



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: When Suffering Becomes Strength and Undying Faith

Guest(s): Dr. Gary Oliver

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Dr. James Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: Welcome to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love. I'm Roger Marsh. And on behalf of everyone here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thank you for making us a part of your day. Well, today's program is all about comfort in the word, and strength and faith when you're tossed into a sea of turmoil and suffering. Our co-host, Dr. Tim Clinton, recently sat down with Dr. Gary Oliver, a man who has been referred to as a modern day Job. Now listen to this. During a period in which he survived eight cancer surgeries himself, as well as the removal of 80% of his tongue, Dr. Oliver also buried his father, his son, his only sibling, and his wife. And that was in a span of just four years. Well, on today's edition of Family Talk, Dr. Gary Oliver reveals that in the face of unspeakable grief, his lifeline has been gut-wrenchingly honest prayer. There is so much to learn about this topic. So let's go there right now.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Well, how many times have you heard the saying, "Be careful on what you say to others, how you treat them, because you never know what that someone is going through." Well, you're about to hear a conversation today from a man with influence in my life. It's because of his heart, his fight, and God's work in his life.

And we're praying here at Family Talk, that God would use this story to speak words of hope, challenge, and hopefully some comfort in your life. Gary, welcome into Family Talk. Dr. Dobson sends his regards. I know he has great love and affection for you.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Thank you, Tim.

Dr. Tim Clinton: We really appreciate you joining us.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Thank you so much. It's an honor to be here. Of course, growing up learned about Dr. Dobson, but I became acquainted with him during Promise Keepers

and his heart, his passion, his vision, which he still has, character, integrity, a lot of love and affection, So thank you.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Years ago, Dr. Dobson wrote a book that really ministered to a lot of people, tough subject. It was called *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. In that book, he just talked about how life can sometimes not just bring curve balls, life can just absolutely knock the wind out of you and take you to a place where it gets dark. You get confused maybe even about who he is, whether or not he loves you, whether or not his heart is toward you. People have a lot of reactions to that. Gary, I want people to get to know the side of you that I think God's probably done his greatest work in and it's a tough story.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: If you don't mind, take us back to when this tough journey started in your life.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Well, just a wee bit of context. I grew up in a Christian home and went to Sunday school, 12 years and didn't miss a Sunday. By the time I was a freshman, I'd memorized hundreds of Bible verses. I had a year of undergraduate Bible. I had three years from my M. Div, two more years of Th.M. So five years of graduate theology, years of Greek and Hebrew. I knew the word and I loved it. And then as a psychologist, I began to become thrilled at understanding how God wants to work with all of who we are, our minds, our heart, our emotions. But in 2005, God began to trust me with a unique adventure. In 2005, I buried my dad. Two months later, my late wife Carrie, then of 25 years, got metastatic pancreatic cancer, was told she'd live maybe six months.

2006 I had my fifth cancer surgery, chemo, radiation. But I was used to it. 2007, my middle son Matt died and two months later, my wife of, at that point, 27 years, Carrie died. 2008, I buried my only sibling, my sister Marsha. So in four years I finished burying my entire nuclear family, half of my current family. ??! zero age,?? Where I had my seventh cancer surgery. They removed 80% of my tongue, took muscle off my leg, put it in my mouth. They said I'd never speak again, I'd never be able to swallow or chew. I'd have a feeding tube the rest of my life, but I was alive.

Then about nine months after that, I went back down to [inaudible 00:04:53] . The cancer had reoccurred. They said it was advanced stage four, there was nothing they could do. I had less than three months to live, go home and call hospice. That was the life of a person who had spent His life serving God, understanding the words, unpacking truth, encouraging others, talking about how God's trustworthy and how he protects us and how we can count on Him. And so yeah, it was a dark seven years of the soul.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Some people listening would be shaking their head. Gary, some people would be thinking maybe what Job's friend say. What's going on? Why this valley? Why

this darkness? There's no doubt. Gary, when you were going through all that, you began to question a lot of things.

Dr. Gary Oliver: One amazing thing Tim was that in the process God helped me see that I need to stop asking why. Because sometimes there may be 15, 20 reasons why. But God said, Gary, you need to ask, who am I? You need to ask, what have I promised? You need to ask, where might I be at work? And it's not that I didn't wonder why, but I have found out why often leads to a cul de sac. And we just go around and round and round and oh, there were times, Tim, I didn't know where God was. I felt betrayed. He says he protects us. I couldn't sure prove it. He said, he'll guard us. Well, I was not a good example. And that somehow I knew that he was a promised keeper. Sometimes he takes his jolly good time, sometimes several years.

But somehow I knew at the deepest level, more than I knew with my mind. I knew the verses, I knew the promises. But it was like, Gary, I'll never leave you or forsake you. I can't, because I promised. I have no choice. You are my beloved. I'm at work and you'll just have to trust me. He said at one point, Peter had to get out of the boat and put his life where his mouth was and take a step on the water. That's when he said, "This is what I want you to do. I am present. You just be faithful". And he was. And he has been. But it took some time, my friend.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, in that journey I want to go into the pain piece a little bit more because we've heard of the sayings. Pain is a gift. By the way, it's a gift that nobody wants.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Reframing, developing perspective is hard. Because when you stand at the casket of a son, of a wife, and you realize they're never coming back, humanly speaking, it's unspeakable grief.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I know the question why needs to be reframed into a who? If you grew up in a Christian home and you have been no stranger to pain, you've walked down these roads, but at the same time you want to just like, you can't help but just keep screaming. God, why?

Dr. Gary Oliver: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Listen, I've tried to do these things right. I've tried to be faithful. You promise that you'd love us, but I don't sense or feel your presence. And Gary, I mean, people get stuck there because if God is a good God, then why are these things happening? I mean he could intervene.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Oh my, Yeah. He delights in using us. And he wants to help us go deeper with him. He wants to move us beyond head knowledge to heart knowledge. Just like when you get married and you have this oxytocin and your fiancé is perfect, and she thinks you're perfect. But then after you're together for a while, the oxytocin wears off. What you thought was funny was no longer funny. You begin to see some things about yourself and each other, and you find most young couples do that. You had buttons that your beautiful, amazing fiancé can push that you didn't know you had. That's how maturation takes place. I think of the Psalms. Talk about a massive failure. Talk about a loser. I mean, David, come on. I mean, he has an affair with a married woman. He has her husband killed. I mean, this stuff.

Then he came back and God says that he was a man after his own heart. And this process taught me the depth of sin. Not theoretically, but the power of his judge. And time and time again, I sense God saying Gary, it's not how much you know. Keep on reading. I still memorize scriptures. I've read a lot of your books, Tim. But it's about doing. It's about being. Get out of the boat. After a while you learn, things don't have to change. You want them to change. I never start praying for that. But at some point you begin to learn that He is enough. That's a key perception that we can learn. That my joy is not dependent upon everything going great. I like it when it does. But I have a knowledge and awareness of God's power, his presence, his spirit that my decades of study didn't give me. There's still sometimes I still find myself asking, why me? It's like the only answer I hear is you'll find out.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, do you think God weeps with us? People often ask me, Do you think God sees what's happening inside my heart? And is he tendered toward that.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Tim, absolutely. If we are in Him and He is in us, He can't not experience what we do, maybe in a different way. He is God, but Jesus wept. The Bible says He keeps track of all of our tears. That means that we have a God who knows us better than we do. That happens because of sin. That's why He came. God sent His son. He understands the depth and breadth of a fall of sin better than we ever will this side of heaven. Quite frankly, after what I've gone through, I understand God's love, His mercy, His goodness, His grace, His faithfulness. That may sound weird to some of our listeners, but I've been through a lot more stuff than most people ever go through.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Well, I think of the life of Job. Gary, you often tell the story of after your surgery, your tongue surgery, the cancer. That you would stand in front of a mirror and try to say your ABCs and wind up crying your eyes out. I want to make sure people are with us here because yeah, you have a lesson, you have a gift for us. That, and for us to be able to get there, we got to go there.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Yeah. I spent hundreds of hours, Tim, that's not hyperbole. Trying to say my ABCs. And early on I would start crying and I would say, God, what the fat's going on? Okay. Your promises, I can't say my picking ABCs. I'm supposed to never talk again. Okay, How can you use some... I mean, I'm writing books, I'm

traveling, speaking internet, blah, blah, blah. And now I can't even say my ABCs. Where are you? Oh, I quoted the Bible back to him many times. Somehow in the midst of that, Tim, I knew in a way that transcends putting into words. In fact, several times I heard him say Gary, nothing of any significance has changed. I had some talks with him about that. What he was saying was, Gary, I still love you. You're still my son. All my promises are true. Okay? You're [inaudible 00:13:46] is here with me and I'm at work in your life. And I will bless you. But sometimes he takes his time, Tim.

Dr. Tim Clinton: When did the mental shift change, Gary, for you? I go back, we've been friends for a long time.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Oh yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And when I think of you, it's like, I don't want to think about what you've been through because humanly speaking, it scares all of us. We would rather ignore or deny it. You hear what I'm saying?

Dr. Gary Oliver: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And no doubt, Gary, you've had some of Job's friends in your life.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Oh my.

Dr. Tim Clinton: But when did the mental shift happen? I know it shifted.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Oh yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And I want our listeners to know that what he's saying is true. Gary really believes this about God.

Dr. Gary Oliver: It didn't happen overnight, but it kind of began. I was in ICU. I'd been on a ventilator for several days. I woke up, I had tubes everywhere. They had to put new holes to put more tubes. The doctor comes in and gives me the diagnosis. You'll never speak again, blah, blah, blah, blah. And after he leaves, I began to talk with God. What's happening? What's going on? Where are you? It's like I heard him say, Gary, I haven't gone anywhere. That's the first time I heard that nothing of any significance has changed. You're my son. You're my beloved, you're precious in my sight. What you have right now, my son, you can handle with my help. I didn't feel it. Okay? I thought he'd gotten the wrong guy. But it took, well a good year before I began to really understand and be able to trust that before I was willing to get out of the boat.

There were 12 disciples, as far as I know, in the boat. Only one got out. And my hunch was people didn't just jump out. He put one foot in the water and then he put the next, but he had to. And it was like God saying, Gary, and God didn't say this, but I felt like it, my son, I will supply your needs. I can't leave you.

Here's the chance for you to put up or shut up. Again, he wasn't quite that cold. But I knew in ways that transcended the information I always had. But Tim, it took day by day, sometimes 15, 20 times a day. There were times when I cried so many tears, I ran out. I went dry. I found myself sobbing. I mean, that happened countless times. But God said, Gary, you just be faithful.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You're listening to family talk, a division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, co-host for today's broadcast. Our in studio guest is Dr. Gary Oliver. A man who is acquainted with sorrow, but who knows what it means to be touched, in his inner most parts, by a God who is real.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Amen.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And who loves him.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Amen.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Gary, coming back, some people would say, Listen, so are we to just accept what happens to us? What about praying and crying out to God and asking him for healing?

Dr. Gary Oliver: Oh yeah. I had friends. I had all kinds of prayer things. Listen, isn't the majority of the Psalms David complaining?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Oh yeah.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Talking to, I mean, he was not a happy camper. Oh no. We have to be open and honest. And sometimes I probably used words with God I wouldn't use in public. But I had nothing to hide. I felt like I had nothing Tim. But the way we learn to be faithful, the only way is by being faithful. The only way we can learn how to do it is to do it. And that means we're going to slip and fall, make mistakes. And that means he'll be there. My sense is God would rather see me get out of the boat and sink in the water than sit in the boat the whole time because I don't feel like I can trust him.

Dr. Tim Clinton: When I was a boy, I remember my mother. Had a lot of spunk in her Gary, but one of her sayings was, How long are you going to sleep in that bed? Get up and get moving.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Wow.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You can't drown in your sorrows.

Dr. Gary Oliver: No.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And that was really your message. Don't get lost than that.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Amen.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Get up.

Dr. Gary Oliver: See, I have more joy in him than I have ever known. I know more about joy than I've ever known. At one point I looked at every Hebrew, Greek, whatever time the word joy was used. So I knew about joy. I had a great message on joy. But now I know it in ways that transcend words. Sovereign joy, we use joy and happiness as synonyms and God's economy, is it there or not. Happy depends on if good things happen to me I'm happy. If bad things happen to me I can't be happy. God's joy is independent of what happens. And you know what I'm talking about, don't you? But it takes time. The refiners fire. But the product, this sounds like I'm trying to be clever. I'm not. The product is always worth the process. Matthew 5:16, "that your light so shine before man that they may see your face and glorify your Father who is in heaven." You be faithful because I'm going to use that to encourage others.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That process, Gary, is a challenge. And I guess at the heart of it, you have to really be rooted in the mindset that God is good, ultimately. How would you believe that he is not good. That he doesn't really care about you. That he doesn't know your name. Gary, as you have journeyed, you've spoken a lot, and I know you take time and you challenge people to just know what it means to experience God. Why such a fervent push in that direction? A lot of people want action plans. They want strategies. Well, that can be helpful. There's another level.

Dr. Gary Oliver: As I began to go back and look at the early church fathers and mothers, I found time and time again that they spent time with Him, not just with their shopping list. Their prayer wasn't Give me, I need, thank you. But they spent time in the old Testament and knew be still, Wait, listen, Meditate again. Again. Christ does his miracles. And rather than get the people to start a bunch of small churches, he goes up in the mountains by himself. That is not the way to have church growth. But even God the Son needs the time with the Father. I begin to see those, what some call holy habits, sacred rhythms. In some ways, those were the key to going beyond head knowledge, to heart knowledge, to knowing about him, to knowing him in ways that become especially powerful when two and two is not making four. If I have a secret, I don't, but that would be it, Tim. Maybe wasting time with God and listening.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It's where the power is.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Amen. Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: The letting go part is the hardest part.

Dr. Gary Oliver: And you don't do just once, do you?

Dr. Tim Clinton: No. And that lost piece is such a companion of life. And there are many people right now who are listening and they're in a dark season, and for them it's very difficult to listen. But they want to listen and they have to listen because they know they have to journey.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: They've got to go somewhere.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: They want to hear you say, God is still good and one day he will wipe every tear from their eyes. That's

Dr. Gary Oliver: That's right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: One day everything will change. One day, Gary, you get to put your arms around that gang of yours you love. That's what keeps you going, isn't it?

Dr. Gary Oliver: Amen.

Dr. Tim Clinton: But until then, God's got you here. Maybe just to do a radio broadcast, and Gary, I'm going to give you the close here, and I want you to speak straight into the lives of people. I want you to pray over them and give them something that God gave you.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Success is ultimately you and I, us choosing to be faithful. To believe in Him. Sometimes that involves feeling better. Sometimes it involves enormous victories. Sometimes it involves pain that doesn't make sense. But again and again as I look unto him, the author and perfecter of my faith, as I don't just read about him, but as I spend more time with him, there comes an intimacy. An intimacy that he then transcends words and a peace that does pass all understanding. It's a process. It takes time.

The more I avoid pain, the longer the pain's going to go, the worse it's going to get. Some ways, the easy way out is to trust him to come back a thousand times. God, I believe, help my unbelief. God, thank you for those who are with us today. Though some have tears right now, some have hard days they can't put your words, some wonder if and where you are. Lord, I pray you've used Tim's and my sharing to maybe give them a wee bit of a greater perspective to maybe see you, be aware of your promises in some new ways. God remind them right now that you're present, that you love them and you can't not be faithful. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dr. Tim Clinton: The old Puritans used to say it this way. They called it the Valley of Vision. It can seem different now. Gary, as we close this piece up, I'm reminded of the words

of Job when he said, "Though he slay me yet will I trust him". I guess that's been the heart of our conversation. That's a difficult place to go, but it's everything.

Dr. Gary Oliver: Amen.

Roger Marsh: Wow. What an inspiring testimonial from Dr. Gary Oliver today here on Family Talk. No matter who you are, you will inevitably come face to face with personal suffering in your own life. I'm always given a sense of peace when I think of the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:18. He writes, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us". Now, to find out more about Dr. Gary Oliver or to access any part of today's interview, just go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. Well, that's it for today. Hope you'll join us again tomorrow. And until next time, I'm Roger Marsh. On behalf of Dr. James Dobson and Dr. Tim Clinton, God's richest blessings and peace to you and your family.

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