



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Another Kind of Courage: Finding Purpose Through Disability – Part 2

Guest(s): Doug Mazza

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- Beau Henderson: Hello everyone! I'm Beau Henderson, Creative Director here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.
- Christian Massey: And I'm Christian Massey, Graphic Designer.
- Beau Henderson: As we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, we want to wish you and your family a Christ-filled Christmas.
- Christian Massey: And a blessed and Happy New Year.
- Both: May the peace of God be with you.
- Roger Marsh: Hi this Roger Marsh for Family Talk. Do you remember Dr. Dobson's touching interview with Rebekah Gregory?
- Rebekah Gregory: The hardest part of that day was not the physical, though. It was the emotional. It was everything that not only I saw, but my son saw as well.
- Roger Marsh: Or what about the powerful interview with Dennis Prager?
- Dennis Prager: Nice people can do damage. Nice is not the same as wise. Lack of wisdom creates evil, not lack of niceness.
- Roger Marsh: There were so many great Family Talk moments this year. It may be hard to pick your favorite, but don't worry, we've done it for you. We've selected eighteen of the most popular broadcasts of the past year, and present them to you together on six audio CDs, in the 2019, Family Talk Best of Broadcast Collection! These entertaining and informative programs are sure to bless you and become a cherished part of your family resource library. This compelling CD-set is our thank you for a suggested gift of any amount in support of Family Talk. Learn more at drjamesdobson.org, or by calling 877-732-6825. Thank you, and God bless you.

Roger Marsh: Welcome to Family Talk, the radio ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, thanking you for joining us today for what is going to be a very special radio program. Throughout the entire month of December, we are highlighting the broadcasts that were the most listened to during the past year. So, sit back and enjoy this popular program from 2019, right here on this special edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: Today, on Family Talk:

Roger Marsh: Welcome everyone to Family Talk, the radio ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh with your host, child psychologist and best-selling author, Dr. James Dobson.

In just a moment, Dr. Dobson will continue his conversation with Doug Mazza, president of Joni & Friends. Yesterday, Doug shared stories and lessons he learned from working alongside Joni for the past 20 years. Joni Eareckson Tada is an incredible godly woman who has lived with her quadriplegia for over 50 years.

Now if you missed that moving conversation, I urge you to go to our website and give it a listen. In a moment, Dr. Dobson will continue his conversation with Doug Mazza, who served as president of Joni & Friends Ministries.

Today, Doug Mazza opens up about his personal connection with disability through raising a child with special needs. Doug's son, Ryan, was born with a rare genetic condition that left him severely mentally and physically handicapped. Doug will explain his son's disorder and how this diagnosis impacted their entire family. He'll also share how he discovered joy through the pain and developed a deeper relationship with God.

Here now is Dr. James Dobson to reintroduce today's guest on this special edition of Family Talk.

Dr. Dobson: Well, Doug, it was such a pleasure to have you with us yesterday to talk about the private lives, the personal lives of Joni Eareckson Tada and her husband, Ken. If today's listeners didn't hear that broadcast from yesterday, I do hope they'll go to our archives and get a copy of it and listen to those words. They were deeply moving.

Now, Doug, you're here with us again today. Good to have you back.

Doug Mazza: I'm honored to be back.

Dr. Dobson: And today we want to talk about your own personal life. Tell us about the birth of your third child. There's a story there that I know will be a blessing to many people. And you and I were talking about it when we were together at a

restaurant not too long ago. You told me that story and I said we really ought to share that with our listeners. Today is that moment.

Doug Mazza: Well, thank you for taking interest in Ryan. He was born with Crouzon Pfeiffer Syndrome, a very rare disorder. At the time, he was recognized as the eighth case in the United States of a child born alive with these two syndromes.

Dr. Dobson: Is it a genetic disorder?

Doug Mazza: It is a genetic disorder, and Ryan's skull in the fetus was fused together, usually what they call the sutures or soft spots in the head, we as parents call them, are not connected and that allows the brain to grow in the young child. If that happens to all the sutures, the child is not born alive because the brain is not able to grow to its full size.

But God has always had something in mind for Ryan and he left one suture open and that was his forehead. And so Ryan's entire brain grew forward, pushing in front of his face and pushed his eyes nearly out of the sockets. It disrupted his upper respiratory system, dislocated his jaw, and he was born into extraordinary suffering and pain from day one.

Dr. Dobson: And you knew that right at the moment of birth?

Doug Mazza: Oh, it was an extraordinary sight. The doctor took Ryan and turned away from me. He had never seen a child with a facial deformity this severe. And he just turned away and over his shoulder said, "I'm sorry, I don't see how this child can survive more than a few hours."

That was 42 years ago and Ryan is miraculously, by the grace of God, still with us. He had 13 brain and skull surgeries his first three years of life in an attempt to save his life. But the disease after he was born continued to distort his face and skull. Some of the bone grew into his brain, it pinched off his optic nerves and he lost his eyesight. They had to remove portions of his face to get at his optic nerves and remove the bone. He did get his sight back for a while and then went blind permanently.

And finally he slipped into a long coma after his 13th surgery. It was just too much for this little boy to handle. And he had cardiac arrest, even though his brain had been developing normally, this long term coma and cardiac arrest created complete disability in his life. He has never spoken, he is blind, he can't sit up in a wheelchair without a brace, he's tube fed. But he knows my voice. And when I walk in the room, he gets a big smile on his face just by me calling his name. We have magnificent conversations, one-sided. I've been talking to him for 42 years.

I will tell him about this experience and meeting you today. When we get to heaven I can't wait to hear Ryan's voice. He's going to have his side of the conversation-

Dr. Dobson: So even though he can't communicate with you, you tell him stories as though he were not disabled.

Doug Mazza: Absolutely. I don't know what Ryan understands, by the grace of God, quite frankly. You know, Dr. Dobson, I have to go back to the time when Ryan was born. I believed in God, I believed that Jesus was the Son of God, but had no walk whatsoever with Jesus Christ or with the Lord. I was living in my own strength. I was a corporate person, driven in corporate life. Wanted to be successful in the corporate world and frankly, the world was showing me that my calculations were successful. I was getting promoted, I had lots of responsibility.

And then Ryan was like a stick in the spokes, he threw me over the handlebars. I didn't know what to do with this. I just saw it as tragedy. I didn't see any purpose for his life. One of the best decisions I made, looking back, was, I had enough belief in God that I didn't get angry with him, I got curious. Which is more of who I am. I wanted to know, how does that work?

And that brought me back to the Bible. And I asked God to show me what purpose Ryan's life had. Instead, he showed me the purpose for my life. I asked him to save my son Ryan's life, and he saved me. I owe Ryan everything. I owe Ryan my salvation, I owe Ryan the work that I know God created me for. I have traveled the world working with Joni Eareckson Tada and I've been to the plains of Africa, the mountains of Ecuador, the slums of China. I have met magnificent people with disabilities that have taught me so much about life and faith that I never would have met had it not been for Ryan.

Ryan is, despite his condition, my senior partner in ministry. And whenever I go somewhere or get to serve, I know it is that his life that pushed me in the direction of the arms of Jesus Christ. And so that's why he's my senior partner and I love to tell him all of those stories and we're going to get to sit on a rock in heaven some place. He may say, "I thought you were never going to shut up." But on the other hand, I can't wait to hear what he's going to have to say.

Dr. Dobson: What was your emotional reaction before you began to realize there was a spiritual dimension to this tragedy?

Doug Mazza: Psychological and physical collapse. I came home from the hospital alone the day he was born and in walking up the steps inside my house, a strong, fit 30-year-old man, I collapsed on the steps and just wept. And isn't amazing how God loves us so much he passes the love on that we have for our children, that this was a child that I knew for six hours and it had changed my entire life.

Dr. Dobson: Yeah.

Doug Mazza: It wasn't somebody-

Dr. Dobson: You already loved him, didn't you?

Doug Mazza: I loved him so much. I remember even thinking, "I've only known this person for six hours and it is the biggest tragedy that has ever befallen me. I don't know how I can possibly get through this."

Dr. Dobson: How about your wife's response? Her baby has been born and quite obviously there was something terribly wrong. How did she react to it?

Doug Mazza: It was tragedy. It was tragedy for both of us. She saw it as tragedy. As many mothers will do, took responsibility for it. Not appropriately, I might add. I want to be sure-

Dr. Dobson: As though she had caused it.

Doug Mazza: As somehow she was the cause of this, which is completely false.

Dr. Dobson: But common.

Doug Mazza: But common, yes. And if there are any mothers out there, no, it is not your fault.

Dr. Dobson: Now this was your third child.

Doug Mazza: Yes.

Dr. Dobson: And you had two very healthy children before.

Doug Mazza: Yes. They were seven and four at the time.

Dr. Dobson: How did they respond to the birth of this disabled child?

Doug Mazza: Well, there was confusion as to why he wasn't coming home and why he had to stay in the hospital and why mommy and daddy were so sad. We did our best to explain to him that he had a deformity. They did not know what deformity meant and so it became very difficult to try to explain medically or personally what exactly was wrong with Ryan.

Dr. Dobson: You know, I was in the department of genetics in child development for a number of years and I know what you're talking about. And I've seen hydrocephaly, where the child's head was larger than the body of the child. The devastation of that on a marriage and on a family are always tragic. It is heartbreaking to see people go through that.

Doug Mazza: That was a period of time of years, not months, as we came to terms with Ryan's viability. For the first ten or twelve years of his life, he was considered terminally ill and the doctors constantly told us, "He won't survive much longer, he won't survive much longer." After a decade, I finally decided I'm going to leave that up to God and let's just take care of the rash on his arm right now. I'm not interested in hearing that anymore.

Dr. Dobson: What kind of hospital has he been in?

Doug Mazza: He's been in Children's Hospital in Chicago, which did a marvelous job. Especially if you think about the time in history as to what was available. He's been to UCLA, he's been to UC Irvine, all looking for the specialists of the day that were working on something related to what Ryan had. At the time, some of the greatest shunt work was actually being done at UCI.

Dr. Dobson: Do you still grieve over Ryan and his disability?

Doug Mazza: You know, to say that disability is a joy would be an overstatement. I have found joy in life through all that God has brought me through Ryan. And I have seen that there is great purpose in Ryan's life. I have come to realize that Ryan, in his current condition, and as he was born, was made in the image of God, just the way he was. I didn't know that when he was born, but now I am convinced of it. That suffering is a part of life in this world that is remedied by eternity in paradise.

Ryan's life has great purpose. Whatever I am allowed to accomplish, whatever I am allowed to do with my hands and feet and mouth, even beyond this radio program, never would have happened without his suffering. And I believe he gets treasure in heaven for that. I mean that with all my heart, that there will be a very special place for him there, for the suffering that he has gone through.

Here I am trying to find answers that will make me feel good and I find 1 Corinthians 10:13 that tells me God is not going to bring me more than I can endure. It was the most annoying piece of scripture I ever read. It was, "That's the deal? You're not going to bring me more than I can endure?" And as I realize that what God does with faith through endurance, it is the trigger to Romans 8:28.

People have asked me for the last 40 years, how do you get Romans 8:28, I want - that Romans 8:28 that says, "All things work together for the good." We all want that. We want the, "all things work together for the good, for those who love him and are called according to his purpose." But I have found that those that get the largest portion of Romans 8:28 are those that go through the largest portion of 1 Corinthians 10:13.

I look at Joni Eareckson Tada, who I have been alongside for 20 years, and I see the suffering that she has gone through as a quadriplegic and the joy that she

has found in life and what she has done with her suffering. And then I watch Romans 8:28 flow out of her life, in every portion of her life, in ministry that spreads around the world, in people coming to Christ with disabilities, in hope being given. It is because she endured and God is honoring that endurance by giving her Romans 8:28 and sharing it with those she comes into contact with.

Dr. Dobson: Oh my, that is so comforting. Speak specifically to the parents who are listening to this program who have children who suffer, who have children who are ill, who are disabled, who are deformed, who may not live very long. How do they come to terms with God and with his Son, Jesus Christ? You found a closer relationship with the Lord through reaching out to him. Anything you want to say to those people who haven't found that peace?

Doug Mazza: Well I would ask you to, if you are angry at God, I would ask you to give curiosity a chance. That will take you on a pathway to faith. Start with curiosity first. Let's not make assumptions about God. God is a good God. God is a loving God. God has a plan for your child. If it's your wife, if it's your parent, whoever it happens to be, there is a plan for that person's life that will eventually be seen as absolutely perfect.

Dr. Dobson: Some people have to start by forgiving God. We know that God never needs forgiving because He's a loving, perfect God. But such anger and resentment can occur when something like this happens to a vulnerable little child. You almost have to start by saying, "Lord, take this sense of anger and frustration away and give me your peace."

Doug Mazza: Yes, you do. You know, Joni Eareckson Tada has an example that I have heard her give. It is about a little boy learning to ride a bike who can't quite master it yet, takes a sharp turn, falls, and slides on his knees, and he's lying there in pain yelling why. "Why? Why am I in such pain? Why did that happen?"

Now there's two fathers that can walk up to you. One of them can say, "Well, Johnny, you see, the angle that you came down and the physics of the back spin on your tire ..." That's not what that-

Dr. Dobson: That's not going to help.

Doug Mazza: That's not going to help. What we really want is for our dad to pick us up and just put his arms around us and hold us close and that's what God did for me. The more we resist that, the more we push against his shoulders as opposed to, "Be still and know that I am God," the longer that pain is going to stay with you.

We have a choice as parents. We have a choice to whether accept the faith that leads us to a relationship with Jesus Christ and all that he said is true. He already suffered what my son suffered and more. He already suffered what I suffer as a parent. He already did that for me. And he said, "Don't worry, I have purpose for

Ryan's life. Ryan is going to be with me in eternity and he is going to be a very special person there."

Dr. Dobson: And you're going to be with him.

Doug Mazza: I hope I'm allowed to go where he is in heaven. Because he's going to have a very exalted place, I believe.

Dr. Dobson: How often do you see Ryan?

Doug Mazza: I see Ryan every week and he is in a group home now. It is age appropriate for, that's his home. He loves it there. When we went to work at Joni & Friends, we moved a little bit further away from him, not very far, but he lives in a group home and so we are able to get down and see him on the weekends and he loves where he is and we have a good time as a family there.

Dr. Dobson: You still feel the pain when you walk in there?

Doug Mazza: You know, I do. It's walking out is when I feel the pain. I have to tell you a very personal thing that I don't think I've ever said publicly, the last night that I saw Ryan before he had his last operation, he was standing in a crib. He was almost three years old, he was at UCLA, and he was looking at me like, "Don't leave me." And I looked at him and I walked down the hallway, took four steps and I walked back. And I looked at him again and he was pleading with me, "Don't leave me." But we were going home for the evening.

I never saw him again where he had eyesight. I never spoke another word with him, he didn't speak then, but he had normal intellect at the time. It was the last time that he ever stood up and recognized me with his eyes or reached his arms out for me. He's never done that in 42 years.

Dr. Dobson: That's wrenching.

Doug Mazza: And when I leave his room ... going in doesn't bother me, but when I leave, I say to myself a 100% of the time, "Don't look back." It's too painful for me to look back. It reminds me of that day that I stopped and looked back. I say goodbye to him, I pray with him, I kiss him, and I walk out of the room and my brain says, "Don't look back."

So, yes, God has done a miracle in our lives. He has brought my other children through the confusion to loving their brother and understanding God's purpose for his life. But we're human and I'm human, and no, that pain does not go away. I do understand that God has a purpose for him, but my life is a human life. And I do still feel the suffering of a dad who wants all the best for his child.

Dr. Dobson: Do you hold his hand, do you hug him? What's your intimacy with your son now?

Doug Mazza: Oh, I hug him, I kiss him, I hold him, I hold his hand, to the point of his annoyance. He only makes sounds, but I know when enough's enough.

Dr. Dobson: Is there any response that comes from him?

Doug Mazza: He has things that he responds to. He has maracas that is his favorite thing. And if you say to him, "Ryan, let's play music." He will respond with a big smile and shake his maracas. He smiles when I walk into the room. There's little games that we can play that you would play with a child, that he remembers from childhood.

He also responds to simple commands, put your hand down, or are you happy today? He will give you a smile. So, there's simple things that he will respond to that I know we're connected.

Dr. Dobson: Well, Doug, our time's almost gone. I appreciate your opening this story to our listeners. You don't tell that story very often, do you?

Doug Mazza: No, I don't. When I have been called upon to do so, I have shared it in churches and find that if it is helpful in developing disability ministry or special needs ministry in the church, I am more than happy to describe Ryan's experiences and my experiences with the Lord all the way through it.

Dr. Dobson: Having been through that, isn't it interesting that the Lord put you in a position of leadership for a ministry specifically dedicated to people with disabilities and the kind of tragedy really that we've heard about today. Thank you for accepting that challenge.

Doug Mazza: Thank you for having me, Dr. Dobson. This has meant a great deal to me. Thank you.

Dr. Dobson: Doug, I know that Joni & Friends reaches out to people who have needs like this. You've seen them up close and personal. What can Joni & Friends do to help people who are going through this very difficult situation right now?

Doug Mazza: Well, we have resources of every kind, including a list of churches that may be in your area that are comforting and welcoming to people with disabilities, that have a special needs ministry. It is good to be surrounded by brothers and sisters in the church. And that is where this ministry really belongs, according to scripture.

You can contact Joni & Friends for resources of every kind, despite the disability. And even if it is a referral to another ministry or service, we're happy to do that. You can call our resource department or email us. Most of our communication these days is on email, but there are people that are trained in biblical counseling that are on the phone as well. We'd be delighted to hear from you.

Dr. Dobson: Thank you, Doug, for being with us today. I wish my voice had been more clear and hope it hasn't bothered people, but it's a pleasure to have you here. You have become my brother and I can't tell you how much I appreciate you.

Doug Mazza: That blesses me greatly. Thank you, Dr. Dobson.

Roger Marsh: This is Roger Marsh again and I pray that you have been encouraged by what Doug Mazza has shared today here on Family Talk. It's amazing to hear the strength of his faith despite enduring a tremendous amount of suffering.

If you're going through a tough time right now because of the way disability has impacted your family, get in touch with Joni & Friends. We have their contact information on our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org.

We also have a tremendous resource there as well from Joni & Friends, it's called The Beyond Suffering Bible. It's a great tool to find encouragement from grief and sorrow alongside God's word. You'll find all of this and much more by visiting our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org.

I'm Roger Marsh, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

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