Marriage and the Empty Nest

Guest: Jill Savage
From the series: Empty Nest, Full Life (Day 2 of 3)
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Bob: Jill Savage was in the season of life where she was transitioning into the empty nest years. Something happened that turned her whole world upside down.

Jill: I had come home from speaking somewhere. He’d fallen asleep with the phone in his hands. I thought, “That’s really odd.” I picked up the phone and saw the—the conversation on there. As I read through it, I felt like I was going to throw up; because it became very evident that they had seen each other quite recently.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Thursday, February 27th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. Jill Savage joins us today to take us through the trauma that occurs when marriage vows are broken, and the recovery and forgiveness that can come later. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. I saw research—I think this is still true. Years ago, the research I saw said that in the—in the first seven years of marriage, that’s a danger zone—when marriages that had just begun often spin out. The divorce rate in the first seven years is high.

And then it kind of plateaus for awhile until you get to year 20 or 25. As you start to move into the empty nest years, the divorce rate comes back, in part because a lot of moms and dads, who have been focused on being moms and dads, don’t have a relationship with one another anymore. They wind up looking at each other, going: “Who are you?” and “Do I still even like you?”

Ann: We’ve seen that a lot.

Bob: Yes

Ann: I have friends, too, that are struggling—of once the kids are out of the house, you seem to put a magnifying glass on the marriage and you’re thinking, “Wait; I really don’t know him,” or “…like him,” or “…her.” And so we are seeing a lot of divorces in that time span.
Dave: And I actually think—you know, we are sitting here with FamilyLife®. I think FamilyLife helped us when we went to that first Weekend to Remember® two weeks before we got married, so we’re an engaged couple.

We learned at that weekend: “Of all things, your marriage is so critically important.” Now, I’m coming from a divorced, alcoholic family. I’m wanting to change a legacy. I learned, Day One—I’m not saying I did it very well—but I knew, Day One: “This marriage is more important than the kids I’m going to have, even though they are going to be extremely important.” I’m going to have to work, from Day One to now 40 years later, on this marriage; cause they’re going to leave someday; and hopefully, she’s never leaving and I’m never leaving. That was a challenge to never let the kids become our idols.

Ann: And that was a real challenge for me, because sometimes I liked my kids more than I liked my husband. [Laughter] I’m embarrassed to say that; but yes, it’s true.

Bob: We’ve got Jill Savage joining us this week, talking about these empty nest years and some of the dangers that come with those years. Jill, welcome back to FamilyLife Today.

Jill: Thank you

Bob: Jill’s written a book called Empty Nest, Full Life. She is an author, speaker, she has lead conferences; she has written on motherhood and on marriage for years. She and her husband Mark live in Normal, Illinois. They are the parents of five grown adults—now, out of the house kids—so she’s fully in the empty nest chapter of life.

You know about some of these challenges that come with these years, and letting go of the kids it—it can, all of a sudden, surface some of the things in the marriage relationship you weren’t ready for.

Jill: Oh, absolutely; that’s because the kids have served a bit as a buffer; you know, our eyes have been on them. Even, I think—you know, for parents that have worked hard to stay marriage-centered, not child-centered—you work hard to launch them and get them going; and then, all of a sudden, you are looking at each other.

You know, one of the things I write about in Empty Nest, Full Life, is you begin to see some of the gaps that maybe have been present in your marriage; but you didn’t really feel them—

Bob: Yes.

Jill: —because you were looking elsewhere.
Bob: Yes; we look at it and say the needs of our kids, during the parenting years, seem like urgent needs. The needs of our marriage are important needs but the urgent takes precedent over the important so many times. We wind up pushing the marriage relationship—

Ann: Yes

Bob: —off to the side. We don’t maintain it—we don’t have date nights; we don’t do anything—and we wind up in kind of an isolation that we didn’t anticipate and didn’t even realize was happening because we were busy with other things.

Jill: Yes, yes; absolutely. I think we have absolutely no idea that that is what is happening; but I think we need to be aware of it, and we need to recognize that, “We’re not the only ones that have dealt with this.”

Dave: I know, when we—when we FaceTime® with our middle son—has four now, kids. When we FaceTime with them, you are/you’re reminded its chaos. [Laughter]

Ann: Yes!

Dave: They are yelling and screaming, and “Hold on!”—you know, the phone’s going all over the—its just—[Laughter]

Ann: I just—

Dave: —and you’re thinking, “How in the world did you even have a marriage?”

Ann: Right. [Laughter]

Dave: —because you’re living in that chaos. [Laughter]

Ann: I just babysat them last week; and I was thinking: “How did I ever spend time with Jesus?” [Laughter] “How did I even talk to Dave?” [Laughter]

Bob: Mary Ann and I look at each other and go: “Was it this crazy? I don’t remember it being this crazy.” Maybe it’s because we were crazier back then and we just had a higher tolerance for crazy.

Jill, you write in your book about some of the challenges that were concurrent with your entry into the empty nest. You’ve been very public—you and Mark both—about a season of strain in your marriage. When were you first aware that your marriage was not where it ought to be?

Jill: Well, you know, Mark and I have always been very intentional about our marriage. We did all the right things: I mean, we went to a Weekend to Remember®; we did our
own marriage seminars that we presented locally; we knew each other’s love languages—we spoke them regularly—we went on date nights; [Laughter] we went away, just the two of us; okay? We’re doing all the right things; okay?

Bob: Yes.

Jill: But at the time that my husband was hitting his 50th birthday, and he also was deciding that it was time for him to retire from ministry—and quite frankly, he was quite beat up from a church plant that we had done for the last ten years; and so he decided it was time to step away—he was pretty exhausted. I knew he was struggling, but I minimized how much he was struggling. I felt him kind of pull away. We were still doing some of the right things on the outside; but on the inside, what we now know is our hearts were being pulled apart, one little quarter inch at a time.

We call them—we wrote about them in a book we wrote, No More Perfect Marriages—we call those “the slow fades.” Our hearts were fading, but we didn’t feel it since it was a quarter inch at a time; and you don’t feel that. A quarter inch builds on another quarter, and it builds on another quarter; and before you know it, you are at inches; then you are at feet; and then you are at miles.

And so by the time that he was two years after he had resigned from ministry, he was emotionally spiraling; and he really began to pull away.

Ann: What did that look like, Jill, when you say he’s emotionally spiraling?

Jill: Mark had always struggled with depression; and we had ups and downs, but this was—he would make comments like: “We are just too different,” and “Life is just too hard. God should be answering our prayers ‘this way.’” He was struggling in a lot of different areas of life, but he just—hopeless; he was very hopeless—that’s really what was happening.

Now, here’s me—the/the person who is always optimistic. He would say, “It’s cloudy outside,” and I was quick to tell him why it was sunny; and so I was dismissing his concerns. We now know that as what we call “the slow fade of minimizing.” I was minimizing his expressed concerns and that was causing him to not feel heard and valued.

At the same time, he had some pretty unrealistic expectations of life, and God, and marriage; and he really kept thinking life should be easier. He’s looking for the easy button; well, it’s not—life is hard. We now know that is “the slow fade of unrealistic expectations”; because when you have unrealistic expectations, the space in between unrealistic expectations and reality is discontentment. His discontentment was growing.

At that point—
Bob: And this was in the season when you are starting to launch your first kids—

Jill: Yes.

Bob: —right?

Jill: We sure were. I’m personally going, “I’m so excited about this new season”; but he’s hopeless, going, “We are just too different; I am not excited about this new season.” We looked good on the outside; but underneath the surface, things were not well.

Bob: Were you unhappy?

Jill: No!

Bob: Huh.

Jill: I wasn’t.

Ann: And did he point anything out about you that he was asking to change—for you to change?

Jill: He definitely felt I had a critical spirit—there was that control piece—and I was learning about that; I was changing that; but I—no, I would say I was very content.

At the same time—I also now know a lot more about myself—and I’m an avoider. I didn’t know that then, but I avoid naturally. The home I grew up in was a loving home, but we didn’t do a lot with emotion; so I kept emotion at a very surface level. Therefore, I wasn’t highly vulnerable to my husband, who actually is a natural feeler. I’m more the thinker; he’s more the feeler. He longed for more, and I didn’t even know what more looked like.

Bob: So Dave and Ann have talked about the fact that, at one point in their marriage, Dave thought it was a 9 or a 10 on a 10-point scale—


Bob: Ann thought it was a .5.

Ann: So we would be exactly the opposite.

Bob: You thought your marriage was a 9 or a 10?

Jill: Yes, absolutely.
Bob: And he was growing discontented with it.

Jill: Yes, yes

Bob: When did the crisis hit, and how did you become aware there was a crisis?

Jill: Yes, well the crisis hit one summer/one summer day that I picked up his phone and saw a text from somebody that I wasn’t familiar with. It became evident that he was talking with someone—a female. We were actually on a date night. He had gone to the bathroom and left his phone laying on the table. He came back to the table; and I said, “What is this?” I actually recognized the name of the person; I knew it was a past girlfriend. I thought, “This is really odd,” and so I asked him.

He said: “Oh, you know, no big deal. We’re just to having—I was helping her/helping her out in a tough time in her life.” But it was several months later when I found out that it had become a move from an emotional affair to a physical affair.

Bob: So at the time you saw the text, he was—

Jill: —it was still emotional.

Bob: Did you accept his answer at dinner?—like: “Oh, I was helping her out”; and it’s like, “Okay, we can move on.”

Jill: Yes and no. I said: “I know his heart. He’s a shepherd at heart, and I know that part of him”; but I also knew that he was struggling in life.

We’ve always talked about, you know, needing to put up hedges of protection in marriage. I said: “Mark your treading in a difficult place. Probably, you should copy me on those texts; so that if you are interacting with her on Facebook® or email, let’s—let’s just make sure that we are both in the loop.” “Ya, Ya, Ya; I know”; and so we did for about one week or so; and then that—

Bob: —went dark again.

Jill: Yes.

Bob: When did you know it was more than an emotional attachment?

Jill: That was about four months later.

Bob: And how did that come to light?

Jill: On the phone—I had come home from speaking somewhere, and he had fallen asleep with the phone in his hands. I thought, “That’s really odd,” and I picked up the
phone and saw the—the conversation on there. As I read through it, I felt like I was going to throw up; because it became very evident that they had seen each other quite recently. And my world turned upside down that night.

**Ann:** That has to be the hardest thing any spouse can go through.

**Jill:** Yes.

**Ann:** How did you react? What did you feel?—what did you say?

**Jill:** I was—I mean, the physical illness when you see something like that—I mean, I heard people say that; but until you experience it.

I had a friend, who knew that Mark was not doing well in just life in general. She—a real sense of discernment in her spirit—she had told me for about a month: “Jill, I am here for you/24 hours a day. You need anything; you let me know.”

When I picked up that phone and saw it, it was 1:30 in the morning. After I feel, “At least, like I’m not going to get sick to my stomach, I/I’m”—well, actually, the first thing I did is—I made the call to the person who was sending the texts on my husband’s phone. I just/I called her to integrity. I said: “I am just calling you to integrity. This is not what you are made for. This is not what God has for you, and I’m just calling you to be a woman of integrity.” That was the hardest phone call I’ve ever made.

**Bob:** That’s a pretty remarkable phone call.

**Ann:** Oh, man!

**Bob:** That’s not how most people are going to respond.

**Ann:** Very—

**Bob:** They’re going to call with anger and—

**Jill:** I—

**Bob:** —let her have it.

**Jill:** I was—I mean, I laid a stake and drew my line. I just—I used it as a call to her life. Her life was off center; and I wanted/I wanted that for her [to be re-centered]. I mean, I wanted it for my family to be restored.

And the next call I called was my friend, and she stayed on the phone with me much of the night. We prayed together. I couldn’t sleep. Mark and I, actually, had a counseling
appointment the next day. I chose to actually wait until the counseling appointment to reveal what I had discovered. I felt like that was wiser.

Ann: Girl, you are mature; that was very wise.

Jill: That was hard.

Dave: How did it go with the counselor? I mean, how did your husband respond?

Jill: Yes, that’s a great question. He looked at me and he looked at the counselor, and he said, “That’s right; that’s what’s going on, and I’m not stopping!” I mean, there was real anger, and pride, and a firmness. The counselor actually separated us; said, “I would like to talk with each of you individually.”

He talked to me first; and so: “What do I do?! I don’t even”—I mean, I was a wreck. I mean, I’m just—I can’t even hold myself together at this point; because I’ve been holding myself, so I just let it all go; you know? We just talked about some next steps. He encouraged me/he said, “If your husband agrees to get help, I think you could consider him staying; but if he refuses help, I think you need to probably ask him to leave.”

Bob: Let me just say here—Mark knows we are having this kind of conversation.

Jill: Oh, yes.

Bob: He’s aware of it. You guys have shared openly about this.

Jill: We have.

Bob: I just want our listeners to know this is not—we are not telling tales out of school here.

Jill: No.

Bob: From that counseling appointment, it was a process of months, certainly, beyond—was it more than a year for you guys to start to do the work?

Jill: Well, it was—at that point, he did agree to get help. He went away to an event for men for sexual purity. Then things seemed to be okay; but actually, between then and when he actually permanently came home—he went back and forth, seven times, between the other relationship and our marriage—and then it was on Easter Sunday, actually of 2012, where I saw the blinders come off; and I saw the surrender happen.

Now, that didn’t mean that trust had been rebuilt; and it didn’t mean that there wasn’t healing. We had another 18 months of weekly marriage counselling after that to put the
wheels back on the bus and to begin to heal. We did not share our story publically for another two to three years after that. We had an agreement we could share it, privately, with anyone; but at that point, you know, we just needed to heal.

**Bob:** Yes; and here you are—an author; and a speaker about marriage/about family; and you’re still doing this, week in and week out, with this baggage that you can’t talk to anyone about except your friends, privately.

**Jill:** Right; because authenticity is a big important part of my life; it’s an important part of my ministry. When Mark left, I circled the wagons with my pastor, my chairman of the board of our ministry, two of my ministry leaders, and my best friend. I said: “I refuse to go on as if life is okay, but I don’t know how to do this. So can we come up with a public statement that will protect my marriage?—because we want him to come home.”

We sat around the table; we prayed; and we crafted what now is on my blog—it was called “From My Heart.” I explained that Mark had chosen to leave and that that wasn’t my heart; my children were heart-broken. I was honest that he had left; I did not speak of his infidelity at that point. I felt like that was his story to tell; and several years later is when he said, “I feel like God’s asking us to start talking about our story.”

**Ann:** So Jill, there were months that you didn’t know if your marriage was going to make it or not. In those months, what was going on? What do you think: “This really helped me”?

**Jill:** So every year, in our *Hearts at Home Conferences*, we had different keynote speakers. Jennifer Rothschild was one of our keynote speakers. I will never forget a statement she said on the stage of our *Hearts at Home Conference*. I’m backstage; you know, I’m emceeing the conference—I’m in and out—but I hear her talking about her blindness. She says this—she says: “It is not well with my circumstances, but it is well with my soul.” I remember catching that and thinking, “Oh, I love that statement”; but I didn’t need it personally at that point in time.

**Ann:** Yes.

**Jill:** It just kind of got shelved back there, and God brought that back to me. My prayer became: “Lord it is not well with my circumstances, but I am determined it will be well with my soul.” That was really—I mean, literally, I’d go to bed at night—I wrote a blogpost during that time; it was called “Sleeping Single in a King-Size Bed” because nighttime was the hardest.

I would read my Bible, and I would lay it on my husband’s pillow; and then I would turn off the lights. Then, in the morning, it was the first thing I saw; and I would pick it up. I would read—just even a verse—I didn’t have the where-with-all to read more than like a few words, because my heart was *broken*. But I just kept trying my best to say: “Okay,
Lord, it’s not well with my circumstances; but I need to keep drawing closer to You. You’re going to have to show me what to do.”

**Bob:** I’ll just mention to listeners—you talk about this in a book you have written called *No More Perfect Marriages*; you also talk about it in *Empty Nest, Full Life*, because it was a part of your transition into the empty nest years. We have both of these books in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. You can go online at FamilylifeToday.com to get a copy of either or both of Jill’s books.

*Empty Nest, Full Life: Discovering God’s Best for Your Next* is the book about the empty nest years; and *No More Perfect Marriages* is where you talk about the challenging journey that you and Mark went through and how you rebuilt a marriage from the ashes it was in. Again, go to FamilyLife.com to order either book; or call 1-800-FL-TODAY, and we can take care of things for you over the phone.

You know, these kinds of conversations like we’ve had today are often conversations that connect really heart to heart with a lot of people in what they are going through. We’re always a little taken aback by how God uses these conversations at just the right moment in the lives of so many people, and that’s what we are here for.

At FamilyLife®, we want to provide you with practical biblical help and hope for your marriage and your family. And the folks who make all of this possible for us are our monthly Legacy Partners—FamilyLife Today listeners, who have said: “This is important; it’s important for me, for our family, it’s important in our community. We want to see this continue. We want to be the providers of help and home for people all around the world.” You do that when you become a Legacy Partner.

This week, we’re asking many of you, who are regular longtime FamilyLife Today listeners: “Would you join the Legacy Partner team?” I will give you three reasons why this is a good time to do it. Here’s reason number one: when you become a new Legacy Partner this week, we are going to send you a copy of Phil Vischer’s, *Laugh and Learn Bible for Kids: The Gospel in 52 Five-Minute Bible Stories*. You can use this with your kids or your grandkids; share it with a family at church; use it in Sunday school. It’s a great tool. It’s our gift to you when you become a new Legacy Partner today.

Number Two: we’re going to send you a certificate so that you and your spouse, or a couple you know, can be your guests at a Weekend to Remember marriage getaway/any of our getaways around the country. This certificate covers the registration fee. It’s our gift to you when you become a Legacy Partner.

And here’s the third reason to become a Legacy Partner this week: we have had some friends of the ministry, who have agreed that they will match every Legacy Partner donation, from new Legacy Partners, over the next 12 months, dollar for dollar, up to total of $30,000. We want to take advantage of that matching-gift opportunity. When you
become a Legacy Partner this week, every donation you make for the rest of the year is going to be doubled, thanks to that matching gift.

With all of that, we are hoping that many of you, who are regular listeners, will say: “Okay, we can be part of the team; we know that you need it. FamilyLife Today is listener-supported; we want to be a part of the support team.” Go to Familylife.com; become a Legacy Partner online, or call 1-800-FL-TODAY to become a Legacy Partner. And thanks, in advance, for joining the team. We are so grateful for those of you who, are not just listeners, but a part of what God is doing through this ministry. Thanks for making it happen.

And we hope you can join us tomorrow. We’re we are going to hear from Jill Savage, again, tomorrow about another traumatic experience that she and her husband have gone through during their transition years into the empty nest. This one involves their son, Evan. I hope that you can tune in for all of that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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