



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Stepfamilies of the Bible – Part 1

Guest(s): Laura Petherbridge

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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 Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, sitting in the co-host chair today, and we have a very special treat, especially for those of you who are in a stepfamily or blended family situation. Yes, there is a difference. Laura Petherbridge is with me today here on the program. Laura is an international author and a professional speaker on subjects related to singles and divorce and recovery and divorce prevention, step families and more. You can find her information at thesmartstepmom.com. We have that linked up at drjamesdobson.org. Today, we're going to take a look at a brand-new book that Laura has written that offers timeless wisdom for blended families, and it comes straight from Scripture. The new book is called *Step Families of the Bible* and we've got a link for it up at drjamestobson.org. Laura Petherbridge, first of all, personally, it's really good to see you again. Welcome back to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.
- Laura Petherbridge: Thank you. It's so great to see you again, even if it's virtual.
- Roger Marsh: Let's talk about this whole situation because you're always my go-to. I probably quote you more in step-family, blended-family situations than anything else. But I realize this is not a ministry that you aspired to. By any stretch of the imagination, is that a safe assumption to say? A lot of people say, okay, well, that's great, you know, but how do you come across as having the expertise to speak on the stepfamily, blended family issue? For those who may not know your background, if you can take us on a 60 second jet tour of how Laura Petherbridge became one of the top voices, if not the top, in speaking about stepfamily and blended family issues.
- Laura Petherbridge: Well, thank you. That's very gracious. I myself was in a home of divorce. I was a child of divorce. And so when I went through a divorce, when my husband didn't want to be married anymore, my first husband, I started working in divorce recovery ministry. That was really where I landed. I just knew God would take something that was bad in my life, the broken pieces, and use it for good if I learned how, if I let it. And so my earlier years in ministry were in divorce recovery. I was a featured expert on the Divorce Care DVD series. Then Ron Deal, who is a therapist who specializes in stepfamilies, Ron asked me if I would

co-author *The Smart Stepmom*. And at first, I was like, oh, my gosh, I do not view myself as the poster child for stepparents or stepmoms. And so I was a little hesitant just because I didn't feel qualified. But he said, I really think you're the right person to co-write this with me. And so when I asked God, He kind of just said, I think, you know, yes, I've put this together for you. And so when we wrote *The Smart Stepmom*, that book has now sold over 4,500 copies.

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Laura Petherbridge: That was hard to get out. And so obviously that was a good fit. And that's really what began my stepfamily journey because I married a man with two sons. They were 11 and 13 when we got married. And we will celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary in December.

Roger Marsh: Wow. Congratulations. That is absolutely phenomenal. We could go down that road of divorce and remarriage or widowhood and remarriage and how long second and third and fourth marriages last. But for your marriage here to be in the 40 year category, that is really tremendous. And congratulations to you both. Let's talk. I threw both terms out there and we kind of use them interchangeably in our culture, stepfamily, blended family. You and Ron probably would say we have different backgrounds because I think it wasn't his situation where his mom was widowed and then remarried. Talk about what a stepfamily is by definition. What's a blended family by definition?

Laura Petherbridge: Yes, when Ron and I each got started and Ron has never been divorced, widowed or remarried. Ron's a therapist who specializes in step families. So that's why our book was so good, because we made good dancing partners.

Roger Marsh: Yes, absolutely.

Laura Petherbridge: He came at it from the therapy and I came at it from the blood, sweat, and tears and together.

Roger Marsh: School of hard knocks.

Laura Petherbridge: And so in the beginning, when Ron first started and when I first joined him, pretty much stepfamily was the only phrase that was being used. A few years into it, then people started calling themselves blended families because they didn't like the word step. They thought it sounded separated or segregated. They didn't like it. And so more and more people started calling themselves a blended family. The only problem with that is that there is also another translation of that, which when some people say blended, they mean racially blended. I mean, when we're blended, that means we either have adoption and biological or we have black and white or any other combination of culture.

Roger Marsh: Right.

Laura Petherbridge: So for a while, people were a little confused by using the difference of blended and step. Today, pretty much it means both mean the same thing. So interchangeably, you'll hear people and especially younger people use the phrase blended because they don't like the phrase stepfamily.

Roger Marsh: Yeah. You know, in the culture, and I think about the way it's portrayed or the way the families are portrayed, you and I can both relate to a time since we're contemporaries having those conversations about Cinderella and the wicked stepmother or whatever. And it just seemed there was always that negative connotation attached to the stepfamily. Now, I saw a shirt recently. My wife. and I, it's second marriage for both. And so we blend our family, even though our kids are old and grown, you know, they're all in their thirties. But I have two daughters and a son. Lisa brought two daughters and a son to the mix as well. And I saw a guy who was wearing a shirt. I think it was a retail store somewhere. And on the front, it said, I'm a stepdad. And on the back, it said, stepdads are the dads who stepped up. And I thought, ooh, I like that because, I mean, there's a choice that has to be made, right? You know, in a situation like this, you're either going to say, we are a family, these are my sons and daughters, or we're not. And, you know, the favoritism and stuff, those are all things you work through in the Divorce Care and your stepfamily materials. Talk just a little, brag on yourself a little bit, Laura, if you would, about the resources that you have available for stepfamilies.

Laura Petherbridge: The thing that you mention in that that is interesting that many people don't know is that kids, young or old, embrace a stepdad much more quickly and easily than they do a stepmom.

Roger Marsh: Interesting. And anecdotally, I can absolutely attest to that. No question about it.

Laura Petherbridge: So you would not see a lot of stepmoms walking around with that shirt. They would agree with it. They would say, yes, I stepped up when maybe the mom stepped out. Or stepped away or, you know, is ill or something like that. But you see kids, especially at the videos that we see today with the kids saying, will you adopt me? You see all these sweet videos online, Instagram or whatever, where the kid gives the stepdad a gift or Father's Day or whatever. Will you adopt me?

Roger Marsh: Very sweet.

Laura Petherbridge: And everybody's crying. Everybody's happy. You don't see any of those videos with stepmom. So it is very much, and people don't realize that until they get into it. And there's a lot of science that kind of, Ron did a lot of exploration of why that's true. But the reality is, kids view a stepdad as a bonus, as a plus in their life, where they often view a stepmom as an interloper.

Roger Marsh: Interesting.

Laura Petherbridge: You took our dad away.

Roger Marsh: Interesting.

Laura Petherbridge: And so that's a whole nother show, Roger.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, it really is. I do want to get into the new book, but what's fascinating because, you know, people, you don't typically think, I mean, if you're going to the Bible, you're going to the Bible for parenting, you're going for marriage, you're going for theology, obviously, eschatology, whatever it is. You don't typically think stepfamily, blended family. Let me crack open God's Word and see what that looks like. But you've identified some, they're right there hiding in plain sight.

Laura Petherbridge: That's right.

Roger Marsh: And oftentimes we don't. When was the idea that you and I were talking before we started our conversation here on the program about the fact that this was a book, not necessarily that you didn't want to write, but God really hounded you until you finished this book off. Talk about what that process was like.

Laura Petherbridge: Yeah, I was at a writer's conference a number of years ago and the idea for this book came to me and I pitched it to seven or several of the editors that were there and acquisition editors and agents. And they were all like, oh my gosh, that's a phenomenal idea. Nobody's written on that. And when I went to do my comparison for a proposal, I couldn't find another book out there like it. And I still have not been able to find one. But it was hard. It was hard to write. It was hard to think. Will people understand this? Will they read this? Will they grasp what I'm trying to do here?

And so the idea was there for a while, but how to formulate it? What I finally realized was that I needed to take each chapter and tackle an emotion associated with stepfamilies. And how these biblical people of God, ancient saints, how they dealt with the emotion that they were experiencing in their stepfamily and the irony of how thousands of years later, here we are dealing with those exact same emotions. Jealousy, rage, unforgiveness, fear, you know, all of these emotions that are common to the modern day stepfamily. Our brothers and sisters thousands of years ago were dealing with the exact same thing. Dynamics were different. Society was different.

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Laura Petherbridge: But the emotions are exactly the same.

Roger Marsh: Laura Petherbridge is our guest today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. The new book is called *Step Families of the Bible: Timeless Wisdom for Blended Families*, and we have it linked up at drjamesdobson.org. You know, you mentioned all those emotions. And of course, the Old Testament didn't make things any easier because of the multiple wives and the girlfriends and the hand,

what do they call them, maidens and things of that nature. I love the fact, though, that you went right for the eye of the tiger. Initially started right out. I mean, talk about jealousy, resentment. Abraham, Sarah, Hagar. I mean, that just looks like a soap opera. I mean, just what an emotional mess. And yet you realize that, yeah, I don't see anywhere in Scripture where Abraham is looking at Isaac or Ishmael and saying, I love you better than I love you. So you can see where the women have that resentment. Talk about something maybe that you learned while doing the research for that part of the book that is going to help people deal with overcoming jealousy and resentment in a stepfamily situation.

Laura Petherbridge: Yeah, Sarah and Hagar are one of the most classic examples in Scripture of two warring women, you know, and I call it the war of the women. It is classic. I primarily work with stepmoms because my other books that I wrote after the one with Ron is primarily for the stepmom and stepfamilies. So when I go out to a church or to a convention or to an event, you know, and I'm speaking on stepfamilies, of course, a lot of stepmoms come, but the biological moms will also come to my workshop or to my class. And so I then began hearing the most common things the biological mother was saying of why she's irritated with the stepmom. And so occasionally when I would do these workshops, and it was both the bio mom and the stepmom in the group, you know, I don't often throw out, does anybody have a question? Because it can turn into World War III.

Roger Marsh: I'll bet. I'll bet.

Laura Petherbridge: When I was trying to get them each to hear the other side, it was just fascinating to me how you could do a reality TV show with Sarah and Hagar today. And it would be very, very similar to these, you know, that's not your child. Stop trying to parent my kid. And yes, but I care for your kid 50% of the time, so I should have some say in that. And he's not your husband anymore, he's my husband.

You know, it really was shocking to me of how Sarah and Hagar and both of them, actually all three, throw in Abraham, all three of them did things that made the situation worse. If they had obeyed God and done what God told them to do, they wouldn't be in this circumstance, even after the two boys were born. And so it's so interesting. That's why at the end of each chapter, I do a little caveat of what can we learn from this stepfamily? And then what can my stepfamily learn from this stepfamily? So it's and it's for anybody. It's not just for the step parents. Because I get a lot of like grandmas or sister-in-laws or sisters or brothers. Hey, my brother is getting remarried and he's marrying a woman with kids or he has kids. And I don't like the way the stepparent is treating my niece and nephew. I don't like the way the new grandparent is treating my child or my stepchild. And so this is a family affair. This is not just between the couple.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, that's so interesting that there are people who are dealing with this now and not thinking, gosh, I could learn something from this biblical example in this area because it seems so contemporary. It seems like it's just a modern

problem. And also, too, Laura, you just spoke about the fact that there are people with free will who are making their own decisions. Some are Christians, some are not. And as we try to blend, I mean, a Gentile can be grafted into the olive branch if you will, of our faith, because physically that happens with olive trees. But when it comes to families, it's a whole different dynamic. And you've got a younger generation coming up now thinking, well, I need to be happy and having fun all the time. So if I'm not, then it's got to be someone's fault. Well, it must be hers. She's my stepmom. I don't like her. She took my dad away or whatever. That's one of the common issues. Talk about the issue of that rejection. You know, what happens when there is that feeling? Inevitably, there's someone in the mix that says, dad got married or mom got married again. And I don't feel like I'm part of the plan. And it's not just teenagers with hormones. I mean, it could be young, young children. It could be adults saying, I'm in my 30s. Why did mom need to marry this guy? I'm very concerned about her well-being. You used the example of Jacob and the Laban situation with his daughters.

Laura Petherbridge: Yes. And that's so important to get out there that we only think of kids struggling when they're little. or young, or adolescents, or teenagers. And that is totally untrue. Many, many adult kids, stepkids and kids struggle with when their parent remarries. And you're hitting the nail right on the head when you say that it's the dynamic. People hate it when I say this, but I have to keep saying it. Stepfamilies are birthed on loss. They are not birthed on the same things a biological family are birthed on top of. And so because a stepfamily is birthed on loss, either a death, a divorce or the severing of a relationship has had to have occurred in order for there even to be a stepfamily. If that hadn't occurred, it wouldn't be a stepfamily.

Now, I do get a lot of pushback with people saying, well, my boyfriend or my fiancé, it was just a one night stand so he wasn't in love with her. You know, so I do get some pushback with that. And they think that doesn't matter to the kids, which is totally untrue. But anyway, to make themselves feel better, they'll say, well, he didn't really have a relationship with her. Or my wife, my fiancé didn't really, you know, have a good relationship with the father of her children. And he left. So dad's not in the picture anymore. And so they assume that that means the kids are going to be all happy about getting a step-parent.

Roger Marsh: Yeah.

Laura Petherbridge: And that is not necessarily the case. And it doesn't matter what age. They've got to grieve the death of their biological family before they can move on to embracing a stepparent.

Roger Marsh: I want you to say that again, Laura. I don't mean to interrupt you, but what you said is so profound. The fact that whether mom was widowed and is now remarrying or divorced or remarrying, the family unit that they knew is gone.

Laura Petherbridge: That's right.

Roger Marsh: That they grew up with. And so you have to mourn the death of that family unit.

Laura Petherbridge: The death of the dream. The death of my family growing old together and mom and dad being there when I have children. You wouldn't believe how much chaos comes when a child or a stepchild has a baby. And so now there's grandparents and step grandparents and some families will allow the step grandma, grandpa to be right in, right part of the family. Other kids, they're like, no, I don't want that person to be a grandfather to my kid. So you stay over there and, you know, my grandkids over here or your grand, my mother or father's grandchild is over here. You're not a part of that. And there's a number of reasons why they do that, but it's very painful.

Roger Marsh: I think we should rename the program Pandora's Box with Laura Petherbridge. My goodness, all these different questions are coming up. This is actually Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk; it's not Pandora's Box. But the tangled web, you know, and when you see that God's plan was a man will leave his father and mother, cleave to his wife, the two become one flesh, they raise a family when there's any kind of disruption in that, then we see the chaos that can ensue.

And Laura, before we get back to your new book, *Step Families of the Bible, Timeless Wisdom for Blended Families*, I want you to talk a little bit about your own experience, because you mentioned at the start of the program, you grew up in a divorced home. And then, so you grew up with a stepmom, as well as, you know, dealing with the issues there as a child. But then you married your husband, and you're celebrating your 40th anniversary later this year, which is phenomenal. But you became a stepmom to his two sons. And I'm sure at some point, you probably thought, okay, well, I grew up in this kind of environment, so I know how this works. But the idea that you had it figured out, what were some of the surprises you encountered?

Laura Petherbridge: Well, you said it exactly right. I actually had two stepmothers and one stepdad.

Roger Marsh: Oh.

Laura Petherbridge: So my dad remarried two more times. One was when I was about 12 and the second one when I was in my early 30s. So I experienced the new stepfamily from two different ages. So I really pretty much sat on every seat on the bus. And so I assumed, when I became a stepmom, that I would just do either things, you know, that worked for me in embracing a stepmom or, you know, didn't go well with my stepmom. My stepmom and my biological mother did not get along. Big, big, big, big friction between those two. And my dad was in the middle of that. And so I watched him not really handle that well. It doesn't mean he didn't love us. I just, you know, there wasn't a lot of books out about this at the time. And so I remember as a kid being in tremendous tension all the time. Every major event in my life, including my wedding, was shrouded in tension because of the stepfamily dynamic.

Roger Marsh: Interesting.

Laura Petherbridge: And I was bound and determined I was not going to do that to my step kids. So when they got married, again, they were 11 and 13, 11 and 14, something like that when we got married.

Roger Marsh: Did you have a good relationship with them going into the marriage? As good as it could be.

Laura Petherbridge: Yes, they lived with their mother. We saw them on weekends. So it was back when dads had visitation. It wasn't the 50-50 like you see today. And they lived about 25, 30 minutes away. So, you know, we would go to them, pick them up, you know, take them to a movie, go have lunch, do stuff like that with them. And so it wasn't like they were under my foot, underfoot, like sometimes in the summer or whatever, they'd come for the weekends or come for more. I just discovered this is way harder than I thought it was going to be. This is, I don't know what these kids want. I don't know what they need. They're being raised completely differently than I was raised. This was back, you know, I'm old. This was back when, you know, you got punished. You know, being raised by a single parent mom, she just looked at us and you know, we stopped whatever behavior she didn't like. And his kids weren't being raised like that. And so I was this overwhelming, wait a minute, that's not going to go on in my home. But you see, they weren't my children. And so if dad and mom were going to choose to raise them that way, that was none of my business. And women hate hearing me say that. Oh, my gosh. I get so much hate. But you see, the reality is a step-parent cannot parent more than the parent.

Roger Marsh: Right. Right.

Laura Petherbridge: And if the parent is okay with it, the step-parent is just beating their heads against the wall if they don't. So, you know, I had a lot of adjusting to do. And like you describe, I felt outside that circle. My husband and his kids have a circle. I'm the newcomer. And if I don't like the way they have formed their circle, I really do not have a lot of power to change that. So especially in the early years, you know, there was a lot of grief, a lot of sorrow. I constantly was trying. Lord, show me what these kids need, not what I need. A lot of sacrifice. Christmases were totally different. I mean. It was an incredible amount of change that I was not prepared for.

Roger Marsh: Well, Laura Petherbridge, the time has gone by much too quickly, and we're going to need to ask you to come back for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk to keep on talking about your great new book called *Step Families of the Bible: Timeless Wisdom for Blended Families*. Laura, can you join us again next time?

Laura Petherbridge: I would be honored. Thanks for asking.

Roger Marsh:

You know, it's truly a gift when someone can take the hardest parts of their own story and turn them into help for other people. And that is exactly what Laura Petherbridge has done. You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. And today we heard part one of my conversation with Laura Petherbridge about step families, blended families, and the wisdom Scripture offers to all of us. Her most recent book is called *Step Families of the Bible: Timeless Wisdom for Blended Families*. And we've got a link to it along with today's full broadcast over at drjamesdobson.org. Again, that's jdfi.org if you'd like to take the shortcut to our main landing page.

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Well, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for joining us today. On behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, we appreciate your prayers and ongoing support. Be sure to tune in again next time when I'll welcome Laura Petherbridge once again for part two of her conversation about step families in the Bible. That's coming up 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.