



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Caregiving with Grit and Grace – Part 1

Guest(s): Jessica Ronne

Air Date: June 25, 2025

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. I'm Roger Marsh, sitting in the co-host seat today for a very special broadcast for anybody who has been challenged with and tasked with the responsibility of caring for someone with, as our family likes to say, different needs. You know, caring for a loved one can really stretch your heartstrings. It can really put you in a situation where you're facing some challenges that perhaps you never thought you'd face before. And you know, when you are that caregiver for that person, maybe it's an adult in your world who is battling dementia or Parkinson's disease or maybe you're a parent and you get the diagnosis that one of your kids is going to be born with some physical or emotional or mental challenges, it really does kind of put you in a whole different dimension.

And today here on the program, we're going to talk with a woman who kind of became an accidental expert, just like a lot of people do who this is your story when you find out that you have a child with this diagnosis. Jessica Ronne is with me, and she is the author of a brand-new book called *Caregiving with Grit and Grace: 100 Days of Hope and Encouragement*. Jessica Ronne is an author, a speaker, a podcast host, a film producer, and a caregiver advocate. She's also the founder and executive director of the Lucas Project, which is a non-profit organization that provides recognition, resources and respite for special needs caregivers. Jess and her husband, Ryan, live in Michigan with their, are you ready for this, eight children in their blended family, but one of those kids in particular is the aforementioned Lucas of the Lucas Project who was born with pretty severe disabilities. And Jess, welcome to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, Dr. and Mrs. Dobson, send their warmest regards and appreciate you being on the program today.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, thanks so much for having me.

Roger Marsh: This is one of those areas of ministry where people say, "I felt called to do something for the kingdom. I just didn't think it would be this," right? I mean, this is not the type of ministry that I think anyone... I know Joni Eareckson Tada would say, "Hey, if it were up to me, I wouldn't be in a wheelchair but this is the ministry that I have." And this is the ministry that God has called you to. You

have been through a lot of milestones that would have knocked a lot of people off course. And yet you have been able to press on with your faith. When did your faith journey start before we get into the nuts and bolts of how your family came together?

Jessica Ronne: You know, that's always kind of an interesting question, really. I grew up in a Christian home and being the oldest of 12 kids and very type...

Roger Marsh: Whoa, okay. Let's not run past this here. I mean, and you come from a large family too, my goodness.

Jessica Ronne: Yes. I feel like I've kind of been in this caregiving role since I was two years old, holding my twin brothers, you know, newborn twin brothers in each hand. So I grew up in a Christian home. We attended church and just being very type A, black and white type of personality, accepted Christ at a very young age, but then always felt compelled to re-accept Christ over and over whenever I did something that I deemed as, you know, unforgivable. So kind of grew up under that mantle of just shame and feeling like I always had to become a Christian again and again. And I would say my faith journey really pivoted when I was pregnant with my second child, Lucas. And I really had to lean into the shepherd's care and become very intimate with his strength upholding me during that very difficult time. And that was the moment, that was the period in life where I feel like it wasn't just in words anymore, but it was a relationship that I had with Jesus Christ.

Roger Marsh: That's wonderful. And as you then, you moved right into normal, you know, Christian college graduate life, right? You get married, you want to start a family. Talk about how those early steps that kind of put you on the trajectory where you are right now.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, married a guy. He was a personal trainer and a tennis professional, Jason. We were married in 2000 and after two years decided we wanted to start a family, got pregnant very quickly, had our son Caleb in 2002 and wanted to continue to add to our family. We wanted four children and found out I was pregnant again in 2004 and that's when everything really shifted. I went to what I thought was a routine ultrasound appointment for my second child and it was there that we were told the baby had experienced a stroke and utero and there was very little hope. The doctor said, "If I were you, I would terminate and try again. You're young and healthy. You won't have any problems getting pregnant. It's just nature's way. These babies aren't supposed to make it." And I went home and talked to my husband Jason about it and our faith would not allow us to terminate the pregnancy. We just put the baby in the Lord's hands and prayed for a miracle. And that became a very intense period of about four months of me just begging God to please heal my baby. And even going so far is to say, you know, I can handle, you know, healing in Heaven, but I don't think I'm the right person for that. So, I would rather you heal this baby completely in Heaven or heal it completely here on earth, but those are your two options, God, is kind of how.

Roger Marsh: And we're good at that, especially firstborns. I understand you, you know, you bring that list to him. And when you talk about that healing in Heaven, I know a lot of people in our shared Christian faith would say, "Yeah, that's the kind of God-honoring thing. You know, I've often prayed with people who are in situations where they're looking at what we would call a terminal diagnosis and saying, "Well, we're going to get healing in Heaven or we're going to get it here." And so for a child to have to be born with a profound disability, and you're talking 2004, I mean, I think about all the advances now that we see in utero in terms of being able to correct heart defects and things of that nature, that really wasn't an option.

Jessica Ronne: Not that I was offered.

Roger Marsh: So here comes Lucas and just the way he was made. And what was that like for you and Jason in that moment realizing you had prayed for a healing and God said My grace is sufficient for you.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, I didn't really realize it quite honestly. I gave birth to him on August 12, 2004. He came out screaming with life and I just wept in relief. I had my miracle baby. He underwent brain surgery at one day old and spent two weeks in the NICU. And then we were handed our baby like good luck with kind of an umbrella diagnosis of special needs and who knows with the right therapies and treatments, he could be very typical one day or not. Like we really had nothing to go on and I was just like okay we're going to give this child every single thing he needs and we're going to get to that as close to typical as we can and just kind of settle back into a normal typical family existence. So kind of in denial really, for many, many years, and it was extremely challenging. Lucas didn't sleep. He was delayed in every aspect of life. He had a two-year-old size head at birth because of all of the cerebral spinal fluid buildup. So they literally cut me open from one end of my belly to the other to get his head out. And so I didn't sleep much because I was terrified. If he were to flip over in the middle of the night, he would suffocate himself. So, those first few years were just very challenging.

Roger Marsh: And when you talk about the Lucas Project, this is something that you identify as you talk about the four seasons of what parents go through. You weren't necessarily saying, "Oh, he'll be fine. I'll just treat him like my other child and it's going to be okay." But rather just saying, "I'm trying to make it through till tomorrow. I'm trying to make it through the night. Just trying to get through." And so there's a certain level of denial in what you would call the winter part of this because you have to come to terms with how profound the situation really is. And even just the reality, I can't imagine what it's like having been the father of three newborn kids myself and now having grandchildren to come and visit the house. And it's like sumo wrestling with them in the middle of the night as they toss and turn and trying to figure out what's going on. But it never, ever occurs to us that they would have something like you had to deal with where if he turns the wrong way, he could suffocate himself. I mean, that's a major

revelation. Who was walking? I mean, it's you and Jason and who else is helping you?

Jessica Ronne: It was pretty much the two of us, quite honestly. And we found that really in raising a profoundly disabled child, it was often just the two of us. I think society is kind of like, well, she has her miracle baby, so they should be good. The baby lived. It's a celebration. The baby lived. It's still really, really hard, but the baby lived. Everything should be great from this point on.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, and it wasn't necessarily. And then to make matters even more interesting God in His mercy said guess what, Jason's gonna have some health challenges now to. Talk, talk about what that was like. You had two children at the time and here's your husband now with this diagnosis.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, three children, Our daughter Mabel was born in 2007 and about six months after she was born Jason started having all of these unexplainable health problems. He lost a ton of weight. He was disoriented all the time. He had vision loss and he's a gym owner, a personal trainer, a tennis professional and the specialists just keep telling him, while you've been diagnosed with type one diabetes, you have to get your sugar levels under control. And he just could not get these sugar levels under control. And he passed out one night and was rushed to the local ER where they discovered a baseball sized brain tumor. He went on to fight brain cancer for three years. We had another child in the middle of that and he ultimately lost his battle on August 24, 2010. And at that point, I was a 33-year-old widow with four children, seven and under.

Roger Marsh: Wow, four children, seven and under. And the second of those four children is Lucas who's dealing with these profound medical, emotional, physical challenges too. What was your life like, Jess, at that point? I mean, whom did you turn to? I mean, obviously, you had your faith, but even then, I'm sure your faith, your prayer life looked a little bit like God. What are you doing? This doesn't make any sense.

Jessica Ronne: Oh, I raged. I was angry. I felt like this doesn't really seem fair, Lord. This seems like a lot for one person to have to walk through. Within our marriage, we went through seven brain surgeries between Jason and Lucas, and at one point I had four people in my family who were incontinent that I was dealing with just with how young my children were with the disabilities, with hospice, with all of it and I was angry. I was very angry. I kind of operated in anger and even looking back, anger was the fuel that I tapped into just to continue to rise every day and to continue to care for everybody that I had to care for and ultimately I came to this point of surrender about two weeks before Jason died where I just fell to my knees and I said "Lord I don't understand this I don't like I but I will trust You" and that's really when I was able to enter into those final two weeks with Jason and accept that he would receive his healing in Heaven. And in those two weeks really had no regrets because I was able to be present with him.

Roger Marsh: What a powerful testimony. I'm still resonating on the number of incontinent people you had in your home, in your care, while you're trying to keep just keep the lights on, you know, keep everything going and keep you from not losing your own sanity. And I'm sure there were some people. Was there anyone in your world? I don't want to presume this. Was there anyone in your world Jess during this time who was that superstar Christian where you said, "Okay, I can lean on them. I can rely on them." And was there anyone in there who came in and just said all the wrong things? Very well, you know, the well -meaning people who show up and just say, "Oh, well, you know, this is God's plan and everything and you want to punch him in the nose?" I mean, I just...

Jessica Ronne: I had, and this is the interesting contrast, I had so much help in those three years. When Jason was going through cancer, I hardly knew what to do with all of the help. Like I did not make a dinner for three years. I had so many casseroles, people did my yard work, people did my house cleaning, my laundry, they helped care for my children. I was literally upheld during that period. And then contrasting that to raising a profoundly disabled child for 19 years, there's been crickets when it came to his care. But so I had so many people holding me up and just really literally being the hands and feet of Christ during that period. But I do remember one individual who it always just stuck with me as I was walking through Walmart, just in a daze. I mean, my husband's dying. I have four children. I'm just trying to get some stuff and get back home. And she came up and she said, you know, I've heard about your husband and she said, I just want to pray over you right here in the middle of Walmart. And I just thought, no, like I just, I need to get home to my husband, to my children. It felt more like it was about her need to have this grand gesture in the middle of Walmart that just kind of felt off. And so that's always stuck out in my memory is just, I feel like there could have been a better way to go about needing to pray for me or maybe offering some help during those moments and not having it be this grand gesture in the middle of Walmart that kind of left us all feeling uncomfortable.

Roger Marsh: Jess, I really appreciate your candor there. I really honestly do for all the times in pastoral ministry. And I was, I went through a heart situation about seven years ago and there were so many people would say, "Oh, I'll pray for you and they'd walk away." And I'm like, "Well, I'm right here." In that moment, I was ready to receive prayer. But for you to be vulnerable enough to say, "You know what? Thank you for the offer, but I really need someone to push this cart." "Or just buy me some extra diapers or something. That will speak to me much louder than you grandstanding here. And I'm in a rhythm and I'm in a daze" And I just really appreciate that. And I think that's kind of at the heart of your ministry now. And of course, the *Caregiving with Grit and Grace* book, which we'll get into in just a moment. We have a link for it up at drjamesdobson.org. So Jason goes home to receive his ultimate healing. You're at home with four children, one of them with profound disabilities. You're 33 years old. You finally kind of surrendered some things to God that maybe you've been holding onto and you probably had a few sleepless nights pounding on His chest asking why, which I appreciate the candor there too. And then a big turn in your life. Talk about

where did you and Ryan meet? How did that come together? It sounds, I mean, you cue the violins. There's gotta be a meet cute story here.

Jessica Ronne: There is and I really have to back up to the funeral, really when Jason's mom pulled me aside and said, "Jess, I just want you to know that I'm praying for your next husband." And I said, "Mom, I am not in the head space, you know, to even think about that." And she said, "You can't, you can't do this life alone with these four young kids and Lucas." She said, "You need a godly man to come alongside you and help you out." And she said, "You know, Jason ran his race and it's time to hand that baton over." And three months later, I got my kids to bed and I checked my blog that I had kept updated for the three years during Jason's cancer journey. And a stranger from Pennsylvania left a comment on my blog just saying "I have no idea why I'm asking you to do this but there is a young widower in Oklahoma. He lost his wife to brain cancer four days after Jason died; he has three young kids. He's not doing very well and I just think you could be a source of encouragement to him." So I found his blog, left a comment woke up the next day to an email from this man named Ryan Ronne and that led to phone calls a couple of weeks later. We were engaged within a few months and married within the year and he ended up moving to Michigan.

Roger Marsh: Oh my goodness. That's a commitment and a whirlwind romance where you, did anyone come alongside? 'Cause my first thought would be if you're sitting there getting this note from someone and you're reading it saying, "I just went through it and this guy just went through it and you should reach out." My first thought would have been, "Nah." What was it about this story that prompted you? I mean, the Holy Spirit obviously said, Jess, I want you to reach out to Ryan.

Jessica Ronne: You know, I'm a fixer maybe to a fault if there's a problem. I'm wired maybe a little bit more masculinely in that way. If there's a problem, I want to fix it. And I thought, well, you know, gosh, if I can help this guy, I want to see if I can fix it. So I've been fixing him now for 14 years, or attempting to. No, I just thought, his journey was very different from mine. She, his wife was diagnosed and three months later, she passed away. Oh, wow. Where I had three years to kind of work through all the stages of grief and come to an acceptance. And so I just thought coming alongside of him and being a source of encouragement, it would give me some purpose in the suffering that I had been through. And I'm always looking for opportunities, I think, to make meaning out of my suffering. And so it just felt like the natural thing for me to do, really.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, I think that's a, it's a wonderful story. And of course, you all lived happily ever after. There was no tension. It was a nice and easy blending of the families. I'm sure his kids love being uprooted from Oklahoma and drug up to Michigan. Seriously though, what were those first years like, those first few months, even weeks like? I mean, when the families all met, was there some kind of synergy? Was there backlash from any one of the kids in particular? How did his kids take to Lucas? I mean, there are a lot of questions that you guys had to work through.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, there's a lot of questions right there. They were all young and that really worked in our favor. So all of the kids were seven and under and there was a lot of excitement about all of these new brothers and sisters and a lot of excitement about getting a new mom or a new dad even, where I think had they been older it would have been much more challenging. And just to preface, when we got married there were 24 grandparents because we both come from broken families and then the late spouses as well. And so that was a lot, that was a lot of opinions. And honestly, how we handled it, we lived in Michigan for about a year and a half, and then we ran away to rural Tennessee, literally middle of nowhere, I think, just to try to carve out some space for our new family so that we could gel and come up with our own rhythms and routines without all of the outside voices and influences. And that was really helpful. It helped us come together as a family, but absolutely, anybody who's blended a family, there's nothing easy about it. I mean, there's so much. I wrote a whole book about it called *Blended with Grit and Grace*. It's very honest and very vulnerable about the challenges that we went through. It takes time for you and your new spouse to have that shared history together, so you're not always referencing, you know, these moments that you used to have with this other spouse. And it just takes time to iron out those new rhythms and routines and structures. And we're in a very different place 14 years later than we were those first couple of years.

Roger Marsh: For you, what was it about Ryan? I mean, obviously you have the similar backgrounds losing a spouse to brain cancer, that type of thing. And having a large, you know, you having four kids, him having three, and now you have another child. I mean, the ours baby, which is kind of nice. What was it like for you looking at him and saying, "Okay, there's something about him and it's not just what he gets me, so therefore we could make this work." I mean, I could see very easily where this might feel kind of familiar and, okay, this is safe and it's a good merger, as opposed to there has to be an element of romance in there too. How did he court you?

Jessica Ronne: How did he court me? That's a very intimate question.

Roger Marsh: Well, I mean, I don't want to go into super specifics, but I mean, I could see very easily where he might be very practical thinking, wow I just lost my wife and here's this wonderful woman and she gets it, so let's get married. But I mean, what kind of conversations did you guys have during the courtship period? Maybe that's a better way of putting it.

Jessica Ronne: We poured out our hearts to each other so much so that eventually we kind of had to pull back because there is something that can become almost painful in sharing so many memories about a late spouse when you're like married to a new spouse. And we recognize in hindsight, we probably should have each gotten our own separate therapist to work through a lot of those feelings and we used each other as therapists, which came back to haunt us a time or two. But lots of texting and emails and we would talk on the phone and we flew back

and forth to see each other numerous times. And we just really felt like God was in the middle of it. We're very similar, but very different. He's kind of this gentle, calm, loyal, steady, peaceful presence. And I'm more of this sort of brash, get it done, speak my mind type of presence. And we've found we just complement each other really well. But there's absolutely still stuff where we work through. We're just very intentional. We've always been very intentional. And even when we got married, we said, "We have to go on a date every single week, because if we don't lay this foundation of our marriage, we will not be doing our children any favors." We need to really invest in us as a couple and that also included going on a week-long vacation every year. It included praying together every morning, going on a walk, just the two of us every night, because we really had to solidify that foundation of our relationship, or it wouldn't have lasted with seven grieving children.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, oh my goodness, what a remarkable story. And Jess Ronne is with us today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. We're talking about the Lucas Project, which we'll get into more on the next edition of the broadcast, 'cause we've run out of time for it today, but I wanna make mention of the fact that the book *Caregiving with Grit and Grace: 100 Days of Hope and Encouragement* is up at drjamesdobson.org. Jess, we're just scratching the surface now on the Lucas Project. Can you join us again next time as we can continue this conversation?

Jessica Ronne: Absolutely. I'd love to.

Roger Marsh: Well Jess didn't certainly set out to be a caregiver advocate. She was actually just trying to survive each day and somehow, God transformed that survival into a ministry. Today on Dr. James Dobson's Talk, you've heard my conversation with Jessica Ronne about caregiving with grit and grace. Now if you missed any part of today's conversation you can listen again at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And be sure to check out Jess' book called *Caregiving with Grit and Grace: 100 Days of Hope and Encouragement*. You'll find information for the audio as well as the printed resource when you go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

You know, as we approach the end of the month of June, I want to share with you about an extraordinary opportunity that is only in effect for a short while longer. Some generous ministry partners of the James Dobson Family Institute have stepped forward with a special matching grant throughout the month of June, which means every gift you make to Family Talk will be doubled dollar for dollar through June 30. Now, June 30 is this coming Monday. You've only got five days left to take advantage of this special offer and please keep in mind your support enables us to bring hope to families facing impossible circumstances. Families who desperately need biblical wisdom and encouragement. When caregivers are at their breaking point, when marriages are tested by trials, when parents feeling overwhelmed by their children's special needs, your partnership allows us to be there with God's Truth and practical help. Whatever amount God leads you to donate, it will have twice the

impact of strengthening families all across the nation. To make a tax-deductible donation online and have it doubled before June 30, go to drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org. You can also call in your donation to 877-732-6825. And if you'd prefer, you can send your donation to our ministry mailing address. And that is Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk P.O. Box 39000 Colorado Springs, Colorado, the zip code, 80949. Please keep in mind, this matching opportunity does end this coming Monday, June 30, so please don't wait to make your donation.

By the way, as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount this month, we'll be happy to send you a copy of Dr. Dobson's powerful book called *Your Legacy* along with the companion DVD. Now this resource will help you build a spiritual heritage that equips your children and grandchildren with an unshakable foundation of faith. Something every parent needs in today's challenging culture. To receive your copy of Dr. James Dobson's *Your Legacy* book along with the companion DVD, as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, please call 877-732-6825. Or give a gift online at drjamesdobson.org.

And speaking of heritage, you know, Independence Day is just a week away and now is the perfect time to discover the remarkable faith stories of America's founders. When you visit our website, be sure to sign up for our exclusive "Faith of Our Founders" email series. You'll be amazed to learn how deeply our founding fathers relied on God's providence as they established this exceptional nation. These inspiring stories remind us that our liberties come from God not from government, a truth we must pass on to the next generation. And you can sign up for the free "Faith of Our Founders" email series when you go to drjamesdobson.org.

Well I'm Roger Marsh and on behalf of Dr. Dobson and all of us here at Family Talk, thanks for listening today. I invite you to join us again next time as we continue our conversation with Jessica Ronne talking about caregiving with grit and grace, right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust, for the family you love.

Announcer:

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