today. Those people who have gone as far as they could go. You're talking to people like that. They're tuned in today and they're identifying with you today. It may not be autism they're dealing with, but it may be mental disability, it may be cerebral palsy, it may be any number of things.

Emily Colson: Finances.

Dr. James Dobson: And where are they? They're not in the church for the most part. I mean, in your church, look around and see how many wheelchairs are there. Yeah, there may be a few, but there are not many. Those people don't feel welcome often. Speak to them, give them some encouragement.

Emily Colson: I would love to.

Dr. James Dobson: And hope. Your book is filled with hope. Share some of it.

Emily Colson: Yes, it is. And if I can speak to that person right now directly, I would tell you my friend that I have been in the pit and I know what it is to feel isolated and rejected and to not know how in the world you're going to keep going and everything in you is screaming to quit. But I will tell you that what I've seen happen over the years and what has come from that time of pain has been the most extraordinary journey of joy. I never would've chosen this life and I will never trade this journey. So I'm going to tell you to hold on and to look for God because He is going to show up in your life. God loves to work through our weaknesses. He loves to work through our broken places, and I know because I've got broken places and I've got failures, and that's just where He steps in. So I'm going to encourage you today to be brave, to think outside the box. Think about possibilities because God can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, and He is our strength.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, that is so beautiful. Chuck, speak to the rest of the family. There are others out there in the position that you were in. Your heart was breaking for your daughter. What were you thinking and feeling? You have anything encouraging to say to them?

Chuck Colson: Well, I would say to them that you have to really trust the Lord because it's only when you hit the end of your own abilities that you begin to see the power of God really work. Paul writes about that in the first chapter of 2 Corinthians, which I just read last week. Saved me in a moment of despair. So don't give up. Just keep loving your child. Keep loving your family member who's hurting. Just be there. The biggest thing they need is to know that somebody's there that'll help them. The biggest single thing that Emily felt was isolation at the beginning and rejection. And so what the family member has to do is kind of suck it in. You're hurting inside, but you don't, you try not to show it. You try to cheer up your loved one who's in trouble and show them unconditional love and just stand with them and trust exactly the same way Emily said. If you trust in the Lord, he is going to step in. He has done so much. I always used to get on airplanes. I was very impatient if I'd hear a baby crying. I would sit there and I would say, "Oh, come on. Why can't that mother control the child?"

Now, I'll often go over and wish the mother well, and it doesn't, you think much less of yourself and more of others when you give yourself to others. I've been giving myself to prisoners for years. It's easy with the prisoners. I've learned in my family how wonderful it is, and we can give to each other in the family, and Max has given to me and Emily's given to me richly and we've got a family back. So just keep standing with that person and trusting the Lord and He's going to bring his healing power to bear.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, our time is gone. Let's end with this. The name of the book is *Dancing with Max*, a mother and son who broke free. There's the hope isn't it?

Emily Colson: There is the hope. And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Dr. James Dobson: And what's life like with Max? You got to do this quickly, but the-

Emily Colson: He is so much fun. I wish everybody could be around somebody like Max. He is into all kinds of special needs sports and kayaking and basketball and baseball, and he's a real mover and a shaker.

Chuck Colson: When you see the joy come over his face, you're filled with joy. It's just amazing. When he's able to accomplish something, it's just such a big deal.

Emily Colson: And when he's loving something, when he is passionate about something, everybody else catches it no matter what it is. And he's just a real joy. I am just so grateful to have such an extraordinary young man for my son who's had such a positive influence on other people and a positive influence on the world

around him. And isn't that what we all want as parents? We want to know that our kids have made a positive difference for someone else.

Dr. James Dobson: And you have done that too, Emily.

Emily Colson: Thank you.

Dr. James Dobson: Thank you for sharing your pain and your journey and what the Lord is doing in your life now. And Chuck, it's always so good to have you here.

Chuck Colson: Well, Jim, I was just thinking back on all the programs we've done. This is the first time I haven't been able to get through it without choking up about four times, probably the most personal program we've ever done together. And at this point in life, you realize what really matters is your relationship with the Lord first and then with your family. I never got that right before. So thanks to Max and Emily, I got it.

Roger Marsh: Well, what a very personal glimpse inside the heart of the late Chuck Colson and his daughter Emily Colson here on Family Talk. Remember, if you missed either part of the conversation over the past couple days, you can always listen again at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. You can also easily listen to and share our programs from our Official Family Talk JDFI app, right from your smartphone anywhere you are. Now, if you're a mom or a caretaker of a child with special needs and you're struggling with the day-to-day uphill battles, here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, we are here to support you with a valuable resource. It's a two-disc CD collection called "God's Plan for the Overwhelmed Mom." On it, you'll hear a conversation Dr. Dobson had with his special guest, Sarah Parshall Perry, about her struggles as a mom of three. And I should note that two of her children are on the autism spectrum. They have Asperger's Syndrome.

It's quite an encouraging conversation and we definitely think you'll enjoy it. Now, we'll be happy to send you this two-CD set as our way of thanking you for your donation of any amount in support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Remember, we are listener-supported, and we greatly appreciate your prayers and financial support. So go online to drjamesdobson.org, hit the Resources tab and then once you're there, hit the Store button and we'll thank you for your gift of any amount in support of JDFI today by sending you this two-disc CD collection, "God's Plan for the Overwhelmed Mom." I'm Roger Marsh, and you've been listening to Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love. Have a blessed weekend.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. James Dobson: It's not the quantity of time that you spend with your children, it's the quality that counts. Or is it?

Roger Marsh: Dr. James Dobson for Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Maybe you've heard that argument that it doesn't matter how much time you spend with your children, as long as your few moments together are of high quality, whatever that means. But the logic of that concept seems rather suspect to me. The question is, why do we have to choose between those virtues of quantity versus quality? We won't accept that forced choice in any other area of our lives, so why is it relevant only to our children? Let me give you an example. Let's suppose you've looked forward all day to going to one of the finest restaurants in town, and when you get there, the waiter brings you a menu and you order the most expensive steak dinner in the house. But when the meal arrives, you see this tiny little piece of meat in the center of the plate about one inch square. When you complain about the size of the steak, the waiter says, "Sir, I recognize that the portion is small, but that's the finest corn-fed beef money can buy. And after all, it's not the quantity that matters, it's the quality that counts." Well, you would certainly object and for good reason. Both quantity and quality are important in many areas of our lives, including how we relate to children. In fact, the quantity versus quality argument might be a rationalization for giving our children neither.

Roger Marsh: Hear more at drjamesdobson.org.