



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Taking Up the Cross of Christ

Guest(s): Dr. James Dobson

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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: Thank you for listening to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. And here on this Good Friday, we are sharing a special reading by Dr. James Dobson. Dr. Dobson wrote what you are about to hear in 2019 with the purpose of reminding believers that as Christians, we are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus each and every day. And that means enduring suffering in this life as well. Dr. Dobson's words are so poignant and so applicable to us, just three years later that we wanted to share them with you again today. So here now is Dr. James Dobson on this special edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson, and this is Family Talk. And I want to devote to our program today to a letter that I wrote to the people on our mailing list. And if you've received it already, forgive this redundancy. This comes from my heart.

Dear friends. I want to devote my letter to the experience of hardship and persecution that often accompanies the Christian life. I bet you haven't heard that before. We are taught in Scripture to adopt a certain mental toughness that is designed to protect us when trouble shows up unannounced. The Apostle Peter referred to that mindset when he wrote, "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourself with this same attitude." 1 Peter, 4:1.

This aspect of the Christian life seems to be underrepresented in today's teachings. We often hear about the blessings and benefits of devotion to the master and therein calculable, but less is said about the cost of discipleship.

Jesus left no doubt about the kingdom priorities when he said, "Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Matthew 10:38. These were powerful words, referring to his approaching death by crucifixion. Jesus repeated that charge a short time later saying to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Matthew 16:24. Have you ever stopped to think what that might mean? The cross stood for crucifixion and we're to take up that mindset. The Apostle

Paul later used another analogy to express a similar concept. He instructed believers to, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs. He wants to please his commanding officer." 2 Timothy 2, 3 and 4. These short verses have intrigued me for years.

What did he mean by his reference to military service? How is the training of a soldier relevant to the life of a Christian? And what does it mean to endure hardship like a good soldier? Well, I attempted to answer these questions in my book, *When God Doesn't Make Sense*, because so many of you have written to ask for prayer and tell us of your own pain and sorrow. I thought it might be helpful to share an excerpt for my book that analyzes the mindset of a soldier.

We've all seen John Wayne movies that made combat look like a romantic romp in the park. Men who have been through it, tell a different story. The most graphic descriptions of battle that I've ever heard came from Bruce Catton's excellent books on the American Civil War. They included the army of the Potomac. They provide a striking understanding of the toughness of both Yankee and Rebel soldiers.

Their lives were filled with deprivation and danger that is hardly imaginable today. It was not unusual for troops to make a two-week, forced march during which commanders would threaten the stragglers at sword point. The men were often thrown into the heat of terrible battle just moments after reaching the front. They would engage in exhausting combat for days, interspersed by sleepless nights on the ground sometimes in freezing rain or snow. During the battle itself, they ate a dry, hard biscuit called hardtack and very little else. Combat experience itself was unbelievably violent in those days. Thousands of men stood toe to toe and slaughtered one another like flies. After one particularly bloody battle in 1862, 5,000 men laid dead in an area of two square miles. And there were 20,000 more who were wounded. One witness said it was possible to walk on dead bodies for 100 yards without once stepping on the ground.

Many of the wounded remained where they fell among dead men and horses for up to 12 to 14 hours with their groans and cries echoing through the countryside. While their willingness to endure these physical deprivations is almost incomprehensible, one has to admire the emotional toughness of the troops. They believed in their cause, whether Union or Confederate and they committed their lives to it. Most believed that they would not survive the war. But that was of little consequence. Please understand that I do not see unmitigated virtue in heroic visions of that day. Indeed, men were all too willing to put their lives on the line for a war they poorly understood. But their dedication and personal sacrifice remain today as memorials to their time.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this commitment to principle and honor than is seen in a letter written by Major Sullivan Ballou of the Union army. He penned this to his wife, Sarah, a week before the Battle of Bull Run.

That was July 14th, 1861. They had been married only six years. These powerful words still touch my soul. You may have heard them before because they're well known, but this gets me by the throat.

“My very dear Sarah, the indications are very strong that we shall move out in a few days, perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more. I have no misgivings about the lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged. And my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American civilization now leans to the triumph of the government and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the revolution. And I am willing, perfectly willing, to lay down all the joys of this life to help maintain the government and to pay that debt.

Sarah, my love for you is deathless. It seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but omnipotence could break. And yet my love for country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield. The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me and I feel most deeply grateful to God in you that I have enjoyed them for so long. Six years it was. And how hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years when God willing, we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grow up to honorable manhood around us.

If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you. And when the last breath escapes me on the battlefield, I will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults and the many pains I've caused you. How thoughtless, how foolish I have oft times been. Oh Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those that they loved, I shall always be near you in the gladdest day and the darkest night amidst your happiest scenes and the gloomiest hours always, always. And if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath or the cool air fans your throbbing temples, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah, do not mourn me dead. Think I am gone. And I wait for thee, for we shall meet again. Sullivan.”

Major Ballou was killed one week later in the first Battle of Bull Run. I wonder, don't you, if he did indeed utter Sarah's name, as he lay dying on the battlefield. She undoubtedly suffered the greater pain in the aftermath of that terrible war. Is this the level of dedication and sacrifice to which the Apostle Paul calls us in 2 Timothy 2? I believe it is. Yet the concept seems almost unreasonable in this day of individual rights and self-fulfillment. How long has it been since we've thought of ourselves as highly disciplined soldiers of the army of the Lord? That was a familiar theme in years past. “Onward, Christian Soldiers” was one of the favorite songs of the church. Christians had proclaimed were marching as to war with the cross of Jesus going on before. Our forebearers also sang, “stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross.” Then there was “Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone, dare to have a purpose firm, dare to make it known.”

That was the way Christians saw their responsibilities in days past. Well, things have changed. Now our emphasis is on harnessing the power of God for more successful and prosperous living. Something seems to have been lost in the translation. One of the popular courses several years ago offered this giddy thought, "something good is going to happen to you. Happen to you this very day. Something good is going to happen to you. Jesus of Nazareth is passing your way." I have a strong dislike for that well-intentioned little rendition because it is based on bad theology. I understand how the lyrics are to be interpreted, but they imply that Christianity guarantees a person only good things. It is not true. Let us be honest as the world interprets it, something terrible could happen to you today. Christians do get sick and die, just like the rest of the world.

Believing otherwise is a trap from which many young believers and some older ones never escape. There's a reason why the great hymns of the church have endured, in some cases for hundreds of years. They're based not on words that tickle our ears, but on solid, theological truth. One of my favorites relating to our theme is entitled "Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken." The lyrics were written by Henry F Lyte back in 1824. And the music was arranged from Mozart. Absorb, if you will, the truth in these incredible words.

"Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow thee. Naked, poor, despised, forsaken thou from hence my all shall be. Perish every fond ambition. All I've sought and hoped and known. Yet how rich is my condition? God and Heaven are still my own. Go then earthly fame and treasure. Come disaster, scorn, and pain. In our service, pain is pleasure. With thy favor, loss is gain. I have called the Abba father. I have stayed my heart on thee. Storms may hell and clouds may gather, all must work for good to me."

With that scriptural underpinning, you can cope with whatever life throws at you, even when God makes absolutely no sense to our human understanding. It will hold you when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, because you need fear no evil. Life can never take you by surprise again. Everything is committed to him. Whether you understand the circumstances or not, He becomes your possessor and your disposessor. With this biblical understanding and a tough well-fortified faith, the awesome why loses its scary significance. A better question becomes, why does it matter? It is not your responsibility to explain what God is doing in your life. He has not provided enough information for you to figure it out.

Instead, you are asked to turn loose and let God be God. And therein lies the secret to the peace that transcends understanding. Philippians 4:7. This theological interpretation may be difficult for the beleaguered believer who has grieved until there are no more tears to shed. If you are that person, I hope you'll understand that I have not intended to trivialize your loss. My heart is tender toward those who have undergone severe suffering. Life can be incredibly cruel to those who have loved and lost. Such a person needs the loving friendship and prayers of a brother and sister in Christ who will simply be

there and say, I care. More importantly, he or she needs to know that God cares. I'm convinced that the heart of the Lord is drawn to those who hold fast to their faith in such time of hardship. How tenderly He must look upon those who have lost a beloved son or daughter, what compassion He feels for those with lifelong physical deformities and diseases.

This identification with the woes of mankind is a major theme of Scripture. Nevertheless, as Paul wrote, we're asked to adopt the mind of Christ with regard to suffering. But why? Is there a logical reason why the Lord asked us to strengthen our resolve and meet our difficulties head on?

I believe it is because of the relationship between mind, body, spirit, and the human experience. We cannot be spiritually stable and emotionally unstable at the same time. We're in a spiritual war with a deadly foe tracking us every hour of the day. We need to be in the best shape possible to cope with the darts and arrows that he hurls our way. Flabby, overindulged, pampered Christians just don't have the stamina to fight the battle. Thus, the Lord puts us on a spiritual treadmill every now and then to keep us in good fighting condition.

Just how tough is your faith? How secure is mine? Will we permit the Lord to use our weakness, our disability, our disappointments, our inadequacy, to accomplish His purposes? Will you and I worship and serve the master even in suffering? Does our expectation as followers of Jesus leave room for frustration and imperfection? Does the Word have anything to say to us about how we live our lives and what causes us to complain?

It certainly does. One of my favorite Scriptures specifically addresses this issue of toughness. And we will conclude with its powerful insight. The Apostle Paul wrote in the Book of Philippians while he was under house arrest in Rome, we believe he was later executed there for sharing his faith in Jesus Christ. He had, in earlier days, been through every conceivable hardship and inconvenience. We can only imagine what kind of suffering took place in the damp miserable dungeons of that day.

Who knows what scraps of wormy food and filthy bathroom facilities were available to him? Or whether rats and spiders shared his bed. We are told that he was chained around the clock and surrounded by murderers, thieves and social outcasts. Paul had every right to be distraught at that stage of his life. What had happened to him was not fair. There had been times recently when he had been publicly whipped, he had gone without adequate food and clothing. He was once stoned and left for dead. He could have complained bitterly that the Lord had called him to a difficult task and then virtually abandoned him. The awesome why could certainly have been on his lips. But that's not what Paul was thinking. Instead, Paul picked up his pen and wrote to the believers of Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again. Rejoice, let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious for anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present

your request to God and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:4-7.

Isn't that a beautiful verse? Then Paul addressed the matter of expectations directly. "I know what it's like to be in need. I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want, I can do everything through Him who gives me the strength." Philippians 4:12-13.

Paul's secret of contentment emerges from a universal principle of human nature. It is to trust God, regardless of the circumstances and not to expect too much perfection in this life. A better day is coming for those whose source of contentment is in the personhood of Jesus Christ.

I hope this discourse on the mind of Christ has been helpful to someone out there who's going through terribly difficult and stressful times today. There's great comfort in trusting the Lord with our very lives. Every description given to us in Scripture, depicts Him as infinitely loving and kind, tenderly watching over his earthly children and guiding the steps of the faithful. He speaks of us as the people of His pasture, the flock of His care. Psalm 95:7. This compassion led Him to send His only begotten son as a sacrifice for our sin that we might escape the punished we deserve. He did this because He so loved the world. John 3:16. Clearly what we have in Scripture is a paradox. On the one hand, we are told to expect suffering and hardship that could even cost us our lives. On the other hand, we are encouraged to be joyful, thankful of good cheer. Acts 23:11.

How do these contrary ideas link together? How can we be triumphant and under intense pressure at the same time? How can we be secure when surrounded by insecurity? That's a mystery, which according to Paul, transcends all understanding. Well, let me end with this word of encouragement. You'll remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego reported in the third chapter of the book of Daniel. They incurred the wrath of King Nebuchadnezzar by refusing to fall down and worship the idol he had set up. He made it clear that if they again refused to his command, they would be thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Their response to that murderous threat is one of the most inspiring passages in Scripture.

Let me quote. "The God we serve is able to save us from it. And He will rescue us from your hand, oh king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, oh king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." Daniel 3:17-18. I want to say directly to those of you who are listening, and especially to those who have been diagnosed with terminal illness, or a parent whose child is in rebellion, or a recently widowed or divorced woman who faces life alone. Let me offer a final word of encouragement. Remember when Nebuchadnezzar looked into the blazing furnace and saw four men instead of three, and he said the fourth looked like the son of God. It's comforting to note, I hope you will take this to heart, that only Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of that fire. The other man, who we believe to have been the Christ,

remained there to comfort and protect you and me when we go through our own fiery trials. He's promised to do that, and that we would not be alone in that difficult hour.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. That's the glorious event that we celebrate on Easter Sunday morning with believers around the world. And someday we will receive the crown of righteousness prepared for those who have fought a good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith.

Roger Marsh:

Well, what a powerful message directly from Dr. Dobson's heart on this very holy and somber day. It's ultimately, though, a day of hope and a clear path for each of us for salvation thanks to the love of God.

Now, if you'd like to download a beautiful commemorative copy of Dr. Dobson's powerful essay that he just read, but in written form, go to drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. His presentation is right there as a downloadable PDF file. And it's yours as a free Easter weekend gift from us to you. So simply click the hyperlink and it's yours to keep or to share, to spread the good news.

You know, the one thing it's so important to remember at Easter time is the fact that we needed salvation as much as God wanted to give it to us. He sent His son to pay the penalty for our sin, knowing that there's no way we can be reconciled to Him unless He actually offers the first act of love and kindness. It's in God's mercy that we are redeemed back into a full relationship with Him. His kindness leads us to repentance of sin. And may we be ever mindful of that, not just on Easter Sunday, but all throughout the year.

Well, that's all the time we have for today here at Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. And may we remember God's love and Jesus sacrifice today, this weekend, and all year round. 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.