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The Losses of Motherhood

Guest: September McCarthy
From the series: Why Motherhood Matters (Day 1 of 2)
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Bob: Early in her second pregnancy, September McCarthy remembers being at her doctor's office when she and her husband received some very disturbing news about her pregnancy.

September: They said: "You could go into labor at six months. You could carry her full term, but she won't live very long—it could be ten minutes. She might not even make it through delivery; she could be stillborn.

We carried her nine months, and we had an hour. [Emotion in voice] You know, delivering a breech baby is hard. I can just remember my husband getting right in my face and saying: "We're going to do this together. God is right here, September." When she was born, and they handed me her and she opened her eyes, it was almost like the Holy Spirit was just right there; and everything in the room faded away. I can never replicate that moment. I had a peace that passes all understanding.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our host is Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. There are seasons of profound grief and heartache that we can face in our parenting journey. There are seasons of unspeakable joy as well. We'll hear more about both sides of parenting from our guest today, September McCarthy. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. I shared with you about my grand-parenting adventure last night a little bit; right? [Laughter]

Dennis: It will never make it on the air, folks. [Laughter] I wish we could play this story. [Laughter]

Bob: Just—In a quick version—I was grand-parenting for two children—

Dennis: —two and under.

Bob: —two and under. And I had them, basically, for two waking hours before I had them both put to bed.

Dennis: What a pro!

Bob: Pretty much the *whole* focus of those two waking hours was feeding and then taking care of what happens after you feed the kids. [Laughter] That was pretty much what I spent my time doing. Here's the reason I brought that up, because—

Dennis: Yes; what is the reason? Are you looking for a martyr award or something?

Bob: No; the reason I brought it up because I had a moment, where I thought—

Dennis: You know what this is?—this is the world's smallest violin. [Laughter]

Bob: Dennis is just giving me no sympathy. [Laughter] I had this momentary thought: "There are moms, who listen to *FamilyLife Today*, and that's not a two-hour experience that they have, you know, once a month. That's what they live with, day in and day out. Then they just go, 'This is my life!—is to feed and then to clean my child.'"

Dennis: Do you have more compassion on MaryAnn as a result of your two-hour duty last night?

Bob: I'm sure, if I sat and thought about it long enough, yes; I would develop more compassion. [Laughter]

Dennis: His compassion molecule just showed up. [Laughter]

Bob: Well, I was just having compassion on *me* for doing my two hours' worth. [Laughter]

Dennis: Well, we want to cheer on moms today.

Bob: Yes; we do.

Dennis: And we have a mom, who is here on the broadcast, who was born in September and *named* after September by her mom and dad. September McCarthy joins us on *FamilyLife Today*. Welcome to the broadcast.

September: Thank you. It's an honor to be here.

Dennis: She has written a book called *Why Motherhood Matters: An Invitation to Purposeful Parenting*.

Bob: You are well beyond the diaper stage of parenting; right?

September: We are well beyond that.

Bob: But you remember it; don't you?

September: Yes; it wasn't long ago—just sixth years ago.

Dennis: Well, she better be beyond it because they have ten—count them—ten children, ages seven to twenty-six—

September: Right.

Dennis: —four grandchildren. She’s been married to Dan the Builder—that’s what he does, but that’s also kind of her nickname in her book for her husband Dan—since 1989.

Bob: Now you know, September, there are some moms listening, who just tuned out when they heard you have ten kids; because it’s kind of like, “Oh, she’s one of those kinds of amazing moms—those super moms.”

Dennis: Are you a three-ring circus mom?

September: No; nope.

Dennis: Now, come on!

September: Five—maybe five-ring. [Laughter] It’s crazy at our house. We are the real deal—real, you know, story. When I travel and speak, and people hear my bio and I introduce myself as a mom of ten, I can see the shades come right down over their faces; and they kind of tune me out. So [now] I don’t even tell anyone anything about me when I start talking, because I want them to know I’m just like them.

Bob: Whether you’re raising one or ten—

September: Right.

Bob: —the realities of motherhood—there are parallels that every mom experiences; right?

September: Correct.

Dennis: What would you say is the *biggest* challenge of being a mom of ten?

September: Just the conversation—just keeping up with everyone’s lives—like knowing where they are, all at the same time. When they come back and talk to me, remembering who’s doing what—what’s going on in their life—remembering I’m living with *ten* different personalities. I have to—it’s my job to remember and make them feel important.

Dennis: So do you have Find a Friend—[Laughter]—Find Your Friend app on your phone?

September: No; but that is a *great* idea! [Laughter]

Dennis: I would have it on every one of the kids who have the devices.

Bob: Or just have a collar around their neck. [Laughter]

September: We have left a few at church before.

Bob: September, I want to go back to 1989, when you and Dan got married. Did you guys talk and both of you look at each other and say, “I want as many kids as we can have”?

September: Never—we never did that.

Bob: Was that in your heart at that point?

September: No; motherhood was not on my radar.

Bob: Now wait!

Dennis: Seriously?

September: Seriously; yes.

Bob: Was it something you weren’t interested in at all?—were you opposed to it?

September: I wasn’t opposed to it. I just was not trained or raised to think that it might be an integral part of my future. I think a lot of women think: “That’s to come. That probably will happen. That is part of what is in the future.” But to me, it wasn’t something that I ever focused or was raised to be a good mom. When we got married, it was just bliss. You know, we were young and I wasn’t thinking: “I’m going to be a mom someday,” and “I want to be a mom someday.”

My book is a *learning* experience. You know, it was something God walked with me and taught me. I’m eager to share it; because I want other women, who may have come into motherhood and been surprised and caught off guard—or even those that thought they were prepared and are entering motherhood—and they’re thinking, “This is *not* what I thought it was going to be.”

Bob: Did you think your path would be a career path with kids fitting in around that?

September: I went to school to be a teacher, and dropped out of college, and married a builder; yes.

Then we started a family with loss. At that point, I just did not think motherhood was on my radar.

Bob: Yes; talk about starting a family with loss, because that’s a key part of this story.

September: Well, you know, I didn't think that motherhood was going to be part of my future. When we found out we were expecting, it was a mix of anxiety and excitement. It grew to be excitement. We had a miscarriage shortly into our marriage. Then we found out we were expecting another baby—a little girl. That's a long story, and that's a part of my book.

I think what happened in all of our loss is—I realized, deep down, when I was in pain and suffering, that God obviously had something that was birthed in me that He put there as a desire; because I was missing it, and longing it, and wondering, “Why did this happen?” instead of thinking, “Well, I didn't plan on being a mother.”

We don't ever think that when we lose a baby. I realized that motherhood must matter.

Bob: That second pregnancy—that daughter—

September: Yes; Elizabeth.

Bob: You learned, while she was still in utero, that she had no kidneys.

September: Right; four months in, we went to the doctor—I was alone; Dan was at work. The doctor pulled me aside and he said: “I recommend that you have an abortion. Your baby won't live. She has no kidneys.” I kind of walked out of that office very numb, thinking, “What choice do I have?” Then I went home, and Dan and I grieved together—we grieved very *deeply*; we kind of secluded ourselves.

Then a great Christian couple, who kind of mentored us, came alongside us and said: “You need to share this. You need to let God use this.” That was a foreign concept to my mind—I'm thinking: “Let God use this? I'm carrying this baby that's going to die.”

My husband and I—we put in a lot of prayer, and we chose to carry that baby—our little girl, Elizabeth—for another six months. We delivered her—a breech delivery—and she lived an hour. I will never forget that moment. You know, it was the most glorious moment of my entire life; because I could sense the presence of the Lord saying, “You didn't have to carry her.” We had that time with her—we were able to spend that time, looking in her eyes. I remember thinking, “Motherhood matters.” I learned that very early on—I was only 19 at that point.

Elizabeth is with the Lord; we had a few more miscarriages after that. That was the beginning of my motherhood journey—was loss.

Dennis: I want you to just unpack where you were, spiritually, when you started your marriage. I mean, at 19—I'm not sure I was in the ball game at that point.

September: Right.

Dennis: You talked about how the concept of allowing God to use suffering in your life for His purposes was foreign. I get that—at that age, you've got the whole of your life to look forward

to. You don't think it's going to happen to you. Share with our listeners where you were at that point and how God has used motherhood to perform heart surgery on you.

September: Yes; motherhood has been sanctifying for me. I was not raised in a very strong Christian home, where you live out what you know. This concept of suffering and drawing closer to the Lord through moments like this was foreign. I didn't even understand what that person meant when they said to me, "Let the Lord use this."

As our marriage and time together in losing children—even in the future, we lost more pregnancies—I realized that my faith needed to be real for *me*.

It couldn't just be: "I'm a Christian. I'm married. We're a godly couple." Really, we were a couple that knew the Lord; but I wanted to be that godly person that understood what Christ meant when He said, "Share in My suffering."

That grew me. It forced me in a path to open the Word of God and to dig in and to understand what His principles were and what they meant. That was how my spiritual journey—in sync with motherhood—kind of grew and expanded my knowledge about the Word of God. I just want to encourage others, who have gone through a loss—just *choose* to draw close to the Lord, because He's the only that's going to hold you through that.

Bob: I want to go back to that one hour you had with Elizabeth; because I can imagine a woman in that moment, saying: "I never want to open myself up to the possibility of this kind of heartache again," and "I don't want to get pregnant." Did you feel any of that?

September: All of that; right—all of that.

Dennis: A big risk.

September: It is a big risk, even after you have a miscarriage. That's the normal feeling—our bodies, our mental state, our emotions—of course, it does take time to heal—you have to let yourself heal.

But in that one hour—you know, it was really a supernatural thing. [Emotion in voice] It's amazing—because I talk about this all the time, but when I think about that one hour—you know, delivering a breech baby is hard. I was only 19, so that was my first delivery. They say women's deliveries get easier, the more you know / the more you do this. But this was my first baby. I can remember thinking, "This is never going to end." It was *very* painful. [Tears]

When you walk through pain and suffering, and it's physical, it becomes more spiritual.

Dennis: Yes.

September: When it was time to deliver Elizabeth—and we had no pain medication back in that day—I can just remember my husband getting right in my face and saying: "We're going to

do this together. God is right here, September.” It was not an easy delivery, and the doctors had to manipulate her out. When she was born, and they handed me her and she opened her eyes, it was almost like the Holy Spirit was just right there; and everything in the room faded away.

Dennis: Yes.

September: I can never replicate that moment. I had a peace that passes all understanding. It was like the calm after the storm, which is so hard to explain. Because when you’ve gone through something like that, people think, “That is the storm—when you lose your baby.” But that was the peaceful part—you know, just holding her and knowing that I had given birth, and made a choice, and that God gave us that moment. He gave us that moment, and I knew that I was going to have to give her back to the Lord.

Then, when it was time, the doctors told me, “September, you don’t have a whole lot of time left with her.” I looked up; and there in the room to my right—and I tell my husband this, and I haven’t shared this with a lot of people—it was like there was an angel standing right there. She [Elizabeth] just closed her eyes, and she went to be with Jesus.

There was this amazing strength that came over me.

I literally just got out of bed and showered and dressed, and my body had just been through a very physical trial. The nurses were like: “Honey, sit down. It’s okay.” I said, “No; I’m really—I’m ready to move on.” I didn’t mean move on, emotionally—I just had this strength.

The hardest part was looking at my husband and watching him watch me suffer. Suffering in this was not just a strengthening of my faith—it was a strengthening of our marriage. Dan and I have always—our marriage has always been about drawing closer to one another through these times.

Bob: When you found out that you were pregnant, again, after—

September: I was afraid. Right; I was afraid. I lived in a lot of fear for many years. It affected our physical relationship—it affected everything—because I didn’t want to find out that I was pregnant again. I didn’t want to—I did not want to have to say good-bye again. It takes a long time to break a cycle of fear. You know, fear can affect your spiritual life, your marriage, your motherhood; and I did *not* want to live in fear—it took me captive.

We did—we found out we were pregnant again. We had another miscarriage, and that led to some bitterness in my life. I became kind of bitter at motherhood. I didn’t understand: “If this is what God meant for motherhood, I didn’t want to have *anything* to do with it.” You know, I’m not afraid to say that; because I want women to know that there’s a real face to grieving—you know, it’s a real thing. The most important thing is, though, that you don’t stay in that place—you know, that there’s a hope that we can hold on to.

Dan and I worked slowly out of that, and we clung to the Lord. We just spent more time in the Word.

We became better communicators with one another and trying to figure out how we were going to navigate the rest of our marriage if this is what it meant—if it meant no children; if it meant loss. The fear just slowly faded away. Then we had our first-born son, Ben, who we did take home from the hospital.

Bob: There was a day that came when you gave birth again; and this time, they handed you a baby that was a healthy baby.

September: Right.

Bob: What was that experience like for you after miscarriages and after Elizabeth's birth?

September: Carrying my son, Benjamin, was fearful. I think every pregnancy after that was fearful. All the questions: "Will something be wrong?" "Will we lose him?" It took me years in our marriage to shake fear off my back and to give it over to God and say: "No more. You [fear] will have no part of me," but it took a long time. I think that is somewhat normal for women who have repeated loss in pregnancy, like with any area of life.

When he was born, he was another miracle. We had problems with the pregnancy for Benjamin as well. When he was born, full of life, it was amazing—it was an amazing experience. I spent a lot of time holding him—I would not lay him down—

Bob: Yes.

September: —just a lot of valuable time. He and I became very close.

Dennis: —not just after delivery.

September: No; right. Yes; he's my son.

Dennis: You didn't want to let go. [Laughter]

September: No; I did not want to let go of that boy. Unfortunately, that poor boy has gone on—he's like, "Mom, let go." [Laughter]

Bob: In that moment, did motherhood become different for you?

September: Motherhood became the reality of what motherhood is to many women now. To me, motherhood had meant loss. Now, motherhood was: "This is work," "This is sleeplessness," "This is love," "This is amazing," "This is hard,"—all of those things that motherhood—people know motherhood to be. I was loving every minute of it. I think that's what happens when you go through a lot of loss. The hard was very dim for me—like it didn't

feel as hard as people were talking, because I was so *thankful* to have him that it just seemed inconsequential—like the hard stuff.

Bob: You know, maybe there is a point to be made there for every mom, who is in the middle of the hard,—

September: Right.

Bob: —to remember: “Yes; this is hard—we’re not denying that—but God’s given you a *blessing* here—

September: Right.

Bob: —“that is *incalculable*.”

September: It is. It is hard to understand until you *don’t* have it. I think that is what put such a huge value to me. Of course, you have to move on and live this hard motherhood stuff. The more we added, the harder it got. [Laughter]

Dennis: Yes; I get that. You’ve reminded us of Psalm 127: 3-4: “Behold children are a heritage from the Lord. The fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth.”

You don’t know this about us, most likely, but one of the first grandchildren we had born—not the very first, but kind of the first batch—was a little girl named Molly, who lived seven days.

September: Beautiful.

Dennis: That’s her footprints on Psalm 127: 3-4—are the only thing we have of her in my Bible. I can kind of identify with your hour. I’m not a mom, but I held Molly on the seventh day.

September: Yes; right.

Dennis: It’s a great privilege.

September: It is.

Dennis: You know, every mom/every dad ought to go home and hug their kids tonight.

September: I agree; yes.

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