



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Messy Mourning – Part 2

Guest(s): Jackie M. Baker

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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 once again to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, and our guest once again is Jackie M. Baker. Jackie is a nurse practitioner. She and her husband, Steve, is a doctor. They have a medical practice. She has a degree in theology. Everything in her life was perfect until her son, Sebastian, got involved in some activities that ultimately led to him taking his own life. Jackie is now the author of a book called *Messy Mourning: Hope for Mother's Grieving the Loss of a Child by Suicide*. We have a link for that book up at drjamesdobson.org. And Jackie, welcome back to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk for round two of this conversation about Sebastian and Steve and you and Isabella and what you guys have been through in the time leading up to Sebastian taking his own life, but then in these nine years after he did so. Thanks for being with us on the program again today.

Jackie M. Baker: Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure to be here.

Roger Marsh: I think it's been helpful. And again, we mentioned this at the start of our last program. If you have young children, watching along with you on YouTube or listening here on the broadcast side of the equation, please use discretion because we're having a very candid conversation about suicide and how it impacts a family. In this case, Sebastian was, he was 23 when he took his life?

Jackie M. Baker: Yes.

Roger Marsh: And had had psychotic episodes, been involved in drug use and abuse and all the things that you never think when your son is born that you would ever be saying about your child you detailed in part one of the program. The book that we are talking about kind of started as a journal of sorts for you, did it not? I mean, is this you kind of writing and processing and how do I deal with all of that? I mean, talk about what that process is like, because I'm sure initially, you're writing this and you're thinking, I just have to put this down somewhere. But now you realize that potentially thousands of people are going to be reading this and saying, wow, you're really helping me process my grief as well. What's that like for you?

Jackie M. Baker: Well, that's funny. I never wanted to write this book. I always said I wanted to write the next Jane Austen novel. That was my forte. I love Jane. But so I started writing. I'd always been a writer, but academically,

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Jackie M. Baker: Because I said I have a master's in biblical studies and a doctorate in nursing practice. So I started writing just to deal with what was going on with me. I felt like I had lost everything all of a sudden. So my daughter got married six months after. That's how she dealt with her grief. And we talked about this because she was just lost too, of course. And my husband had just started a new job, so my daughter got married and left. And I'm like, I have just empty nested in like in six months and I don't know what to do. It was pretty traumatic.

Roger Marsh: Was your daughter's relationship a new one that kind of grew out of Sebastian's situation or had she been with this guy for a while and they just decided to.

Jackie M. Baker: She had.

Roger Marsh: Okay.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah, she had been and she was bringing him home. In fact, she brought Brennan home to meet Sebastian, actually, and then he died that night. So Brennan...

Roger Marsh: Oh, wow.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah. I mean, that's talk about trial by fire for Brennan. I was like, what do I do with this kid? It's like he, because he was just going to go meet, he was going to meet Sebastian a couple days later because Isabel really wanted him to meet, you know, her brother. And she and Sebastian are so close. So just, they were just best buds and, you know, she adored him. He loved her and just typical big brother, little sister scenario.

So yeah, so I started writing in the journal and then I joined like an online writing class. And so I took 16 creative nonfiction classes and just started writing and writing. And so, so I, first I had written a memoir. It had nothing to do with Sebastian because I needed something to do, you know?

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Jackie M. Baker: And so I thought, I'll just write my story. And so I had written my manuscript, got it and I was like shopping it around as you do. And I had a writing coach and my writing coach was like, well, this was good. And you know, you could definitely publish it. And she goes, but I think this just prepared you to write, *Messy Morning*. And I knew that was from the Lord. And I was like, you're right.

Part of me is like, oh, here, I got to write another book. I just finished writing the first book. But then I listened to her and I'm like, okay, I'm going to write it.

And so then I started writing. And I had already had, I said, I had my journals, but I had also been doing essays on Substack already talking about grief and what I was going through. And people resonated with it. It was interesting because when I was shopping around, books, you know, they're like, well, what's your platform? How many followers do you have? And I'm like, people do not, people do not like when you write about grief.

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Jackie M. Baker: It's not, you're like, you know, it's not like you're going to have followers about that, you know, and it's, and so, but people would come up to me and say, I love what you wrote. And I'm like, oh, okay. So then I started keep writing it. And then I started really when I wanted to write, I didn't want to just write all about me, but I, you know, the things that I started seeing, like how the church was dealing with suicide. And then so my research brain started kicking in, you know, my research background. And so I'm like, I really wanted to bring more to the table than just, these are all the things you should do.

Roger Marsh: Yeah. I'm so glad. Well, I'm so glad you brought up the church aspect of this because in my last pastoral call, I remember a longtime member of our congregation, she and her husband and their two daughters, their girls played soccer against my girls. I mean, we all knew each other. And then they just kind of vanished. And about a year later, she showed up in church by herself and she sat in the very back. And so I saw her and after service, I came over and gave her a hug and said, gosh, it's really good to see you again. Hadn't seen you in a while. What's happening? What's going on? And she told me about that she and her husband had separated and they were getting a divorce. And I said, oh, I'm so sorry. I mean, have we been able, did we know, you know, basically? And she said, no. She said, I just, when I mentioned to people that we were getting divorced, they just started kind of ghosting us. And, you know, and I thought, well, when you, in your chapter, "When Suicide Comes to Church," you talk about that there's a stigma where if you got a child who's fighting cancer or something like that, or some kind of addiction, everybody rallies around you. But if they're dealing with a mental health issue that leads down the road that Sebastian's was, they look at you like, what's wrong? What happened here? Talk about that, how the church can do a better job of coming alongside families that are wrestling with mental illness, knowing that this is the kind of thing that could potentially take a life.

Jackie M. Baker: It's funny, we talk about suicide all the time. I mean, you know, like in the media, but when it comes to having conversations with it, people just, they don't know what to say because it makes them feel uncomfortable. And of course it does. It makes me feel uncomfortable. After Sebastian died, people would just say in their awkwardness and their uncomfortableness, things that were not helpful or, you know, you always hear about, you know, Sebastian

going to Hell or the divorce rate is really high And I'm just like, that is not helpful. And so I'm like, and these are well-meaning Christian friends. And I'm just like, where is this coming from?

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Jackie M. Baker: But, you know, I can look back and say, oh, they just didn't know what to say. They didn't know how to handle it. Because the church, we don't have a training program about how do you help someone in this way. Now, our pastor did an awesome job talking about, you know, suicide in the church. And when we had the sermon, I was like, memorial service, I'm like, let's not sugarcoat this. And he did an awesome job. And I had heard him do, we had another person in our church die by suicide. And that was the first time I had heard him talk. And I was just like, wow, he's not hiding it, but he's not condemning it. He's not saying it's the worst sin. He's not saying that someone's going to go to hell or is it a sin? But it was just love and compassion for this person. And they're more than who they are.

And so I, even though, you know, people were really good at our church, but there's this undercurrent, I always say, like that stigma. And I think it's generational, you know, or even, you know, historically, you know, the early church was so against suicide: Catholic, Protestant, you know, whoever the early church fathers. And I think there was a lot of misinterpretation or misunderstanding of what it was at that time. And then we didn't know the mental health issue at that time, and we didn't understand that. So I think being more aware of the biblical counseling that's becoming much more commonplace in churches can be a great resource if they're... And helping out about destigmatizing those that are suffering from mental illnesses and knowing it's not a sin. It's not a... That there's more to it than just a right or wrong. I mean, I remember someone would tell me once, well, if you just prayed enough, you know, it's like.

Roger Marsh: Right. Oh, yeah.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah. You know, it's like, yeah.

Roger Marsh: Jackie, I wanted to ask you, 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 the season? And what was the absolute worst thing? Was the, if you'd 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 is from my husband, you know, and he's in the middle of this. And I'm a very self, you know, 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... that was so helpful because otherwise I would have just been in a tailspin.

Roger Marsh: 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, 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.

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

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 leading a girls' group. I was mentoring some high school girls, and the idea was I was going to go with them for four years,

Roger Marsh: Okay.

Jackie M. Baker: 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. 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 live, 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.

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Jackie M. Baker: 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. It's just very sweet, you know, all these years later.

Roger Marsh: That's wonderful.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah. Yeah.

Roger Marsh: Well, I love the fact, too, that you became a Bible that they could read in terms of not necessarily one that you all got together and read, you know, verses and

memorized and what is Jesus saying here and that, which is all very important. You're in a, it seems like in a good place to help others go through this too. Was there a turning point where you said, hey, this doesn't have to be just kind of a dark cloud hanging over our home.

Jackie M. Baker: Right.

Roger Marsh: But we can be filled with hope in spite of what we went through.

Jackie M. Baker: And that is so true, because I just keep clinging to Jesus. And I kept saying, you know, just going through the motions, going through the, you know, you fake it till you make it. I didn't want to read my Bible, but I listened to my Bible every day.

Roger Marsh: There you go.

Jackie M. Baker: I would walk, and I'm like, did I hear it? I'm like, I just hoped that the Holy Spirit would permeate through, you know, my foggy brain and just bathe.

Roger Marsh: Yeah.

Jackie M. Baker: You know, I just bathe myself in the Word every day. And so I would take my dog for a walk, and I just kept exercising. I just kept the same routine. I said, I would go to church, but I would hide in the corner because I needed to go to church. So I'd go to the early service where all the elderly people are, and no one knew me. And I'd hide out and cry because I knew I needed to be in the presence of the Lord. So it was a work. It was a work. And one thing in my research that I knew it intuitively; it's like suicidal grief lasts a lot longer. It's not a one year and done like some people think you're like, oh, I should be good. It couldn't be five, seven, nine years, it's, you know, my daughter's still struggling, you know, and, you know, nine years, I mean, she, she misses her brother, you know, I mean, I miss my son, but it was probably year seven, you know, we, we said year seven, I went, huh, I kind of feel normal again, or whatever that new normal is. It's a new normal.

Roger Marsh: New normal. Right.

Jackie M. Baker: But I, I felt like. I had a year of jubilee. It was kind of like the seventh year. And I felt that was from the Lord too for me. It's like, wow, I felt a peace about me that I hadn't felt in a long time. So that started giving me hope and I could see it. But I also had to learn that grief is not linear, it can come. That's why I call it messy mourning because it's messy. One day you're fine and then things happen. We call them triggers unexpectedly. But year two, it's like you come out of the fog. For me, it was worse because I think that numbness went away and you start feeling the things that I think God protected me from. I think a lot of us in that fog then you have to start dealing with that grief in a different way. Because people go away, the meals aren't coming, people are living their lives.

Roger Marsh: Right, right.

Jackie M. Baker: And it's not that they've forgotten, and maybe they have, but that's not their responsibility, is it? We want them to remember, but that's why I just keep talking about my boy. I want other people to talk about my boy, because he's more than just, I always say, I wrote a chapter, "More than a Statistic." He's more than what he did. And so I want people to remember that about him.

Roger Marsh: Yeah. Jackie M. Baker is my guest today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. The book is called *Messing Mourning: Hope for Mothers Grieving the Loss of a Child by Suicide*. The link for the book is up at drjamesdobson.org. Let's talk about that faith component because that has probably become one of the most hotly debated issues in the last four or five years in the church is there are more people who are feeling this way. There are more young people who are thinking, maybe I'd be better off. Any number of reasons why they're thinking that being unalive, as they say, is better than being alive. But then there's the faith component. And a lot of people, how have you and Steve and Isabel kind of worked your way through that in terms of, well, Sebastian loved the Lord. Okay, so what did that mean for you guys then when you're saying, yeah, he loved the Lord, but he called his own number at that point.

Jackie M. Baker: It's a very complex topic.

Roger Marsh: Yeah. How have you guys worked through that? Because I'm sure there are a lot of people are saying, well, he said he was a Christian, but there's no way because this is what I believe. And we know it's way more nuanced than that.

Jackie M. Baker: Right. It is way more nuanced. In fact, I had someone that, well, they're like, well, suicide is a sin. Don't you believe that? And I'm like, I go, but is that the point right now? Does that mean anything in this whole scenario? That is not going to help a person who's struggling with mental illness by telling them that suicide is sin, that it's not going to keep someone from not taking their life.

Roger Marsh: Exactly.

Jackie M. Baker: In fact, they feel more guilt and more shame because they're thinking those things, and they have no sense of forgiveness or hope from a well-meaning person who they themselves, either one had never struggled with that, so they don't understand. And so, yeah, we struggled with that a lot. I remember after Sebastian died; we all grieve in different ways. I mean, I have a chapter, it's called "Grief Would Be Easier If It Was Just Me."

Roger Marsh: That's a good title.

Jackie M. Baker: Yeah, because me, I wanted to clean out his room and get rid of everything and just put it all away. My husband didn't want to; he wanted to close the door and pretend it wasn't there. And my daughter wanted to wear all of her brother's clothes and she still does. And, but in it, you know, he had his diaries and he

wrote a lot about his mental health and grief. I cannot look at those. But my daughter freely can look at those. And she's like, mom, I just want you to know that he loved Jesus so much. She said, but he was broken. We're all broken. And sometimes in our brokenness, we do things, we lose sight of the hope that's in us because we can't see it. And it's nothing. Is that a sin? I just think, no, that's a brokenness, isn't it? But there is nothing that can separate us from God's love. And so clinging to that has been so helpful for us. We just know that Sebastian is healed and whole and in the presence of Jesus.

Roger Marsh: Yes.

Jackie M. Baker: And so that's what I'd love to tell people. They're like, well, don't you miss your son? Of course I miss my son. And they go, don't you want him back? And I would hear this from moms. I'm like, yeah, but I don't want him back the way he was.

Roger Marsh: Yeah.

Jackie M. Baker: I want him back the way he is now. And of course, he doesn't want me, because I'm broken still. He's good. So I have to cling to that. I mean, one day, yeah, I'm going to be in God's presence. And I remember before, I was like, I can't wait to see Jesus. No, I would say, oh, I just want to see Sebastian. I'm like, wait a minute. No, I want to see Jesus.

Roger Marsh: There you go.

Jackie M. Baker: And Sebastian will be there.

Roger Marsh: Yes!

Jackie M. Baker: But I had a shift. There had to be that shift in there, because I had lost sight of that. And now it's like, you know what? When it's my time, and I remember because that was my husband's thing. I just want to be with the Lord. And I felt guilty because I was like, you know what? But it's not my time. God wants me here to do the work He has put before me. And I need to cling to that, that, oh my, this is where I am right now. So, but yeah, but everything again, we just had to keep clinging to Jesus and just being in His word. And so I lived in the Psalms for like seven years. That was the only Scripture I could read.

Roger Marsh: It's powerful to have that kind of reminder that, yes, obviously Sebastian lived here. He is part of our family. He's with the Lord now, but his life took a very unfortunate turn that got him to where he is. Jackie, talk now, if you would, for the mom who's listening to us, who says, okay, this was my story and you're giving me a lot of help. And trust me, when you were talking about being the woman who went to the early service where the elderly people were and sat in the back corner and cried, trust me, in my pastoral ministry days, I saw you every single Sunday because you think you're just kind of hiding out. It's like, wait, why is she here at this service and why is she sitting in the, okay, there's

something going on. But that's okay because your pastor saw you too and God saw you obviously and that's the case. But as you, when you were moving forward, there was a point where you needed to grieve, obviously, and the grieving process is a process. But what does a mom do in those days, in those weeks, those months, even in the first couple of years after suicide impacts a home? What do you recommend that she do?

Jackie M. Baker:

Well, the big thing is, I want to say, you know, isolation is good, but you need your people. You've got to have your safe people. And I say safe people, the ones that, I mean, I had some girlfriends, we've been prayer partners for years. So I for like two or three years, I would cry every time we got together. So you need those safe people to lament with and who are walking alongside you. I always think it's like Job's friends before they opened up their mouth because they sat beside him, right? And I think it provided a comfort for him. Then they changed. But I always just like, yeah, be present. You need safe people. And if it's with a support group, a grief group, I'm a member of Grief Share. I'm a grief share leader. It can be really, really helpful.

It's really hard to find suicide grief groups. A lot of people won't go to them. And then if you're that person like me, I didn't want to come alongside other moms. But I remember a few months after I'd lost Sebastian, a friend of mine had lost her husband and son in a tragic accident, and she wanted me to meet with her. And I'm like, I can't do this, Lord. And then I did. Again, I was being obedient. And we cried together for at least two or three years. And we're really, really good friends still. We get together. We help lead a Grief Share group. But that was years of that, doing that together, sharing our losses. Other things, mom, that there is hope that you are not alone. A lot of moms think nobody understands what they're going through.

Roger Marsh:

Right.

Jackie M. Baker:

And I just want to say that is not true. I call these are the lies that moms believe. And 49,000 people died by suicide in 2024 in the United States. So those are 49,000 moms. So you're not alone. And so finding those safe people, calling the church, if the church isn't helpful, go to another church. I can't control my child. I mean, you can do all those things and put all those safeguards in place, but they have a free will of their own, and they're going to make choices whether we like it or not. We can't always control our kids, especially when we have to let them go. It's hard to let go and to let God be in control. And so that's the other thing is you just have to learn. You've got to let it go because otherwise it's just going to hold you hostage. And then there is hope in Christ and just claiming on those Scriptures. And I said, just reading and listening to the Bible, you know, there is hope.

Roger Marsh:

Jackie M. Baker, the book is called *Messy Mourning, Hope for Mothers Grieving the Loss of a Child by Suicide*. It's a book that we highly recommend here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, and we have it linked up at drjamesdobson.org. Jackie, thank you for your vulnerability and sharing with

moms and dads who might have gone through this or who may be potentially needing this resource at some point and they don't realize it yet. Thank you for putting this together and for having such a great spirit about helping people who have gone through this. We appreciate your ministry and grateful to get to know you here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk today. Thanks for being with us.

Jackie M. Baker: Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure.

Roger Marsh: Well, we hope you appreciated the thoughts and sentiments that Jackie M. Baker shared today on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, our conversation based on her book called *Messy Mourning: Hope for Mothers Grieving the Loss of a Child by Suicide*. I'm Roger Marsh. If you missed part one of this broadcast, or if you'd like to share today's program with someone who would really be encouraged by it, you'll find parts one and two at drjamesdobson.org. And if it's easier, just type in jdfi.org. It's the same website.

One thing that really stood out to me during today's broadcast is how Jackie and her husband Steve came through this together. Instead of letting their grief drive a wedge between them, they kept praying together, and every day they kept a standing date night. And they kept their marriage a priority. And if you want to work on developing that same closeness in your own marriage, here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute we have created a 10-Day Marriage Series grounded in the simple time tested truth, the husband and wife that pray together stay together. Over 10 days, you'll receive practical faith-filled encouragement delivered right to your inbox to help you and your spouse grow closer to God and to each other. Now to get started, simply go to drjamesdobson.org and search for that title, "The 10-Day Marriage Series." Remember, it's a free email series. Go to drjamesdobson.org to learn more, or just type in those initials, jdfi.org.

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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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