



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Our Dear Friend, Joni

Guest(s): Joni Eareckson Tada

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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: Friends, welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. It's Friday and we are almost into the first full weekend of 2024. Thank you so much for joining us today. But before we get any further in today's broadcast, I want to take a moment to thank you, as a faithful listener of Family Talk, for your generous financial support last month when we had our special matching grant in place. We are so grateful for the prayers that you pray on behalf of our ministry, and your financial contributions make it possible for us to do what we do each and every day here on the air, so thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

Now today's program is a classic and it features our own Dr. James Dobson and his dear friend, Joni Eareckson Tada. Joni is an author, a radio host, and founder of Joni and Friends, an organization that reaches out to the disabled community. You may not have heard the story, but it's truly a remarkable one about how Joni came to be Joni. Joni was paralyzed in a diving accident back in 1967 and has written about her experiences in her best-selling autobiography, which became a movie called *Joni*, and that's spelled J-O-N-I. She was an integral part in the creation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, and now at 74 years of age, continues to lead and inspire millions each and every day. So let's join Joni Eareckson Tada and our own Dr. James Dobson right now on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Joni, greetings to you.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Oh, good to be with you on Family Talk today. I'm so honored to be on the show.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, Shirley and I have loved and admired you and Ken for many years, as have millions of other people around the world who have loved you. You've been an inspiration to Christian people everywhere, and especially to those who have disabilities. You've been a compassionate voice for those that needed somebody to put an arm around them, and I just appreciate you more than you know. But now we have heard that you have yet another challenge in your life with breast cancer. And we sent word through our mutual friends, Peggy

Campbell and Al Sanders, asking if it would be an invasion of your privacy for us to give you a call and talk about what you're going through now and the spiritual implications of it because I know many other people are going to be blessed by what you have told to others. So I appreciate so much you talking with us today.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Oh, doctor, believe me, when I got this diagnosis of breast cancer, Ken and I looked at each other, and I'm not kidding, we took a deep breath and said, "Well, God's putting us on a new adventure here." And the second thing I said to Ken was, "Ken, I just want the Lord Jesus to use this for the good of our souls, secondly, for the advancement of Christ's gospel, and thirdly, that the Father will get the glory." So there's no privacy here, there's no invasion of my private moments. I want to talk about the goodness of God through this. And it's been tough, but God's been good.

Dr. James Dobson: You know my daughter, Danae, and she emailed me when she heard about your illness. And she wrote and said, "Oh, no, oh, no. Not Joni. She's already suffered so much." And I think millions of other people are asking the same questions and saying the same thing. How are you dealing emotionally with yet another challenge in your life?

Joni Eareckson Tada: Well, it's been a little over two weeks since I had a mastectomy for breast cancer. And Ken would be with us, but right now, he's lining up doctors' appointments because I will soon start chemotherapy. And as you could imagine, there are a lot of tests to go to the hospital. And when I met with the medical oncologists two nights, three nights ago, I did break down because it was just a little overwhelming, quadriplegia, chronic pain, and now cancer, which showed up in my lymph nodes, and of course may yet still be in my body somewhere. Chemotherapy hopefully will target that. But I said to Ken, "I just don't have the strength for this." But in the next breath, as he held me in his arms, I said, "But God has strength, doesn't He?" And Ken, through tears, just shook his head yes. And God will see us through this.

And just this morning before we went on air today, I was at my office desk, and I looked up at a photograph I have framed above my desk on the wall. It's of an African man. I don't know his name. But he was someone we met on a Wheels for the World Outreach. This man lives in intractable pain. He lives in abject poverty. His body is covered with sores. His family has deserted him. And I look at him, doctor, and suddenly, things fall into perspective. I may be struggling with quadriplegia and chronic pain and cancer, but you know what, 90% of the world of people with disabilities, their plight is far more desperate, far more dire than mine will ever be. And so I'm so grateful that I keep that photo of that man. I am one blessed woman living in America with the kind of resources and healthcare that I have, supportive family, which makes me want to take what God has given us, these incredible blessings, and quick get them off our laps like a hot potato and pass them on to somebody else, and reach those who are in more desperate need. Right?

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, Joni, weren't you 17 when you were injured, when your neck was broken?

Joni Eareckson Tada: Took a reckless dive into the shallow waters of the Chesapeake Bay.

Dr. James Dobson: At 17, and all of this time, all of these decades, you have lived in a wheelchair, have been a quadriplegic. And I just wonder, with this additional problem, this additional illness, how do we explain your ability to cope with this? Where is the strength that is within you? Was it there as a child? All of these years, you've been on our program many times, and we've cried together and we've prayed together. And you have sung to me in my studio many, many years ago. And my heart goes out to you, Joni, especially now. Describe what is occurring within you and the strength that you just described.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Well, Jim, thank you for mentioning me singing, but I sing because I have to. I just have to. I cannot, I cannot let my thoughts go down that dark, grim path of despair. They don't belong there. I'm a child of God. Now my hope is secure like an anchor, and God has promised that He'll see me through this valley. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," so I sing because I have to. I will be the first to tell you guys, I'm not a strong person. I'm not. I'm not a professional at this. I'm no veteran at this. I don't have it all together, but I do know enough that in my weakness, every single morning when I hear my girlfriend come through the front door, and I hear her in the kitchen, I know she's going to come into my bedroom, give me a bed bath, exercise my legs, get me dressed, put on my corset, put on my leg bag, sit me up in my wheelchair, brush my teeth, brush my hair, blow my nose, all that stuff.

It's so overwhelming after 43 years, but that's when I find myself praying, "Lord Jesus, I don't have the strength to do this, with a smile like You do." I have no resources for this day, but You do. I cannot do quadriplegia, but I can do all things through You, as You strengthen me." That's the secret of contentment that Paul was talking about.

Dr. James Dobson: Joni, that's what you've been saying to the Lord. What's He been saying to you in the last couple of weeks?

Joni Eareckson Tada: I don't know if you guys will want to hear this, but He's been telling me that the personal "catastrophe" that I'm going through with this cancer is just an inkling of what the Western church, the Western world may yet soon encounter. I've been reading a book by Dr. John Piper that's been so invigorating to my faith. And of course, I've been handing out copies of his article, "Don't Waste Your Cancer," right and left. But he talks about how the Western world, the Western church, we're so coddled. We're so infected by this culture of comfort. We've forgotten that one must enter the kingdom of God through many hardships. Too many Christians, we want to erase suffering out of the dictionary. We want to eradicate it. We want to ease it with ibuprofen, or exorcize it, or surgically enhance it, or institutionalize it, or divorce it, or we want to do everything but live with it.

And I think God is telling me, "Joni, I want to use you. I want to use your life as an example just one more time, of how Christians when they grieve loss, you don't need to grieve as the world grieves," because we have hope. And this world is but a blip on the eternal screen. We are but wisps of smoke, fading vapor. Our lives are here today, gone tomorrow. Our glory is like the flower in the field that withers in the heat of the summer sun. And so hold on to the eternal things, set your heart and mind on things above. And I think that's what God's been telling me, that my example may yet be used of Him to outfit, to resource other people, other Christians, to brace for the coming hardships that will no doubt hit us all, and to face them with dignity and with confidence in God's Word, and an utter resolve to trust our precious savior at every turn because look at the cross that He bore. And should be expect a lighter one?

Dr. James Dobson: Self-pity is a natural human response to pain and hardship and suffering, and the fear of medical things. You won't allow yourself to experience an ounce of it. Will you?

Joni Eareckson Tada: If I gave myself just one minute of self-pity, if I tried to convince myself that God owed me some time off from obeying Him because of this cancer and quadriplegia and pain, I'd be committing emotional suicide. I do not want to go down that horribly grim, dark path.

Dr. James Dobson: Once you start there, you can't get out of it. Can you?

Joni Eareckson Tada: Absolutely. It's like that miry pit that we're told of in the Book of Psalms. And why even venture near the edge of that pit? Why not turn instead and take God at His word? And I tried to let the reality of this sink in. "Now, Joni, this is deathly, this is dangerous. You can't feel it. It's invisible, but it's in your body and it could kill you." My thoughts were like some inflated rubber raft that kept bouncing back up to the surface. And I just breathed a sigh of relief and I said, "Oh, Lord Jesus, thank you." It's prayer. Isn't it? People are praying for me and that's why I can't even go down that path toward despair and discouragement. I choose the bright way. I choose the righteous path and that's the path that God has paid for us in His word, so I'm going to take Him at His Word.

And even though it says, "No good thing will I withhold from you," that doesn't necessarily mean I might be healed of cancer. Cancer will not win if I die. Cancer will win if I fail to cherish Christ.

Dr. James Dobson: I know that's what the Lord wants of us. But I mean to tell you, you've got to be tough to walk that path.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Just recently, somebody asked me, "Joni, I want to pray for your healing from this cancer. And may I do that for you?" And of course, I gladly and willingly said, "Yes." But then I added, "While you're praying for my physical relief from cancer, may I tell you what I really need to be healed from?" And this person was very interested to hear what I might say, and got out his pencil and pad of

paper to write down some of these prayer requests I was about to list off. And I said, "I want you to pray about my self-centeredness. I want you to pray about this itchiness to get things my own way, my propensity to want to take credit for things, my pride. Would you please pray about my impatience with certain people? I'm so lazy often in reading God's Word. I've got this slothful, careless way of approaching prayer. Friend, these are the things from which I would love to be healed, to be released, to be set free from."

And Jim, it goes perfectly with what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 18. I mean, He delighted in healing those who came to Him in faith, but listen to what He says in Matthew 18. He says, "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. Throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. Throw it away." Now isn't this odd? The God man who healed people is really showcasing to us His priority that spiritual healing is worth losing your foot, losing your eye, losing your hand. And that little Scripture in Matthew 18 is such a bright perspective on how God's core plan in the lives of any of us, and we don't have to be quadriplegics, but any of us, His core plan is to eradicate sin out of our lives, that stuff I just told you about, that itchiness to get things my way, that pride, that self-centeredness, my impatience, that laziness about God's Word. That's what he wants to cure. That's what He wants to heal.

Dr. James Dobson: That is just absolutely brilliant. More than that, it's eternal. That is the divine perspective on difficulty and trouble. And you have modeled that for us. Tell us, Joni, what chemotherapy will mean for you. What does it mean day by day?

Joni Eareckson Tada: Well, it will be an 18 week stint. And I'll be taking six cycles of chemotherapy every three weeks. And so our friends listening on Family Talk today can just be praying that my husband and I will be able to persevere through this. And so I'm happy that I'm going to be meeting with a nutritionist. I've got a great team of specialists with the UCLA Cancer Research Institute. I've got my sister, Cathy, here helping me. And then my sister, JK, is going to be coming, so I've got lots of support. But I think the thing that I'm really going to be struggling with is that one of the side effects is loss of energy.

Dr. James Dobson: Tell us how Ken is doing.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Amazing. I always knew my husband loved me, but I never knew he loved me this much. And it's so sweet to see how tender, this tenderness between us is so endearing and so ... And Jesus has been so good to Ken. I mean, the other night, we were having friends come up for a little hymn sing on Sunday afternoon, which meant that Ken had to go into the garage, turn on the car, back it out, get the patio furniture cushions out, wash them down, et cetera. He goes into the garage, this is about 8:30 at night, turns on the car, and my voice comes on over KKLA, which is a Southern California Christian radio station. Well, Joni and

Friends isn't even on KKLA. But for some reason, they were airing one of my programs.

And not only that, I was talking about praying for your caregiver. Ken sat there in his car with the motor running, stunned, as he listened to me talk about how important it is to care for our caregivers because they give so much. They bend over backward. "They go the second mile, so let's be praying for them," I was saying over the radio on KKLA. He stumbled into the room and said, "You're not going to believe what God just did to encourage me."

Dr. James Dobson: Goodness.

Joni Eareckson Tada: That's how the Lord is ministering to my husband.

Dr. James Dobson: Ken is such a good man. I've loved him. We've had a friendship for many years. I'm going to share something with you that does not compare in any way with what you're going through, but it gave me a little taste of it. And I don't even know if Shirley would want me to say this, but she's been dealing with a lower back problem that's really, really been difficult. And it just is debilitating when you can't get away from it. And I've been very concerned about her and been praying for her. And we went to bed the other night, I think it was three nights ago. And I was asleep, and Shirley began talking in her sleep, and she was not awake, and she was praying and she was crying. And she said, "Lord, touch my body. I need a touch from you."

I lay there in the middle of the night, listening to her cry out to God. And I just reached over and I stroked her face gently and her forehead and her eyes, and she quit crying, and she went back to ... Well, she was never awake, and she never did awaken. And I just felt that compassion He must feel.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Absolutely. And it just moves me to know that your hand on Shirley's forehead was that touch that she asked Jesus for. Oh, thank you for being a good caregiver to your dear wife with her pain, as well. We share a lot in common in that regard. And when you and Ken get together, you're going to have to do more than just go fly-fishing.

Dr. James Dobson: You are Shirley's chairman, honorary chairman of the National Day of Prayer next year. Aren't you?

Joni Eareckson Tada: I'm so excited about that. I can't believe that the National Day of Prayer team has asked me to be their honorary chair. And I'm glad that doctors have said that by the end of the year, I should be able to start out fresh and energized and ready to go, and hopefully back to things a little bit differently. But I'll be able to handle my responsibilities in a new, fresh way. And I'm looking forward to being the honorary chair and energizing people in this country to pray for our great nation, oh, my goodness, to get on our knees. And it's this whole thing, and

Shirley quotes the verse from Chronicles so often about seeking God's space, turn from our wicked ways and live.

This pretty much echoes what I was saying earlier. Let's get rid of sin. Let's get rid of the peevishness, the pettiness, the competition, the favoritism. Let's just put all these things behind us. Let's reach for the bigger picture, the higher goal, the broader vision because I think people who are truly healed in this way don't care about health and wealth or success. We care about giving the gospel and advancing His kingdom and reclaiming Earth as rightfully His.

Dr. James Dobson: We're going to have to have you on again, Joni, to talk about your concern for the church and what we may be about to go through. We're almost out of time today. But, boy, there's a program right there that we ought to do because there's a lot behind what you said. And I already know some of it and agree with it, so thank you so much.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Well, I think it's good to know that a quick verse, Ephesians 3:10 says, "It's not God's purpose that through the church, His manifold wisdom should be known to the powers and principalities of the heavenly realms." That means every caregiver right now listening who feels slump shouldered and overwhelmed, friend, you're in a cosmic battle. And you might think nobody is watching, nobody's observing, the sacrifices you make for your elderly parent, or your child with a disability, or your husband who survived a stroke. You might think nobody's noticing, but millions and millions of unseen beings, both angels and demons, are standing on their tiptoes intensely interested as to how you're going to handle the day after day routines.

Set your minds on Heavenly things above. And if you feel tired, just remember, it's not so much that you're serving your husband, or your parent, or your child with a ... You're serving Jesus. And when you're serving Him, you might get tired, but things don't have to be tiresome. You might get a little weary, but things don't have to be wearisome because it's going to account for your eternal record, and oh what a day is awaiting us in glory. Hang in there, friend.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, let me pray for you. Heavenly Father, we are talking today to a precious woman, your spokeswoman. And you have allowed her to walk a very difficult path for your own purposes. We don't pretend to understand it. But I thank you for the way Joni has handled it and modeled for us how we should deal with fear. And I just pray that you will be with her and Ken at this time. Put your great arms around both of them, Lord. Let them know that you're there. Give them your comfort. And if it be nigh will to bring Joni through this, and give her many more years to speak for you, pray that you will do that. We love you, Lord. We know Joni and Ken love you. And I just ask you to embrace them, amen.

Joni Eareckson Tada: Hezekiah's prayer, 15 more years. How about it?

Dr. James Dobson: The one I thought of when you were talking earlier was Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were in the fiery furnace, or about to go in, and they said, "Our Jehovah can rescue us, but if not, but if not." It's all right.

Joni Eareckson Tada: It's all right.

Dr. James Dobson: That's a beautiful prayer and I'm sure all of us will have reason at some point to pray that prayer. Thank you, Joni, you're a great lady and a great friend, and I appreciate you being with us today.

Joni Eareckson Tada: And what an honor it's been to share this time with you.

Roger Marsh: And that concludes our classic conversation featuring Joni Eareckson Tada and our own Dr. James Dobson here on Family Talk. Well, Joni's story is certainly encouraging, and even more inspiring as the years wear on. After this program was first recorded about a decade ago, after treatment, Joni was declared cancer free in 2015. But in 2018, she was diagnosed with a malignant tumor near the site of her original cancer. But after successful treatment, she was declared cancer free once again in 2019. What a tremendous blessing. By the way, if you'd like to learn more about Joni and her ministry, visit our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

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I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of all of us here at the JDFI, thank you for making Family Talk a part of your day. Hope you have a blessed and peaceful weekend. And be sure to join us again Monday for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

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

Dr. James Dobson: Hello, everyone. This is James Dobson inviting you to join us for our next edition of Family Talk. Every day, we come to these microphones with someone in mind, whether it's a busy mom looking for tips on discipline, or a husband who wants to learn more about connecting with his wife. We want to put an arm around your family in any way that we can, so join us next time for Family Talk. Won't you?

Roger Marsh:

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