



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Light from Lucas: Lessons in Faith From a Fragile Life – Part 2

Guest(s): Bob Vander Plaats

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Dr. James Dobson: Hello everyone. I'm James Dobson. I wanted to remind you that right now is a great time to partner with us at James Dobson Family Institute. Every dollar you give will be doubled thanks to a very generous matching grant. I hope you will stand with us in our fight for marriages and families. If you are able to support us, know that any amount that you give will have a major impact on the people that we're able to reach. Learn how you can partner with us and participate by going to drjamesdobson.org or call (877) 732-6825. That's (877) 732-6825.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome back to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. On yesterday's program, we heard about how Bob and Darla Vander Plaats brought their son Lucas into the world, and then quickly, how things spun into chaos for the whole family. Today, we're going to hear day two of this three-part conversation featuring our own Dr. James Dobson and his dear friend, Bob Vander Plaats. Bob will be continuing to share more about his family's life story and also about the updated and newly released book called *Light from Lucas: Lessons in Faith from a Fragile Life*. Our guest today, Bob Vander Plaats, is the president and CEO of The Family Leader, a family public policy center focused on state issues and headquartered in Iowa. Bob married his high school sweetheart, Darla, and together they raised four grown sons. Sadly, their third son Lucas, went home to be with the Lord in November of 2021.

Now, today's program is included in our 2023 broadcast collection. If you enjoy Family Talk programs, you'll definitely want to add this to your personal library. And you can get a copy of this five CD set or as a digital download by visiting drjamesdobson.org/2023. We'll be happy to send you your collection as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the ministry of the JDFI today. So go online to drjamesdobson.org/2023 or call us at 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825. And now, let's join Dr. Dobson and Bob Vander Plaats for part two of their powerful conversation right here on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: There was a point at which you had to admit he needs more care than we can give. Take us through that decision, because that was wrenching in itself.

Bob Vander Plaats: Well, there's no doubt it's gut-wrenching. First of all, anytime a couple gets pregnant, most of the time they're filled with optimism. They're looking forward to this child, this son, this daughter, and they have hopes and dreams for that

son or daughter. And then when that fastball does get thrown through that picture window and all of a sudden there's a whole new reality, what happens here. The good news for Darla and I is we get to experience Christian community in a fresh way. People praying for us, people lifting us up and coming around Lucas and our family in a very special way.

But there was a time where the medical professionals told us we're risking Lucas's life by keeping him at home because there will be a time when the medical professionals won't get there soon enough. When he goes into a seizure that needs resuscitation, you need to rescue breathe. And then I had a mentor of mine who said to me that God has gifted us with four boys. And he said, typical in a scenario like this is that you and Darla's attention will go to Lucas because he needs all the care. And he goes, make sure you don't forget about the other three.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, that's the problem.

Bob Vander Plaats: And we really had to balance with that. So we did what we felt was best for Lucas, his medical needs. The hospital that was specialized for Lucas was 70 miles away, and what was best for our family, but part of our family was a family suburban, where we loaded up that family in that family suburban once, twice, three times a week and we put on over 400,000 miles on that family suburban to be with Lucas. As while other kids might've been doing other things, our boys were with their brother Lucas.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you deal with agony of not being there for him when he cried at night?

Bob Vander Plaats: Well, the first agony we dealt with was a feeling of guilt. And the feeling of guilt was, yeah, we brought him to children's care hospital and school because we knew he'd be best cared for. The first guilt though, was Darla and I had the first night of pure sleep that we had had in years. It was like, that felt kind of good. So that was almost a guilt feeling there. But yeah, then there was guilt feelings along the way about why can't he be at our home? He should be here. But we did the best that we knew how to do back then. Darla is exceptionally bright. One of the brightest people I still know today, she's an avid reader. She graduated summa cum laude, she passed her CPA exam on her first try, and she gave up a career in accounting being a CPA and put her entire focus as a mom on providing the best care for Lucas.

And she started to advise the doctors and she became Lucas's number one advocate. And there was a doctor one time after Lucas had the full spinal fusion surgery, he went code blue and they brought in everybody. And I remember being in that room and Dr. Lamb was his name and he was the chief pediatrician in charge of everything. And they couldn't figure out how to get Lucas to come back, how Lucas could respond. And then Darla said, give him a bolus of Ativan. And without looking at medical textbooks or without Googling whatever, Dr. Lamb said immediately give him a bolus of Ativan. They gave him a bolus of

Ativan and Lucas came out of a deep seizure and Dr. Lamb grabbed my shoulder and he said, "Thank God for moms." Because Darla knew her son.

Dr. James Dobson: Indeed.

Bob Vander Plaats: We threw our best into Lucas, as well as to our other boys about how would we walk this journey. And again, I think Darla and I in talking about it after Lucas passed away, you get through it day by day, you do the best you can that day. After Lucas has passed, then it's the time to almost reflect, take a deep breath of all the things that have happened. And there's a song that Garth Brooks has about the dance. I would've had to have missed the pain, but I would've missed the dance as well. And Lucas gave us so much joy, so much he happiness. He gave us the best sermon without ever speaking a word.

Dr. James Dobson: How do you explain that? How can you have joy in so much pain?

Bob Vander Plaats: Well, I think part of it is that Lucas wasn't caught up in all the other stuff we're caught up into. All the stuff of this world that clamors for our attention, that tells us we will be perfect if we're the right weight, if we're the right height.

Dr. James Dobson: Did he ever say Daddy or Mommy?

Bob Vander Plaats: No, he never did. Never did.

Dr. James Dobson: Did he ever express any verbal understanding?

Bob Vander Plaats: Verbal, really, no. But we knew when he was happy, we knew when he was sad. We knew when he was hurting. His non-verbals, he would light up a room with a smile, clap of his chest. It was easy to love Lucas just because of who... But he brought such joy in the little things. And I remember if I would come home from a stressful day at work, and maybe I was lamenting in a way about this stressful day at work, Darla's comment would be, "Go take Lucas for a walk." And what she was saying to me is, get yourself recentered. And Lucas had that way about him is that he recentered you about you get to walk, you get to talk, you get to do all these things. I don't get to do that. Yet, Lucas would experience joy in life. He had a lot of high hurdles too, but he definitely experienced joy.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you ever come to terms with the guilt? Did you ever get to the place that you could deal with, wondering if Lucas was crying somewhere?

Bob Vander Plaats: I think we did. I'll give you a scenario. It was a Sunday morning and we went to adult Sunday school class and Lucas came with us and Darla was holding Lucas and Hans and Josh were at their classrooms and we're talking with friends after the Sunday school class. And Darla got my attention and said Lucas isn't breathing. And so at first Reformed church in Sheldon, I'm resuscitating Lucas as they call the ambulance. They Life Flight Lucas to Sioux Falls. And that day, Darla rode in the helicopter with Lucas, I drove by myself to Sioux Falls, 70 mile

journey. I had a fierce conversation with God about why Lucas, why me, why Darla? And if this was intended for me somehow, take it out on me, but leave this little boy alone. It was just a fierce conversation.

And when I got to Sioux Falls that day, before I left the doctor said, "If Lucas repeats the scenario he did this morning, do you want us to keep him alive or would you want us to just make him comfortable so he could pass away?" So now I have a doctor questioning the very life of my son. And right away I said, "Do what you can to keep him alive." And I stepped across the threshold of that hospital room door and I just happened to look into another room and there was a little boy there who was not disabled and he wasn't sick, but some adult in his life used a lit cigarette to burn his body from head to toe as a form of punishment. And it was almost if God was shaking me and say, "Bob, Lucas will always be loved. He'll be loved by you, he'll be loved by Darla, he'll be loved by Han, Josh, Logan, his family."

But the next morning, Dr. Dobson, when I'm back in Sheldon, Darla is still in Sioux Falls, I read for my devotions John 9:1 through 3, and I'm not sure why I read it, but I think God was sending me a message. And that's the story where Jesus and His disciples happen upon a blind man. And the disciples have a real question for Jesus. And the question is, who sinned? Did this guy sin or did his parents sin? And so often parents in this situation are wondering, what did we do, right? There's a cause consequence, but Jesus' answer rocked my world. He said, no one sinned. He said, this is so the glory of the Father might be displayed. His mighty works can be displayed. And I really believe God's mighty works are not displayed in Lucas's disabilities and Lucas frailty. I believe God's mighty works are displayed in our response to Lucas's frailty and disabilities, how we come around him as a Christian community.

Dr. James Dobson Did you ever deal with anger at God?

Bob Vander Plaats: Well, we definitely did. One is I just told you about that fierce conversation with God. I remember when Darla and I were in Boston and doctors were not listening to us now as parents, and they were trying to find a blood vein that they could draw blood. And Darla was trying to help them out and they had us removed. But Darla knew her son, that this is how you'd get the best vein to draw the blood without hurting him. And we left that hospital room seeing Lucas in so much pain, almost questioning the very existence of God, about why would God allow a child like this to go through this much pain? And yet I think it was probably 10 minutes later, we were both holding hands, praying to God to intervene in that situation.

Dr. James Dobson: In my book, when God doesn't make sense, I dealt with the fact that there are moments of intense anger, demanding to know the answer to the why question. God never answers that question. He will not be accountable to man. And that is the most difficult thing at all, of all. And isn't it interesting that even Jesus asked the why question on the cross?

Bob Vander Plaats: Sure he did.

Dr. James Dobson: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? And many parents have come up with that same question, my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Bob Vander Plaats: Well, it definitely puts your faith to the test and understand His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. His ways are higher than our ways. He's a mysterious God. But of course you have questions of why. Matter of fact, that's the persistent question. Why Lucas? Why me? Why Darla? Why our family? Why the seizures?

Dr. James Dobson: You still can't answer them today.

Bob Vander Plaats: You can't answer them. However, at the end of the story, at the end of Lucas's life and his life journey, you see how it brought Darla and I closer together in our marriage. You see what it has done to Lucas's three brothers, their faith as well as just their compassion for one another and how they as three brothers are, I mean, they're exceptionally tight. As Hans said in his eulogy, being Lucas's brothers is one of the greatest honor of our lives. So when God uses the weak to deliver that sermon, when God uses the weak to teach the strong, I think he can send a message that we healthy, normal people cannot send.

Roger Marsh: You are listening to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and if you're just joining us, we are listening to today's guest, Bob Vander Plaats, and his conversation with our own Dr. James Dobson. Bob is sharing personal stories and some of the lessons he learned from the life of his son, Lucas. Sadly, Bob and his wife Darla lost Lucas in November of 2021 from his battle with a very rare brain disorder which he ultimately lost due to pneumonia. Now, let's return to Dr. Dobson and Bob Vander Plaats right here on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: I think people can understand now why you're here today. First of all, because I care about you and I care about Darla and about your life, and I wanted to know about it and I wanted people to read this book because it's filled with compassion and passion of all varieties, and you have done it beautifully. Bob, I appreciate your being willing to open your heart in this way. You are talking right now to many parents out there who have gone through something like it. Every experience is unique, but they've gone through it too. And I wanted you to minister to them and you are doing so today. Talk about the children, the other children. You said somebody asked you or suggested that you not forget your own kids. That can happen, can't it? Because you become so absorbed with taking care of this child and what was going on that it's possible that the other kids don't feel loved and needed. How did you cope with that?

Bob Vander Plaats: Well, again, it's an intentional balance. I was very thankful for a mentor alerting that to me, of saying, "Listen, you have other boys as well, so give Lucas your best. But do not forget about Hans, Josh and Logan as well." And so I believe, and again, I think the gift of Darla being who Darla is, number one, who loves

her boys very, very deeply. But Darla was also a stay-at-home mom as well. And they saw that, yes, it changed the trajectory of our life. Our other boys did. I was a teacher, I was a coach, I was a high school principal. After Lucas, I went on to serve people of disabilities.

Our boys saw that. We moved because of that. But I think the balance of the boys of being very open in conversation with them, and when you have car rides that are 70 miles one way back and forth, there's a lot of conversation. When they see their little brother on a helicopter ride. For quite a while, that was the only thing Lucas had on his brothers is, that he had flown in helicopters and they had not. And they're a little bit jealous of that. But I think there has to be an intentionality about it, about give your best for the child with disabilities, give the child with special needs your absolute best, but be intentional as you walk that journey with the other children as well. And by God's grace, obviously we didn't do everything perfect, but our boys turned out very, very well.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you nearly lose him a long time before he died?

Bob Vander Plaats: Sure we did. Well, with Lucas, as I mentioned, the doctors warned us two days, two weeks, two years. The doctor in Boston, when he was two years old, prepared me as a dad to prepare my family that Lucas isn't going to be around very much longer. And so for Lucas to live 28 years is a testament to life and a testament to I really believe Darla and a medical community and a Christian community, and honestly a country that rallies around children with special needs, that they can maximize their potential with dignity and with purpose in this life.

Dr. James Dobson: Let me ask you a tough question. If through some divine intervention you could have not had this experience and Lucas could have been normal, of course you would want that. But would you have taken that option? Has this child done something very positive in your life as well?

Bob Vander Plaats: I would say before Lucas was born, without question, I'd want a child that's healthy, normal, play basketball. On this side, when Darla and I are now 60 years old and ready to celebrate 40 years of marriage, I'm so thankful for the gift of Lucas. It's something that we never would've prayed for, but it is a gift to have a child like Lucas.

Dr. James Dobson: Does she agree?

Bob Vander Plaats: I believe she does agree. He taught us so much and he gave us a joy and a purpose that honestly I don't think any other child could have. And like I said, he gave such a powerful sermon. And again, our lives would not be what our lives are today without Lucas. And yeah, so if God opened up on June 13th, 1993 and said, "Okay, this is going to be your journey until November 22, 21," we would've ran from that. I mean, we would've been like, count me out. I'm not doing that. But His grace is sufficient. His mercies are fresh every morning and

it's day by day, and that's where we can really get to. We're just so thankful that he would choose us to have a child like Lucas.

This is the only book the Chuck Norris has ever approved. Okay? So it carries the Chuck Norris approved seal on it. But Chuck said to me, he said, "Bob," he goes, "I know that you wanted kids who could compete, especially in the game of basketball." He said, "But I believe Lucas might be the toughest kid I know, but he's not competing for some victory that's here today, gone tomorrow on a basketball court. He's competing for his own life." And I agree with Chuck. Lucas is probably the toughest kid I know.

Dr. James Dobson: Did he ever say, I love you?

Bob Vander Plaats: He never verbalized I love you, but I believe through his eyes and through a lot of other nonverbals, he did communicate I love you. This book, I believe, speaks to a lot of parents who are dealing with children with special needs. There's no doubt about that. And we have testimonies of that. But a gentleman who is very wealthy, doesn't know anybody with disabilities close to him, that would be a family member or cousin or anywhere close, when he read the manuscript, he said, "Bob, this is my story." I said, "This is your story." He goes, "Yeah, this is my story." And this is about expect the unexpected. This is about thank God for moms. This is about don't wear a mask, be authentic. This is, there are angels among us. He said, "When I read that," he goes, "This is my story." And he goes, "I can almost track my journey through Lucas's journey in your book." And again, I believe that's where God is using a child like Lucas to speak to all of us, not just some of us.

Dr. James Dobson: Where, Bob, did you get the strength in the midst of all that was going on at home and being up half the night or all the night and nearly losing your child over and over again, where did you get the strength to go ahead and be useful to the kingdom the way you have? That's why I admire you so greatly.

Bob Vander Plaats: Well, I think that's part of God's sovereignty. And Darla and I did not choose this path. This is not a path we would've chosen. If Darla would've been a career CPA, probably owned her own accounting firm. I would've been a teacher, a coach, high school principal, maybe a superintendent, and I would've retired at age 55 with full government benefits. But that's not the path God wanted us on. And so we just tried to be in prayer and with Christian community and wisdom and discernment from others to help guide us.

Roger Marsh: Well, Bob and Darla Vander Plaats saw Lucas show lots of joy amidst great pain. And that's a powerful example for us all. Friend, you're listening to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and Bob Vander Plaats has much more to share about expecting the unexpected. So be sure to join us again tomorrow for the conclusion of this powerful three day series featuring Bob Vander Plaats and our own Dr. James Dobson here on Family Talk. And keep in mind that just for the month of December, thanks to some very special friends of the ministry, we have a matching grant in place here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

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Announcer:

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