



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: When the Light Finds Us, Part 2

Guest(s): Judy Henderson and Angel McDonald

Air Date: October 30, 2026

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: Well, welcome to another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. Roger Marsh here, once again and our program today features a continuing conversation with Judy Henderson and her daughter, Angel McDonald. Judy, in 1982, she was sentenced to prison for a crime she did not commit. She spent 36 years of unwavering faith and persistence while she was locked up, eventually granted clemency in 2017, and was pardoned in 2018. And this really was more of a matter of vindication than just giving her freedom. Judy was running a successful business at the time when she was wrongfully convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. But while she was behind bars, she earned her GED. She earned a paralegal certification. She pioneered programs connecting incarcerated mothers with their children, and also has become a powerful voice for women's rights and prison reform, including some landmark legislation recognizing battered women's syndrome as a legal defense in the state of Missouri. She has written a book about her experience, which we've been discussing for the past couple of programs here on Family Talk. The book is called *When the Light Finds Us, From a Sentenced Life to a Transformed One*. Judy Henderson and her daughter, Angel McDonald, welcome back to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk for part two of our conversation.

Judy Henderson: Thank you. Thank you so much, Roger. It's good to be back with you.

Angel McDonald: Yes, thank you.

Roger Marsh: Well, it's definitely good to be back, especially because now we're picking up the story where you found faith in Christ. How long had you been in prison, Judy, before you went to that three-day retreat where all of a sudden God just really turned things around for you?

Judy Henderson: It was probably within two to three years of me being incarcerated. And that's whenever I realized in order to endure the situation they have a saying in prison either you do the time or the time does you and I saw so much anger and so much pain and it was it was just heart-wrenching seeing mothers that didn't

know how to mother behind bars and um seeing that generational curse that the enemy had over these families that made them all career criminals and just passing it down generation after generation. And so that's whenever I started my work into helping others, which is, I think that's why God created us is I was able to find my purpose in this whole situation. And I started while I was incarcerated.

Roger Marsh: That's so interesting to hear when you mentioned in our last conversation that your co-defendant, who was still awaiting trial when you had been sentenced, had actually ordered a hit on you, which is, and I'm using that terminology, I don't know if that's even accurate, but I mean, and that forced you to go from smiling, happy, just get along to go along, go along to get along, Judy to becoming someone who realized someone was trying to take your life behind bars. What was it like for you? I mean, eventually people referred to you in prison, according to your book, as you were Miss Judy, you were the governor, you were a mentor. You had a prominent place in that system, but starting out, it wasn't always that way. What did you do to kind of fight that off as you were kind of stealing yourself to be a prisoner who was potentially gonna be spending the rest of her life in jail?

Judy Henderson: Well, like I said, I became a certified paralegal, like you said in the introduction. And I used that knowledge in order to help other lifers also for those that were wrongly convicted. Or maybe they're too long. The sentence didn't fit the crime. And so I was able to help them put their clemencies together. And a lot of them made parol long before I did.

Roger Marsh: Interesting.

Judy Henderson: Yes. But you know what God did? He saved the best for last because every one of them, of course, always wanted their sentence commuted to lifetime served and a pardon. They were released on parole and they had to go before the parole board. Then they were on parole. However, God, he just really gave me double for my trouble. And he gave me, that day, time served, the Governor said, I'm commuting your sentence to time served, immediate release. And then he gave me a pardon.

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Judy Henderson: So I got the whole gift.

Roger Marsh: Yes, you got the whole package. I mean, people don't realize when you hear someone being quote unquote out on parole, that's supervised. Basically, it's supervised release, but you're still part of the system. I mean, you're not behind bars, but you're still basically having to deal with that. So for you to get a full pardon was remarkable.

Now, Angel, when did you first get a chance to, when did you want to see your mom? What was that like for you? I mean, you're a teenager when she got

arrested, convicted, and then sentenced. And you're thinking, gosh, I may never see her outside of prison again. What was it like the first couple of times you visited her?

Angel McDonald: It was really different. I went with my grandma. My dad actually took me a couple times, too. But it was hard to go in. It was scary, you know, first of all, very scary. And then there were so many rules, and now they have a lot more rules than they did even back then, that many years ago. We could, you know, do a lot more. And then it was just hard to leave her. I think that was probably, it was scary to go in and it was hard to leave knowing that I got to leave and go home, but she wasn't going to. And then it's crazy because then it becomes a part of your life. You know, it becomes the new normal.

Roger Marsh: Yeah.

Angel McDonald: And then I went to visit prisons for 36 years. And, you know, it didn't ever get easy, though. I can honestly say, like... I mean, it became normal, but not easy, if that makes sense.

Roger Marsh: Oh, yeah. It makes perfect sense because sometimes the simple is not easy. There's only two steps to it, but it's not easy to actually do. And the fact that we read about, Judy, in your book, *When the Light Finds Us*, that that whole process that you just mentioned, you were trying to get parole, and they kept shooting it down, but eventually the pardon kept through. What's interesting about this is you write about in your book that there was an inmate, a fellow inmate that was helpful. There was a woman named Shannon, and you developed a friendship with her, and then Angel even. How did you stay strong and focused and keep that going so that you finally did get the traction for your case to be reviewed after it had been turned down time and time and time again?

Judy Henderson: You know, I believe that God just kept bringing people into my life. One door would close and another one would open and somebody new would come in until I started putting together a big team. I had to understand not only the law, but how politics worked.

Roger Marsh: Please say that again louder for the people in the back. There are so many people who look at the criminal justice system and they say, well, it's very fair and it's tit for tat and you do this, then you get this. And they don't realize how highly politicized it's become, especially in cases where they might look at you and say, hey, we have this woman here and she was part of this crime and this, that, and the other thing. So we're going to keep her in longer because quite frankly, we're not interested in letting her go. I mean, I don't mean to sound crass, but I mean, just my experience in working with families that have had this happen that is the norm.

Judy Henderson: That is the norm. He was running for chief prosecutor so uh politics played a big part in my sentence and my conviction and he used my case as tough on crime

and it made him look bad but I do want to say that after 20 years he became one of my biggest advocates.

Roger Marsh: Really?

Judy Henderson: Because he said it was no other cases ever giving him nightmares like mine did. And he let the governor know that he wanted me to come home. He wanted this to end. So, yeah. So, it ended up, he even turned himself around.

Angel McDonald: Or God did.

Judy Henderson: Yeah. Yeah, God did. Yes, you're right.

Roger Marsh: Through your case, yes. You're right.

Judy Henderson: Yeah. Yeah. And so he did become one of my advocates, and we met afterwards. And he apologized, of course, but I wrote him every year. After about 20 years, I wrote him to let him know that I had forgiven him. I felt like he was doing a job that he was elected to do, and he did it very well. And regardless of what his motive was, he got his conviction. But I said, I want to let you know what I've been doing all these years and what my family has been doing. And every year I would send a new update on what I was doing.

Roger Marsh: I love the fact that you stayed present with him and just kept checking in with him, saying just as a reminder, because I think of the, in scripture, the prayer of the persistent widow, you know, and thinking, okay, we keep coming and we keep coming. And sometimes it's not so much a question of, did I pray the perfect prayer? Sometimes it literally is just that that's the straw that broke the camel's proverbial back.

Judy Henderson: And I'm tired of her.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, exactly, exactly. And that's scriptural. So I think that's wonderful. Judy Henderson's book, *When the Light Finds Us, From a Sentenced Life to a Transformed One*, is up at drjamesdobson.org. And as we're talking about the moment of her release, take us back, Judy, if you would, to December 20th, 2017. What was that? The visit like? What was that document like? I mean, that literally was a game changer for you. Take us through that day.

Judy Henderson: Yes. Well, Roger, one thing I do want to point out to the audience is, you know, God works in numbers also. So I went through six governors and it was finally the seventh governor, God's number of completion that I was released.

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Judy Henderson: And even though three pro boards had made their recommendation to other governors to release me, and they did not do so. So for the seventh governor to

come in, not even at the end of his term, which is normal politically, because they do not want anything to jeopardize their political career.

Roger Marsh: Oh, sure. They do it on the way out the door, by all means.

Judy Henderson: Yes. He did it his first year.

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Judy Henderson: Of his first term. So for him to do that that was a miracle in itself and for a governor to even come to a prison to release a lifer is a miracle. I mean my case is just full of miracles yes full of God saving my life hit after hit or you know so many different things that transpired in my case and a hit put on us before I ever came to prison. And my mom had something to do with that miracle years prior. And there's just so many ways that you can see how God worked in my life. And I always tell people I'm the cat of nine lives. Because God was not done with me yet. He had a purpose in all of this.

Roger Marsh: Amen.

Judy Henderson: And so the day that they told me to go to the visiting room, I actually refused to go because I said, no, my attorney, it wasn't even a visiting day. And I said, my attorney is not going to come and see me without letting me know first. And they said, if you don't go, you're going to the hole. And I said, okay, I think I'm going. I am going.

Roger Marsh: That's a very persuasive argument right there.

Judy Henderson: Yeah. Yeah. Am I there yet? Yeah. So then whenever I got there, I still waited an hour and a half, and I thought, this is really strange. This is really bad news, evidently, for my attorney to just show up out of the blue. And so finally, after an hour and a half, they said, okay, you can go in now, Judy. So I went in, and the governor's attorney had been there to see me like three weeks prior. But he said, I just have a couple of questions to ask you while I'm here that the governor wants me to get an answer for him on. But he said, this doesn't mean anything's going to happen. We just are looking at your case and that's all we can tell you. So whenever I saw him in the visiting room. I saw it was him, not my attorney, but my attorney was there. I just didn't know she was there. She was in hiding with my family. And he said, well, actually, Judy, he said, there's somebody that has been waiting to see you and wanting to meet you. And I said, well, who would want to meet me, an inmate? And because they always make you feel like that you're worthless whenever you're in that setting. So I thought, you know, who would want to see me anyways? So he said, turn around. And so I turned around, and there was a governor standing right there.

Roger Marsh: Wow. Yeah, right behind me. And how he got through those metal doors that are so heavy without me hearing him, that was a miracle in itself.

Roger Marsh: Yeah. Yeah. Oh, my goodness. I mean, that moment, I'm sure the reunion was just incredible. And Angel, why don't you pick up some of the gap here in terms of you and your mom and your brother Chip and everyone getting together. What was it like for you guys realizing after 36 years, hey, this is happening. It was really happening.

Angel McDonald: It was so amazing. I mean, when I got the call the night before to ask me or two days before to ask if I could meet them at the prison and keep a secret I said absolutely and they didn't they still didn't tell me she was coming home but we knew you know and um and my aunt flew in from Arizona and rented a limo to go pick her up in. And so we had everybody and we couldn't tell anybody outside, you know, because they didn't want it to be released before they told her. And just getting there and the governor coming and meeting us and he went to each and every one of us and apologized for what we had gone through for 36 years.

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Angel McDonald: Yeah. And I mean, we were so over the moon. that we were going to get to bring her home that, you know, it was like all that time had just erased and God had restored 36 years in one moment, you know.

Roger Marsh: Incredible.

Angel McDonald: And then just walking through those doors and hugging her and being able to walk out with her was, I mean, it was a dream come true. I know like for 36 years, we had prayed and believed and had faith. And you get those looks on people's face where they're like, yeah, okay. You know, that's sweet that you're going to believe that your mom's going to come home, but not really believe it. And then to see that, no, I'm serious, like God answers prayers. They might take a while, but he does answer.

Roger Marsh: It's incredible. Judy Henderson's book is called *When the Light Finds Us, From a Sentenced Life to a Transformed One*. The link is up at drjamesdobson.org. And Angel, before I ask your mom another question, you and I were talking before our time together here about the fact that... When the book came out, you really were kind of hesitant to even take a look and read that. What was it like for you to read this story?

Angel McDonald: You know, I was afraid to face what was said in it and didn't know like our perspectives are different. And so whenever I got the courage to actually read it right before it was released, I thought, what a miracle, what a gift that God has given me and my family, because so many people go their whole lives and they don't get to understand their family from that perspective of why we do the things we do, why we make the decisions we make, what happened to our family. And so it is such a gift, but it was one that the enemy tried to keep me afraid of and scared of because of the pain that I associated with the story. But it was actually a gift and an inspiration.

Roger Marsh: Judy, what's it been like for you? I mean, this happened in 2017. We're about a decade removed from this now. What were those first few weeks and months like where you've been working for this for such a long time and now you really are? Free physically, but emotionally, spiritually. How did that transformation take place? Well, I knew that I wanted to write a book at one point during my incarceration. And then I kind of just kind of let it go until everybody started hearing about my situation and said, Judy, you have no choice here. You have to write a book because what happened to you and the miracles that you received. Throughout your incarceration and your life is something that people need to hear. They need to know that God is alive and well and he's working his miracles even today. And so I did. And whenever I first come home, yeah, it took a lot of getting used to because I knew nothing about technology. Yeah, the cars look like the inside of a cockpit.

Roger Marsh: Right. The computers on the dashboards and everything. What a trip.

Judy Henderson: And I'm thinking, I'll never be able to drive again in my life. You know? And then the phones.

Angel McDonald: She might run over a few curbs every now and then.

Roger Marsh: Give her a little grace. Come on.

Judy Henderson: That's right. That's right. But you know what? I was really blessed, Roger, because I got to come home, which was a God gift. Because everybody that I was in prison with, all the staff, even the wardens, tell me, Judy, quit packing your boxes. You're not going home. You're going to die here. We want you to just accept that. And I said, no, I'm not. I'm going home. I am going home. They asked me to start honor dorms, help them set up honor dorms or start programs. And I said, okay, but I'm not going to be here to see them through. And they said, yes, you will, Judy. They'd always try to convince me that I wasn't going.

Roger Marsh: And they thought they were helping, I would imagine.

Judy Henderson: Yeah, I think they wanted me to just adjust. And I had adjusted to my thinking, but I'm adjusting to the fact I'm going to be free.

Roger Marsh: That's right, that's right. Yeah, and what a blessing for you now to enjoy your two children. Is it nine grandchildren? Nine great-grandchildren on top of that too?

Judy Henderson: Yes!

Roger Marsh: Oh my goodness.

Judy Henderson: Nine and nine.

Roger Marsh: What a blessing, what a blessing. As we're getting ready to wrap up our time together, Judy, what's something, that when it comes to incarcerated mothers, that we don't necessarily understand and where's the advocacy, where's an opportunity for us in the body of Christ to say, look, there are people who wind up getting sentenced and convicted and sentenced all the time for crimes they did commit, but there are probably a lot of other people who are in your situation who were innocent bystanders, kind of, if I may, collateral damage in certain areas that wind up too. Do you see a lot of moms who fit that second category?

Judy Henderson: I do. And it's sad because I think that people forget that these children are victims also.

Roger Marsh: Yes.

Judy Henderson: It's just not the person that maybe was harmed or killed that are victims. The families of incarcerated people are victims too. And the children are the ones that suffer the most. And people just kind of put them in the background. And I can, I feel that there's more programs that need to be created to help these children with scholarships to college. Send them that way instead of sending them to the street where they learn more career... we create more career criminals. Take them and nourish them and nurture them and love on them. Because when you don't do that, you're creating more criminals. And that's where the curses keep happening.

And I think more children like my daughter. Of course, she has a perfect name, according to me. And, you know, letting people hear the children of incarcerated parents. Listen to what they're saying. Listen to the pain that they had to suffer themselves. And I think that sometimes where our citizens and our organizations and our churches, they forget about those kids. And they need lifted up. They need prayer. They need loved on.

Angel McDonald: They also need to know that their parents, even though they're incarcerated, that they're important.

Roger Marsh: Yeah.

Angel McDonald: You know, as a daughter that walked through that, I would say that, you know, sometimes they're like, oh, poor you, your mom's bad. But that's not what we want to hear. We want to hear, you know what, God has a plan for her.

Roger Marsh: Right.

Angel McDonald: And it's a good plan, you know, and there is hope.

Roger Marsh: Right. What a powerful testimony from Judy Henderson today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. Her brand new book, which I can't recommend highly

enough, is called *When the Light Finds Us, From a Sentenced Life to a Transformed One*. We have a link for it up at drjamesdobson.org. And it's been an honor to feature Judy and her daughter, Angel McDonald, over the past couple of days here on the Family Talk broadcast. Judy, thank you for your testimony. Thank you for sharing it with so many people and the work that you continue to do. And Judy and Angel, thank you so much for being a part of Dr. James Dobson's family talk today.

Judy Henderson: Thank you Roger.

Angel McDonald: Thank you for having us.

Roger Marsh: You know, there are seasons in life when nothing seems to make any sense. We pray for answers. We wait for circumstances to change. And yet sometimes the waiting lasts far longer than we ever imagined. Judy Henderson's story reminds us that even in those darkest places, God has not abandoned us. You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's family talk and the conclusion of my conversation with Judy Henderson, along with her daughter, Angel McDonald. Judy has been sharing her remarkable testimony about being locked up for 36 years for a crime she did not commit. And you can read more about her story in her book called *When the Light Finds Us, From a Sentenced Life to a Transformed One*. We have a link for the book as well as for our conversation up at drjamesdobson.org.

You know, maybe Judy McDonald's story connected with something that you're walking through right now. You've experienced a loss or disappointment, maybe heartache you simply cannot explain, and you've wondered, where is God in the middle of all this? Well, if so, I want to share with you about a free resource from the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. It's simply called *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. This is a 10-day email series based on Dr. Dobson's best-selling book, and it explores what happens when we encounter trials so painful that we struggle to understand why would God ever allow them? The truth is we may never completely understand some of the circumstances that we'll face in this life, but these daily messages can help strengthen your faith and remind you that even the darkest valleys can lead us into a deeper relationship with the Lord. You can sign up for 10-day email series called *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. It's absolutely free, simply go to drjamesdobson.org and search for that title, again drjamesdobson.org or just use those initials jdfi.org. Those websites are one and the same.

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Well, I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks so much for joining us today. Be sure to tune in again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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