



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: A Father Looks Back

Guest(s): Dr. James Dobson

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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 Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and today we are sharing a timeless address from Dr. Dobson himself, delivered live to an audience during a pivotal season of his life. He was 48 years old, and Dr. Dobson was reflecting on the passage of time, the years he spent at home watching his own children grow up, and the two convictions that came to define his priorities. If you're a dad wondering how to make the most of the years you have left with your kids, the insights you're about to hear will help you slow down, pay attention and keep first things first. Here on the first Father's Day, we'll be celebrating without our founder and chairman, here's a timeless message from Dr. James Dobson as a father looks back today on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: I need to tell you where I'm coming from this evening. Seven years ago, we were engaged in another film series in San Antonio, Texas. And at that time, I was trying to make a decision about what to do about the conflict between the ministry and the message that I wanted to get out and the need to stay home with my own children. And I've done a lot of dumb things in my life, but I think the smartest thing I ever did was to stay home and watch my kids grow up. So this is kind of a celebration of that decision today, because in those seven years, I've not only had an opportunity to stay home with my kids and with Shirley, of course, but I've had an opportunity to do some thinking. And what I want to do with you is bring you up to date on some of the thinking that I've been doing in the last seven years as I've moved through my own midlife years.

Now, I am 48 years old, and by all rights, I ought to be going through a midlife crisis. Well, I am not going through this kind of midlife crisis. But I'll tell you where I do find myself at this moment, and I'm deadly serious about this. I have for the last seven years, and especially the last three, been going through what I might call a period of contemplative reassessment, where I've been thinking about the meaning of life and the major questions that it poses. You know, like, who am I really? And what am I doing here really? And where am I going really? And what's the meaning of life? And what am I going to do with the rest of my time here on this earth? There's something about the 40s that scream those questions at you, whether you're in the midst of a midlife crisis or not. It's almost impossible to go through the 40s without struggling with some of those

questions as you see the sand starting to run out of the hourglass. I was going through that and I stopped it all as much as I possibly could to do some thinking about who I am. And I drew two conclusions from this time of reassessment.

The first has to do with the incredible passage of time. You know, this passage of time is something that many writers write about, and I enjoy reading those that get a grasp of it. But I think the person who understands it better than any philosopher I know is a little woman named Erma Bombeck. She really understands that concept of time. And she makes us laugh, obviously, especially about aging and that process. I saw her on the *Phil Donahue Show* and Phil asked her if she was sensitive about her age. And she said, "No, I'm not sensitive about it." He said, "Then how old are you?" She said, "I'm somewhere between estrogen and death." But sometimes, folks, Erma does not make us laugh. Sometimes Erma makes us cry. And she wrote, I think, the most incredible piece in her book, *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?* The name of the piece was, "When Does the Mother Become the Daughter and the Daughter Become the Mother?" And she was describing the changing relationship between herself and her mother and the stress that occurred associated with it. She said her mother was always so strong. Her mother was always so stable, so independent, so secure. The one she looked up to, the one she modeled her life after.

But in recent years, that relationship has been changing and her mother has been becoming the daughter and Erma has been becoming the mother. Their relationship was flipping upside down. She said it started when they were riding in a car together one day and Erma was driving and her mother was sitting over here to the right. And there was a sudden stack up of automobiles and the brake lights came on. And Erma put on the brakes to keep from hitting the car in front of her and reached out instinctively to keep her mother from hitting the windshield instead of her mother reaching out to keep Erma from hitting the steering wheel. And they looked at each other for a moment and realized something had changed in the relationship. And as time goes on, it's Erma saying, "Mom, we're going shopping in the stores today, and don't you look nice in that dress?" As Erma's mother had said to her a thousand times before, "Erma, you look so nice today." And "Mom, don't forget to wear your sweater today because, you know, they turned the air conditioning up so high, and I don't want you to get cold." Instead of her mother saying, "Erma, wear your coat now, bundle up, wear your galoshes, stay warm, don't catch a cold."

And as time moves on, the mother is becoming the daughter and the daughter is becoming the mother and the relationship is changing and it's difficult. She says, "I don't want it. I resist it. I don't want to see my mother becoming dependent upon me." But the inexorable march of time changes the relationship. And then as her mother moves through old age, it's Erma saying, "Mom, will you please stop talking about seeing dad last night? Do you know he's been gone for 10 years." And the mother has become the daughter and the daughter has become the mother. Erma said shortly thereafter, she was riding in the car with her own daughter and her daughter was driving. There was a

sudden stack up of cars and her daughter put on the brakes to keep from hitting the car in front of her and then reached out instinctively to keep Erma from hitting the windshield. And the last line of the piece says, "My Lord, so quickly, so quickly indeed. I am there right now. My mother is becoming my daughter and I am becoming her father. And it is a wrenching experience if you have not been through it."

Folks, you want to see the passage of time? Look at the people closest to you within the family. Don't look outside the family. If you were riding on a fast moving train and you wanted to know how fast you were going, you would not look at the distant mountains. You would look at the ground beside the train. That would tell you how fast you're moving. And so it is with the family. You want to know how fast? Year are passing, look at your children. Look at how your relationship with your children is changing. Look at your brothers and sisters, your uncles and aunts. Look at your parents. See, I think that's one thing that causes a midlife crisis for men, because when you hit your 40s, it's not unusual to lose your father, and that's an emotional impact. That makes you think about life. It makes you think about how short it is. Shirley and I have been married 24 years, as I told you. And in only 18 years, I will be the age my father was when he died. See, and you think of yourself as a young man in your 30s and you round the corner and you're thinking 28% left. And there's something about that that makes you think.

Now, there'll be people here who will say, what a morbid thought. Not so. This is a very important biblical concept. It's all through the Bible. King David wrote about it. He said, "For as man his days are as grass, as the flower of the field so he flourisheth, but the wind passeth over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more." What a graphic way to say it. It's a biblical concept, and it's an important one because it has a way of putting everything else into proper perspective. It certainly makes the pursuit of materialism empty and meaningless, at least as a reason for living. There's got to be something more important than that. Shirley and I got married at a time when we had absolutely nothing. And it looked for about 10 years like we were going to keep it. We didn't have any financial problems because we didn't have any finances. But I finally got through USC and quit paying those enormous school bills and joined the staff of USC School of Medicine and began writing and things started changing for us. And we have tasted now some of the things that people hunger for. But part of the analysis of the 40s has to do with the meaning of life. And that doesn't provide a whole lot. I want to tell you all something very personally. This is perhaps telling you more about who I am than I want you to know. But if I don't allow you to see who I really am, I can't help you. I'm not at all sure that I want to give a whole lot to my children either because it takes a steady hand to hold a full cup. And I can't think of any better way to destroy them than to deprive them of that need to build and save and be disciplined and grow and dedicate themselves to a task. I think we're so busy giving our kids what we didn't have as kids, we forget to give them what we did have as kids.

Well, that leads me inexorably to the second conclusion that I've drawn at this time. And the conclusion that I've drawn that outranks all others is that nothing in life matters except love for God and His son, Jesus Christ, and love for mankind beginning with my own family. This is why I've been home for the last seven years because these years are passing so fast and I wanted to be there to have that influence on my kids and see them grow up and to instill those values that I care about. And the years have passed so, so rapidly. I know so quickly now that the skateboard will be warped and standing over in the corner of the garage. The bicycle tires will be flat. The swing set is already gone. We'll go through Christmas and there will not be the two stockings hanging there. I know that. I accept that. I'm not fighting that. I wouldn't try to hold my kids back if I could. I want them to grow and become independent and live their own lives.

I understand the process, but I'll tell you this. When those two children are gone, something precious will have gone out of my life because I have valued those years with my kids so much. And by being home the last seven years, I have their childhood videotaped up here in my mind. You can't see it, but I can see it. I can turn it on and I see a little five-year-old boy come up to me. I'm sitting in my study. I'm watching a football game. This little boy comes up to me and he says, "I want to get up in your lap." And I say, "No way." He says, "How come?" And I say, "Because I have to be kind of careful about who I let climb on my lap. That's why." And he says, "Who can climb on you?" And I said, "Well, you wouldn't know him." He said, "Yes, I would." I said, "Well, he's a kid with blonde hair." He says, "I got blonde hair." I say, "I know, but this is a kid with blonde hair and blue eyes." He said, "I got blue eyes." I said, "Yeah, I know, but this is a kid with blonde hair and blue eyes, and his name's Ryan." He said, "That's my name." I said, "I know, but you wouldn't understand. You don't know this kid. He's a kid with blonde hair, blue eyes, his name's Ryan, and he's my son. He's my only son, the only son I will ever have. He is the only boy in the world that can climb on me anytime he wants to without asking."

He says, "I got blonde hair and blue eyes. My name's Ryan. I'm your son. You love me. Move over. I'm coming up." We played that game for four years, 500 times. He loved the game. That's why I don't have to think to tell you about it. I've been through it over and over again because it said something to Ryan about him being special to me. But I have that videotape. That's up here in my head. I can turn that off. I turn on another videotape and I see a little girl coming home from school. She's six years old she has little pigtails out the side here but they're all messed up and her dress is disheveled and she's got one sock down around one shoe and she comes in and she's so happy to see us and she hugs her mother and she hugs me and she goes in and sits down at the table and Shirley brings her some sandwiches and some milk and she's sitting there and she's eating it and I'm watching and she doesn't know that. She doesn't really know yet just how much I love her. Perhaps someday she will comprehend it, but she doesn't understand it. That's just a passing moment. It's gone, but I've got it right here. Nobody can take it away from me. I've got it here because I was home to see it, and I'm thankful for that. Let me tell you one other thing about Danae if I can. She absolutely loved her childhood. She loved it. But alas,

she turned 13 years of age one day and she went into her bedroom and closed the door. She stacked up her records and all of her little treasured toys and put them on top of it. And she carried them next door and left them in front of Ryan's door where he was sleeping. And she put a note on the top and she said, "Dear Ryan, These are yours now. Take good care of them like I have. Love, Danae." Shirley found the note and she brought it to me. I was in my study and we sat and I read it and we both cried because we heard in that note the door of childhood gently shut and once it closes no power on the face of the earth can open it again. And again, I thank the Lord that I was there to witness that process but I'm not a perfect father I do not have perfect kids.

Shirley is not a perfect mother and we struggle in the same ways that you do we struggle to find something that we could do together as a family. Have you had that problem? We tried everything. You know, we weren't content to just find recreation each one of us wanted to do. But we were trying to find something we all enjoyed doing together. And we had a hard time finding. We tried hiking. That didn't work. We tried bowling. Believe me, that didn't work. But we finally hit on skiing. I need to tell you all something about skiing for those of you who don't know. On the first day when you've got young children, that can be one of the most frustrating events in the entire world because you can guess who gets to carry the skis, buckle the boots, buy the lift tickets, get the locker, park the car, make three trips back to the house, bundle them up in all those clothes, then take them to the bathroom. All that stuff. It's an enormous task. And on this particular day, my kids were about to drive me crazy. They were struck by a sudden wave of childish irresponsibility. And they were losing skis and dropping stuff and forgetting gloves. And I was on their backs. I mean, I was yelling at these kids and crabbing at them and riding them.

And I violated everything I write about. Does that make you feel better? I took them up to the ski lodge. Shirley was already up there and I let them out. I said, go have a good time. Slammed the door. I drove the car back down the hill to park it. And all the way down the hill, I was talking to the Lord. I was saying, "Lord, what am I going to do with these kids that You gave me?" You ever asked that question? Just a little irritated at Him for giving me these kids. And He didn't say anything. He sometimes lets me talk to Him that way. I really wasn't being disrespectful. I parked the car and I got out and I walked back down to a little pickup area where a flatbed truck comes and picks people up and takes them back up the mountain. And when I walked to this spot, there were about eight or 10 people there. And among them was a girl about 17 years of age. And she was saying strange things, nonsense things, especially the word whomever. She was saying, "whomever, whomever," just this word over and over again. And I thought she was on a bad drug trip or something. And the other people were kind of pulled back away from her. So she was just kind of standing there all by herself saying these words. And then she turned and looked at me. And I saw the unmistakable look in her eyes. About that time the truck came and we all got up in the back of the truck and she stumbled over there and got in the truck too. And she stood right in the center of that flatbed truck and looked up the mountain and continued to say, whomever. Here she is with her shoulders

back saying, “whomever, whomever.” And there was a visible rejection by the other people that were there. They were young. You could tell by the sneers on their face. They kind of moved back from her and they looked at her and then looked at each other as if to say, “Who’s the crazy that we’ve got with us?” And then I realized that the big man who was standing near her was her father. And he did something I will never forget. He took about three steps toward her. He just engulfed that girl in his arms. And he put his big hand on the back of her head and just pressed it gently to his chest. And he looked down at her and he said, “Yeah, babe, whomever.”

And I had to turn my face away from that crowd to hide the moisture in my eyes. Because you know what that father was saying? He was not talking to his daughter at all. He was talking to us. That father had seen the same rejection, the same sneers that I had seen, and he was giving us a message. You know what he was saying? “That’s my girl, and I love her, and I’m not ashamed to be identified with her. Yeah, babe, whomever.” The love of that father for that girl flooded out of his soul and filled mine and mine outward to my children. And I said, okay, Lord, I get the message. Fathers who are here, don’t let these years get away from you. If your children are still at home, don’t let them slide through your fingers. On the other end of life, looking back, there will be no compensation.

To those of you here tonight who are achievement-oriented and you’ve reached your goal, I don’t mean to insult you. Let me tell you that I admire you. You’ve worked hard. You’ve gotten there because of self-discipline and self-control and hard work and long hours. But to some degree, I have to. And reverberating in my head these last seven years has been on question I cannot get away from. And that question is, so what? Or an infinitely more important question, now what? “For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more.”

Now, folks, I really kind of fooled you a little bit tonight. I have kind of told you that I was talking about the midlife crisis and the midlife years. I’m really not. The experience of the last seven years has said to me, go back to your roots, back to your faith. And in that faith, I find meaning and purpose and dignity and self-esteem, self-respect, self-control and identity. I know who I am because I know whose I am. And I’ve come down at this stage in my life with only two objectives for what’s left. The first is to serve my fellow man, beginning with my own family. And the second is to be acceptable to the God who made me and to hear those words, how I want to hear those words, “well done, thou good and faithful servant.” And nothing else will stand the scrutiny of time.

Roger Marsh:

Well, what a powerful reminder from our founder, Dr. James Dobson, that the years with our children pass more quickly than we ever expect them to. And no achievement will ever outweigh the time we invest in the people we love. With this Sunday being the first Father’s Day we’ll be celebrating without Dr. Dobson present with his family, it was a perfect time for us to take a look back at the values that drove him in his life, his marriage, his parenting, and his ministry.

And if you'd like to hear today's program again, "A Father Looks Back" is the title. Go to jdfi.org.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh, and from all of us here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute and the Family Talk program, thanks so much for listening, and I hope you have a wonderful Father's Day weekend. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another 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.

Dr. James Dobson: Several months ago, I talked to a man who described one of the most painful experiences of his life.

Roger Marsh: Here's today's Dr. Dobson Minute with Dr. James Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: When he was 17 years old, he was one of the stars on his high school football team. But his father, a very successful man in the city, was always too busy to come see him play. The man who told me this story is now 58 years of age, and yet he stood there with tears streaming down his cheeks. The rejection and disappointment. are as vivid as ever. I was struck again by the awesome influence a father has in the lives of his children. When he's uninvolved, when he doesn't love or care for them, it creates a vacuum that reverberates for decades. That man's father died not long ago, and he stood by his dad's body in the mortuary and said, "Dad, I never really knew you. We could have shared so much love together."

Roger Marsh: For more information, visit drdobsonminute.org.