



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Messy Mourning – Part 1

Guest(s): Jackie M. Baker

Air Date: October 26, 2026

Dr. James Dobson: Welcome, everyone, to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute, supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, and today we have an important topic to discuss on the program. This is one that if you have young children who are listening along with or watching along with on our YouTube channel, I encourage you to pause for just a moment and use it from parental discretion because this is a topic that is sensitive, but it's one that is becoming more of a concern even in the church. And the topic is of parents grieving the loss of a child to suicide. It's a very, very sensitive matter, of course. And please know that if this is something that has impacted your family here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, our thoughts and prayers are with you. And perhaps if you know someone who has gone through this situation, we encourage you to listen to what you're about to hear on today's program because we have someone who has become sort of an unwilling expert in this whole area. Jackie M. Baker is my guest. Nobody wants to be knowledgeable in this area. Let's just face it. There are so many ministries that start. And Jackie, welcome to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. It's good to have you on the program today.

Jackie M. Baker: Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Roger Marsh: And I know that you don't want to be talking about this. I mean, quite frankly, no parent brings a child into the world and then says, boy, what am I going to do with? It's the same way with marriages that end in divorce or whatever. I mean, that's not God's plan A. But Jackie has written a book called *Messy Mourning*, and that's M-O-U-R-N-I-N-G. *Hope for Mothers Grieving the Loss of a Child by Suicide*. It's a faith-forward companion that offers hope and practical support to mothers. And this is something that, like I said, Jackie wishes she didn't have to write. But Jackie, let's talk about your family before we get into the reason for the book. First and foremost, I mean, you basically had the typical all-American family, mom, dad, son, daughter. I mean, faith in Christ. I mean, things were going very, very well for you. Talk about how you and your husband met and how that family came together.

Jackie M. Baker: Oh, yeah. So we met, actually, we met through friends from our church. I was a Navy nurse. My husband was a Navy physician. And people thought the Navy

nurse should meet the Navy doctor. And I didn't want to meet him because as a Navy nurse, I worked with a lot of doctors. And so I avoided him for about three months. And then we met. And I was like, oh, he's not bad. And so we corresponded. He was going out to sea. He was doing his, they're called Westpacks. We met in Long Beach, California at our church there.

Roger Marsh: Okay.

Jackie M. Baker: And so he was going Westpacks for six months. So he was the junior medical officer on the ship. And he asked if he could write me. And I always love to tell people it was these thin pieces of paper. They cut from a tree, use a pen, and have an envelope because kids don't know what that is. And so we started like we were like pen pals. So we wrote for six months and he told people he had asked for my picture and he told people we were going to get married. And even though we hadn't been dating at the time, but he was telling everybody he was going to marry me. And then he came home after six months. It was March of 1990 and then the Persian Gulf War broke out.

And so by this time, I had made a decision to already leave the military because I didn't want to be a mom in the military. I wanted to be able to stay home with my kids. And at that time, the Navy was not very supportive of that. And so I had gotten out before we had made a decision to get married. And then two weeks after we were married, he shipped off to the Persian Gulf War. And so we spent the first six months writing letters again and wondering. We didn't know how long it was going to be. Fortunately, he was only gone five and a half months at that time. And then he came back. So we always said we had to learn how to date.

Roger Marsh: Yeah.

Jackie M. Baker: By, you know, we did premarital counseling by mail, you know. And so, yeah, so that's how we met. And so that's, we're coming on 36 years of marriage.

Roger Marsh: That's fantastic. Good for you.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah. And so the Lord brought us to the Pacific Northwest where he did his residency. And then that's when we had our first son, Sebastian. He was born in 1994 in April. And then our daughter, Isabel, joined him like two years later in August of 96. Yeah, so two kids.

Roger Marsh: That's wonderful.

Jackie M. Baker: And I was a nurse, but I stayed home with my kids until about they were in eighth grade. And then I was able to be the school nurse at their school. So that was a lot of fun.

Roger Marsh: Wonderful. Yeah.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah.

Roger Marsh: And because you're a glutton for punishment, you went back and finished a doctorate in nurse practitioner.

Jackie M. Baker: I did. After my youngest graduated from high school, I was like, okay, Lord. Actually, I remember I asked the lawyer, I'm like, well, should I do something else or whatever? And I literally heard nurse practitioner, and I was looking around like, you're kidding, right? I'm in my 50s. And so I went to UW. That's another story about how God got me into the University of Washington. So I got into UW, did my doctorate there, as a pediatric nurse. Yeah, so 10 years now for doing that, yeah.

Roger Marsh: So everything, what I'm hearing, Jackie, is that everything in your world, you could expect it to just be going so swimmingly. I mean, you and your husband meet, you have this wonderful courtship, you get married. You have a son in '94, you have another daughter who comes along a couple of years later, you're listening to James Dobson on the radio and reading his books and everything is going just perfectly. And I don't mean to make light of that, but what were the first signs that there was a situation with Sebastian where you're thinking, okay, no parent wakes up in the morning and says, you know, I wonder if this is the day.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah.

Roger Marsh: And yet, even in the best homes, I think of Rick and Kay Warren. I mean, there are so many prominent people that we all could mention who have wrestled with this. What were some of the early signs that Sebastian might be leaning in this direction?

Jackie M. Baker: Well, you know, it was interesting because he, he was always a very precocious child and we just, you know, he was smarter beyond his own, you know, life. I was just amazed at the things that he would come up with when he was a young child and he was a national chess champion. He had like the golden glove, you know, anything he touched, he did well at it. It came easy to him, always did well in school, I mean, I always had to tell them. They go, well, I don't have to tell them the why. This is the answer. But they want to know how to do it. Like, I don't need to tell. I just know. So we always argue about that. But yeah, he was a national chess champion when he was nine and then in eighth grade again. So just this little brain that I was always trying to keep him busy. I thought if I didn't keep him busy, he was going to keep me busy. So that was one of my mantras I tell patients. You got to keep your boys busy. Because they are boys, right.

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Jackie M. Baker: And so boys are active and they climb things and they, and so I allowed him to be, you know, let them do all these fun things, but it was about middle school. You know, very typical. You know, chess wasn't cool anymore, so he stopped.

Roger Marsh: Right.

Jackie M. Baker: I'm like, that's fine. I was like, darn, there goes those scholarships I thought about, you know.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, yeah.

Jackie M. Baker: It's not about me.

Roger Marsh: Good at something.

Jackie M. Baker: Right, yeah. But it wasn't cool anymore. And he was a soccer player and was a keeper, played club ball, got accepted to a D2 school in Idaho to play Division II soccer. And so he was struggling. We always said our kids, if they wanted to see a counselor, to talk about normal things because I'm like, it's hard being in middle school. It's hard being in high school. And so we tried to encourage all that. But then when he left for college, he came back and he just said, I'm not going back anymore. And he wouldn't tell us why. At this time he was 18 and we're trying to treat him as an adult. So what I found out is that he just got involved with not the right people. And it was a Christian school, but that doesn't guarantee a lot of, you know, who you hang out with.

Roger Marsh: Right.

Jackie M. Baker: And the soccer team at that time wasn't, you know, I just don't think they were cared for. It changed afterwards. I had other friends whose sons went and they had a great spiritual emphasis and everything. But I don't know if he just got lost in the shuffle or whatever. And he pretty much kept to himself a lot of times too.

So when he came home, well, we told him you got to get a job, got to work, you know, um, while you figure out what's going on. And it was that time we noticed more, uh, manicky phases, depression. He had gotten himself, I think he got himself diagnosed with ADHD so he could get medication and he was using overusing stimulants. And then marijuana became legal in Washington state, which I think contributed greatly to, you know, just changing the mechanisms in his brain because they can find that the research shows that early use of marijuana, especially in young boys, can change the wiring in the brain and especially excessive use. And he was using all the time.

And by this time, then he was stealing from us and just making really, you know, making really poor choices. And so, you know, we sought help in all the places. We tried to do all the things. And then we had friends that were going to take him, family members. And even there, he was stealing from them and just making poor choices and it got to the point where they said, well, I think we're going to have to arrest him. And I'm like, well, you have to do what you need to do. At this time, he was like 20.

And so they arrested him. He got arrested. And he was in New Mexico at the time. And then he was facing jail time or rehab. And so we encouraged rehab. And so he went with Teen Challenge, which was a great place for him.

Roger Marsh: Excellent program.

Jackie M. Baker: I really loved what they did for him. And it was there that he had his first suicide attempt. He just walked off the campus and he was missing for 24 hours. And I just remember that was one of the longest 24 hours of my life, not knowing where he was.

Roger Marsh: I'll bet.

Jackie M. Baker: And, you know, just, just praying to the Lord, you know, that, you know, all you can do is pray because you can't do anything and just waiting. Cause I'm like, do we fly out? Do we not? And then they found him and he was taken to a hospital, where he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital and then diagnosed with bipolar and, you know, of course, suicidal ideation. And so we started him on medications, but the, in New Mexico where, or he was in Arizona at that time, excuse me, and he went to Arizona. They couldn't do medication at the Teen Challenge, but there was a place in Bend, Oregon that, their Teen Challenge also did medication and he could follow up with a psychiatrist. And it was five months later then he had a successful...then he died by suicide in South Bend, when he was... at 23. And it was two weeks ago was the nine year anniversary.

Roger Marsh: Oh, Jackie, I'm so sorry. You know, it's interesting today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, talking with Jackie M. Baker. She's the author of a book called *Messy Mourning*, and it's a hope for moms who are grieving the self-inflicted ending of a life for one of their children. And in this case, it was her son, Sebastian.

As you were describing this account, I was thinking about another story I've read from a couple who were involved in a similar situation almost to the letter in terms of the ages. But the way it started, it started with an ADHD diagnosis and there were some meds that were prescribed. And this young man, he was probably 13 or so going to a Christian school in Colorado. He didn't like being on the meds. And so when friends introduced him to marijuana, he preferred that to the ADHD meds because as they put it later in a book that they wrote about his story, they said he felt like he had a certain measure of control. Like, okay, well, I'm doing this and I'm controlling what I'm doing to kind of help regulate myself. And it spiraled out of control, all the things about the arrests, the changing of the locks, the calling the police on your own kid.

I mean, as you were describing this whole thing with Sebastian and everything you went through, what was it like for you and your husband as you're watching this escalate from, gosh, he was kind of a moody kid to because you don't want

to jump to conclusions, obviously. You don't want to sit there and say, oh my gosh, there's all these, we have to really put the hammer.

Jackie M. Baker: We should know this.

Roger Marsh: We're medical professionals for crying out loud.

Jackie M. Baker: Right.

Roger Marsh: We should know this. Exactly!

Jackie M. Baker: Right.

Roger Marsh: And we're Christians. You have a degree in theology too. So I mean, it's not like you've got the perfect home and you've got James Dobson tapes, you've got books, I mean, all of that.

Jackie M. Baker: Right.

Roger Marsh: And it's not working. But was there a point where you kind of looked at each other and said, hey, this is a lot bigger than maybe we thought it was?

Jackie M. Baker: Oh yeah. And it was interesting because of course, like, said we knew all those things and we decided we needed to get counseling to help with this because as with any type of when you have children and you know there's triangulation and there's always I always call it the weak link and I was the weak link. Not the weak link, but, you know, Sebastian knew if I couldn't get it from dad, I could get it from mom. Because I'm always, I think the moms are, we're going to hold out because, you know, we love our sons. We love our children so much. And as my husband said, you know, it's bad when mom says enough is enough, you know? And I'm like, yeah. And it came to the point where I had to ask Sebastian to leave home. Broke my heart.

Roger Marsh: I'll bet.

Jackie M. Baker: Because he had, I noticed my credit cards were, I was overdrawn. And I confronted him. And, you know, I was like, Sebastian, did you do that? And he goes, maybe you should just change your PIN number. And I'm like, oh, I don't know this boy anymore. Who is this young man? It just broke my heart. And then I said, all right, I'm done. I'm done.

But even though we had to evict him from our home and then all the things, he always knew we loved him. And even the night he died, the last words were, he asked to come home because at that time, he had gotten kicked out of Teen Challenge. He wasn't following the rules and so they were going to put him in a, he was going to go to a homeless shelter. And the idea was 30 days, tough love. And some people might object to the choice. I mean, he was an adult, young man. And he's like, can I come home? And I'm like, you can't come home. And

he goes, I know. And he understood. And I said, but you know I love you. And he goes, I love you too, Mom. And those were our last words before he died.

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Jackie M. Baker: But at least I know, you know, he knew I loved him and I wanted the best for him. And I just kept saying, just got to get through this program and then we can, you know, and then because he was worrying about jail time at that time if he didn't finish. And so he had some real concerns and anxiety. And I think in the end he just... My husband, Steve, would say that Sebastian just had these voices in his head telling him to kill himself all the time. And he said they just couldn't stop. So how do you compete with that? And then he was on lithium at the very end. So just really, really, really strong antipsychotics and nothing was working for him at this time.

Roger Marsh: Very, very interesting as you talk about this, Jackie, because I know there are some parents who are listening to us right now, maybe who've experienced this, and they're saying, oh my gosh, you were living in our house for a while because we know exactly what that's like. And for others, they're probably saying, well, now what about the faith component? What about God? I mean, God is all-knowing. God is all-powerful. And wasn't there something, I mean, and again, I don't mean to sound rude by saying this or by any suggestion of that. But the implication I'm sure from some people is, well, where were you guys in your faith journey? I mean, honestly, what was it like for you, Jackie, when you're on your face before God and just saying, look, Sebastian is throwing his life away and we don't feel like we have any answers.

Jackie M. Baker: Oh yeah.

Roger Marsh: God, either why don't You do something or what can we do? Why are You not showing us that? How did you, I know you have a chapter in your book called "The Lament If Only."

Jackie M. Baker: Right.

Roger Marsh: Talk about that because I mean, I'm sure there are a lot of people who can relate to that and say, man, I wish I could help my grown child from making these stupid mistakes, but they keep making them.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah. I know. I always said, I wish my kids, my thing was like, I wanted them not to have free will till they were 35 and married and had their own kids. We always were very intentional about raising our children. You know, the Deuteronomy passage about when you walk along the path. So we were always like, everything was bringing in Jesus. Everything was, you know, we're going to live our lives intentionally. And we knew that before our kids were born, that was our prayer, that this is going to be, you know, how we're going to raise our kids, knowing Jesus. And everything was about Jesus. You know, it was more

than just the, we pray before meals, but like when we watch television shows, like, okay, what's the good? Where's the biblical worldview?

So we were really intentional about, you know, engaging the world. Not isolating them from the world but you know but keeping but walking alongside them in the world, because the world is not an easy place to live it is without. I mean it's hard enough with Jesus I can't imagine without Jesus. But during those times that's when I um you know just clung to the Scriptures of course in the Psalms. The Psalms were just so filled with laments and start we forget about those you know because there's anger and weeping and you know and madness and you know and why are you doing this God. But it was always to God and so I realized you know it's okay for us to lament and people think they have to look pretty before they come before the Lord. And it's like, no.

Roger Marsh: Right.

Jackie M. Baker: We are all messes and He accepts us right where we're at. And so I clung to that. And I just remember one of my favorite books is by Tim Keller is *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*. And I started reading that during this time with Sebastian. And one of the key things I remember Tim Keller was saying was, why are we surprised when we have suffering? We should be surprised when things are good. Because, you know, I'm like, wow, I never thought about it that way, you know, because we're either going to be in suffering or post-suffering or in suffering is about to come, you know, because we live in this broken world. And so I just knew, you know, I, you know, grew up in a very broken home as well so I wasn't surprised that things were going to happen. Yeah, you always hope it never does, but eventually things are going to happen to you.

Roger Marsh: Yes.

Jackie M. Baker: And so just had to cling to the Lord. And my husband would say, you know, the Scripture we were quoting, Peter's like where else Lord are we gonna go? You know we can only you know and so we that was one of our key verses like we just can't go anywhere else but you. People used to ask me if I was mad at God, I said no. I was never mad at God. You know, I never was. I was mad at my son for what he did to me. I was so mad at him, and for a couple years. And I remember people were like; you can't be mad at your boy. And I remember, because I would tell people, when I get to Heaven, I'm going to push Jesus aside, and I'm going to slug my son for what he did to me. And they're like, you can't do that. I'm like, oh, yes, I said, Jesus will understand. No.

Roger Marsh: What parent has not felt that about their child? I mean, regardless of what they've done. And of course, obviously, we're not talking about finding him and tackling him. By then, we're over it. But Jackie, I really appreciate the candor with which you have been able to articulate this up to this point with the fact that your son took his life, that you had not a contentious conversation the night before he did. I mean, literally, it sounds like it was a, hey, could you do this? No, I can't do that. Okay, I love you, mom, whatever. And it wasn't like a

big old, I hate you, slam the phone, slam the door, we're never gonna talk again. It seemed like it was just part of where that rhythm where you were in that moment. And so, Jackie, I wanted to ask you what, and don't put anybody on the spot here, or at least of all you, what was the best piece of advice, comfort that you got from someone during this season? And what was the absolute worst thing? Was the, if you prayed more kind of on the bottom of the barrel there, you know, in terms of dealing with that?

Jackie M. Baker: Well, I think the best advice, the best thing I got was actually just from, I'm going to say Tim Keller. It was funny. It was from the books I read, you know, the idea of just people sitting beside me and just being present. That was the best thing people could do. The best advice is from my husband, you know, and he's in the middle of this and I'm a very self, I do everything. I'm self-sufficient. And he's like, if someone asks you to do something, you're going to say yes. And I realized... so I learned to use my yes muscle. When someone said, can I bring you groceries? I'm going to say yes. That's not the time to worry about what you're eating, right? And they're going to say, can I mow your lawn? They're not going to do it perfect, but you're going to say yes. So I learned to say yes about a lot of things. And that was so helpful because otherwise I would have just been in a tailspin.

Roger Marsh: I was going to say, and you write about in your book, *Messy Morning*, you also write about the fact that there were some things like with the church and stuff like that, that you had been involved in. And your pastor kind of challenged you a little bit and said, no, you're going to keep doing this. Talk about why isolation is not the solution. When you want to just say, make the world go away, I'm just going to put a big blanket on and watch sad movies all day long because I'm missing them. And yet your pastor said, no, you're called to some things. Keep doing those things.

Jackie M. Baker: You know, that was a shocker for me. Yeah, because it was easy. I didn't want to go to church. You know, again, shame, the guilt. You don't want the pity from people because they're all looking at you or you think they're all looking at you. Maybe they are too.

Roger Marsh: Sure, that's what it feels like.

Jackie M. Baker: That's what it feels like. And if it's irrational or not, but it's your feelings. But I remember I was... a girls' group. I was mentoring some high school girls. And the idea was I was going to go with them for four years and they were sophomores. And so we met every week at my house, pizza, Bible study, just chatting. And I loved them. But after my son died, I couldn't do it, of course. And so it was like three months. And I was feeling guilty because I wasn't meeting with my girls. And I went to the youth pastor, Scotty, and I'm like, Scotty, I can't do this. And I just assumed he would say, oh, totally understand. And he challenged me and he just said, I said, I haven't even done a Bible study. I can't do this. He goes, that's okay. He goes, you need to let them see you grieve. And he said, just so he challenged me just to let them see my life and not avoid my life. And so I did

that. And so we did not do Bible study for two years. We didn't. I mean, we talk about Sunday and stuff, but they just came and hung out with me. We ate pizza. We cried because they knew I was hurting. And they were 15 and 16 going through their own stuff. But I think it gave them permission to grieve and talk. And I still meet with those girls.

Roger Marsh: That's wonderful. Yeah. Well, I love the fact too that you became a Bible that they could read. We've run out of time for this first segment. So I have to ask you if you can come back again next time and continue the story because you're leaving us on a bit of a cliffhanger, Jackie M. Baker. But would you be able to join us again for the next edition of Family Talk so we can conclude the story?

Jackie M. Baker: I sure will. Thank you.

Roger Marsh: Jackie Baker is the author of the book, *Messy Morning, Hope for Mothers Grieving the Loss of a Child by Suicide*. We have that link up at drjamesdobson.org. And Jackie, we look forward to continuing the conversation next time.

Well, you've been listening to my conversation with Jackie M. Baker here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. Jackie is the author of the book called *Messy Mourning: Hope for Mothers Grieving the Loss of a Child by Suicide*. You'll find today's program along with a link for the book up at drjamesdobson.org. And if today's conversation struck a chord with you. Maybe because you're walking through a hardship of your own right now, something so painful that it's difficult to understand how a loving God could allow it. Well, if that's where you find yourself, I want to share with you about a free resource from the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. It's our 10-day email series based on Dr. Dobson's book, *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. Over those 10 days, these honest and encouraging messages walk straight into life's most difficult questions, and they show how even our deepest valleys can become the place where we meet God most closely. To sign up for the free 10-day email series, go to drjamesdobson.org and search for that title, *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. Again, you'll find that at drjamesdobson.org or jdfi.org. They are one and the same website.

Conversations like the one you heard on today's Family Talk broadcast reach families all across the country because friends like you keep them on the air. The Dr. James Dobson Family Institute is here to strengthen marriages, to equip parents, defend the sanctity of human life, and to introduce as many people as possible to the gospel of Jesus Christ. When you partner with us, you join a mission that reaches millions, bringing biblical hope and encouragement to families who need a voice they can trust. Your donation of any amount helps us carry that message to listeners all across America. And you can donate today through our secure website at drjamesdobson.org. Or if it's easier, just type in those initials jdfi.org. That'll take you right to our homepage. You can also speak with a member of our constituent care team. That number is 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thank you so much for joining us today. Be sure to tune in again next time when Jackie M. Baker continues her story, sharing of how God carried her family through the long years of grief that followed, a story that she chronicles in her new book called *Messy Mourning: Hope for Mothers Grieving the Loss of a Child by Suicide*. That's coming up right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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