



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Finding Faith and Family Through Foster Care – Part 1

Guest(s): Tori Hope Petersen

Air Date: November 16, 2022

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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: Welcome to Family Talk, the radio ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, thanking you for choosing to make us a part of your day. Family Talk is only possible because of you. It's because of your prayers, your kindness, your encouragement and generosity that we remain on the air. If you like what you hear on our program, please share us with a friend and let us know how we're doing by speaking with our care team. To do so, dial 877-732-6825. You can call us anytime day or night to give us your feedback.

Our guest on today's program is Tori Hope Petersen. Both today and tomorrow, she'll be sharing her inspiring story of grappling with the trauma of a stormy home life with her mom as a little girl, being removed from that home and overcoming the many challenges she experienced in foster care. She shared her story with Dr. Tim Clinton discussing her life, her struggles as a little girl and a teenager, her time in the foster system, the emotional pain that remained even after being adopted, and what she has learned about faith and perseverance along the way.

Tori has an amazing bio, let me tell you just a few tidbits about her. She was a collegiate track and field champion at Hillsdale College and was named Mrs. Universe in 2021 after competing in that well regarded beauty pageant. She is most beautiful inside and out for sure. Tori is happily married to her husband Jacob since 2018, and they have two biological children as well as one adopted child. Tori also runs the Beloved Initiative ministry. While there is so much to embrace with her heartfelt testimonial and the uplifting victorious outcome. So let's join them right now here on Family Talk.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Welcome in to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, co-host of Family Talk. As a licensed professional counselor and marriage and family therapist, I'm honored to service resident authority on mental health and relationships here at JDFI. I also serve as president of the American Association of Christian Counselors. Thank you for joining us today here on Family Talk.

In 2020, a total of 493 children and youth were living in foster care. Children aged zero to five made up the largest share of kids entering foster care at a rate of 30%. According to the National Foster Youth Institute, it's estimated that 60% of child sex trafficking victims have a history in the child welfare system. More than a third of foster care children and youth experience two or more placements each year. We all know that stable relationships and home environments are crucial for healthy child development. Frequent moves can create instability, stress, a lack of trust, and often trauma for a child. And once a child enters foster care, the goal is to either safely reunite them with their parents, if the concerns are resolved, or to secure another permanent family. Every year, approximately 20,000 youth age out of foster care. That means about 4,000 of them immediately become homeless.

I'm telling you all these sobering statistics because we have a very special guest today here on Family Talk. Her name is Tori Hope Petersen, and she can speak directly to this topic of fostering and foster care in our nation. She has a new book out just released August 30th. Tori spent all of her teen years and a few months of her early childhood in foster care. Tori, we're so delighted to have you. Thank you for joining us here on Family Talk.

Tori Hope Petersen: Thank you so much for having me. I'm so happy to be here.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Tori is passionate about foster care reform, adoption, advocacy and vulnerable populations, and seeing the love of God change people's lives. Tori speaks across the nation sharing her powerful story. Her brand new book is available now, it's called *Fostered: One Woman's Powerful Story of Finding Faith and Family through Foster Care*. Tori, again, such a delight to have you. As we get started, I went through your memoir as you entitled it, but what a story, Tori. And there's a lot of brokenness in here, we're going to talk about a lot of pain and more, hopefully representative of everything that happens in foster care, but it's a very sobering story. Can you start us out by telling us a little bit about your mom and you go back to what you called as your first memory of how your life began?

Tori Hope Petersen: Yeah, you don't really have memories before you're three, I think it is. But as I got older, there was a story my mom would always tell me that happened before I was born, and that's the story of me being conceived out of abuse. My mom was in a very difficult circumstance. Both her parents had passed away. She was abused in the community that she was in, and she made the very brave, bold, courageous decision to give me life and to be a mother. And I'm just so grateful that she did that. I hear a lot that who might experience the foster care system that they shouldn't be here. And I think every day about how grateful I am for my mom, despite the situations, the hardships that I've been through, because I love my life and I'm thankful that I've been able to live the life that I have.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Tori, when I began reading how your life unfolded, I was drawn to what it's like to be a child. And kids are supposed to have parents who are there all the time.

They're supposed to be loved and cuddled and taken care of, because they're vulnerable. They're not to be passed around, tossed around. I began to think, I wonder what it's like to look at life through the eyes of that kind of brokenness? Can you take us back to what it was like as a child, maybe your earlier memories? And I know you experienced a lot of trauma, whatever you're comfortable with. And I know you've journeyed and God's done a lot of healing in your heart and life. As a matter of fact, I love how you claim Genesis 50:20, that verse about Joseph and his life and what was meant for evil, God has taken it and turned it for good, for the saving of lives, but can you go back with us?

Tori Hope Petersen: It's very interesting because I think as a little girl when the life you live is all you know, I actually didn't see it through a lens of brokenness. I just thought for what it was. My mom always told me that she loved me and I think growing up I just thought that was enough. It wasn't until I hit my junior high years that I started to understand that my mom was a very hurt person. And because of that, she was hurting me and my sister and other people. It wasn't until I was older that I realized that there was a brokenness in our household.

And I had an amazing teacher. We were reading *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teenager*, and during that reading, he was like, "You got to begin with the end in mind." And his example for that was to get good grades. And we wanted to get good grades because we wanted to go to college. If we didn't go to college, some of us were going to end up like our parents. And that just really hit me. It was these almost like TikToks, like Reels, these videos really fast were going through my head of what I was living, the drugs on the table and the abuse that my sister and I endured. And I was like, "Oh, I don't want my kids to experience that." That's when I knew there was brokenness and that I didn't want it.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It's amazing how our hearts and minds adapt to what we're going through. It's also amazing how God begins to work in those kind of moments, Tori.

As I made notes and I was going through your story, there were times in there when you described a very abusive mom who wrestled, again, with her own demons. I think you believe that she was really hurt and abused as a child too, and she struggled with a lot of mental disorder type issues, maybe some mania, et cetera, but you were on the receiving end of a lot of pain. And you detailed and chronologically walked us through what that was like as a little girl.

In that, I think as a counselor, we begin to learn what people call adverse childhood experiences and what childhood trauma is all about. And we're changing how we look at the stories of kids and how they grew up and what affects how they do and how they don't do relationships, how they do emotion regulation and more. And in that, Tori, I think you know this better than anybody, there is a bond that is there, whether it's in pain or not, trauma bonds, you call them, that it's hard to break those patterns. And you search frantically for love and you want to be loved earnestly. And so you move in and out of this

trying to make sense of what doesn't make any sense. Am I describing some of this accurately for you?

Tori Hope Petersen: Yeah, you described it so well. And I think that I did, I chased love. The word trauma bond is something that I feel like I've always identified with, just trying to latch myself onto someone or something with a hope to find that unconditional love. And I think that's why, once I understood who Jesus was, once I understood who God was, why my heart was brought towards Him, because that's something that I craved so much. But before that, and even after God, even after God came into my life, there was a lot of very unhealthy dating patterns that I regret deeply. And a lot of pressuring of the people that I dated, like, "We have to get married. We have to make a plan for the future." Because I was always so terrified of the relationship, somehow fleeting or dissipating.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. What's interesting is when you get in those chaotic structures, there's no predictability. And so even when you get into healthy relationships, Tori, it's like you expect that relationship somehow to blow up in your hands. Or you actually take a knife out and stab it because it has to be broken. It's got to hurt you because when you grow up like this, the source of your comfort is always the source of your pain too. And so you don't know how to move into healthy, if you will, how to get to a place. And trauma destroys our sense of safety. And Tori, as I was reading your story too, I was struck by how my granddaughter, Olivia, has a little blanket she calls Love-Love. And she loves Love-Love, Tori. And I was thinking about you as I was reading the story and thinking of this little girl who was looking for hooks, looking for something to hold onto, but you were losing your voice, you lost your identity, your sense of safety, and yet you were searching for it frantically. Is that an accurate description?

Tori Hope Petersen: Oh yeah, I would say that's exactly what I was doing. And as I moved from foster home to foster home when I was an adolescent, in every home, I was like, "Okay, I can change to be like them. I'm going to do whatever I need to do to be accepted, to fit here." And then it felt like by the time that maybe things were starting to go well, that I started to be accepted, I would be pulled away. And so I'd have to do it all over again.

Dr. Tim Clinton: No predictability. Which by the way, creates a sense of, not just insecurity, it's like instability. It's frantically, what am I going to do? Somebody help rescue me in the midst of this. I wanted to bring up the word triggers because in the midst of that instability, when things happen, it can just take you back real quickly. Through the years, Tori, I've learned that when people experience trauma in life, especially the kind of story that you talked about with abuse and abandonment and being groomed and being hurt and violated so many times, that you don't just remember those past experiences at time, you begin to relive them. And you tend to almost superimpose them onto any relationship that you're in. Would that be accurate?

Tori Hope Petersen: Yeah, I would say so interesting, as a married woman, as an adult person now, I think that that is true, that there are things in my family as it's grown that have

reflected my time in foster care. And it has felt like I'm going through the exact same thing and like I'll never be able to escape these patterns.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

As I was listening to you there, I was thinking about people who have gone through horrific trauma experiences. I've sat behind a closed door and heard a lot of stories through the years. And Tori, you're right, it's not necessarily hard to give your heart, but it's hard to believe that ultimately it's going to rescue your heart. That somewhere again, this will disappear. Even though I don't want it because we know this, that the antidote to trauma ultimately is relationship. I'm broken in relationship i.e. via the traumatic experiences where I lose my sense of safety and security, maybe my voice. Tori, I want to go back to a story when the first time you went into foster care and how something started working inside of your heart. Here you are, a little girl, I think you were three or four years old, and the first time you're in foster care, you have a bedwetting experience. Take us back there and tell us what happened and how God did something, with another girl, right?

Tori Hope Petersen:

Yeah. I didn't wet the bed when I was living with my mom, but we know now that children wet the bed when they've experienced something traumatic. And being taken from your biological parent is traumatic. And so I started wetting the bed probably once or twice a week, if I remember right. It was frequent. And it made my foster mom very, very angry. And I think back then, I like to make an excuse for her, I don't think we had all of the knowledge that we have about trauma today. So she made me take my underwear to the toilet and ring them out and then throw them in the laundry chute. She would make me clean the toilet with my underwear. That's humiliating, she would stand over me. And then one morning I peed the bed again and I just woke up so scared, so frantic, like, okay, here we go again.

But for some reason my foster mom wasn't there that morning, which is very weird because there was a lot of kids in that house. But an older foster sister, she was a teenager, standing over me and she was like, "Okay, we're going to take care of this." And she just grabbed all the sheets and she grabbed my pajamas and she was like, "Go get in the shower, get dressed." And she took everything. And I didn't know where she went, but then by the end of the day, my bed was made and it was all clean and there was no punishment to what had happened. And after that I didn't pee to bed anymore.

And I think that everyone who is involved in foster care has read the book, *The Body Keeps the Score*. And in that he says that, when it comes to healing trauma in our bodies, psychiatric medication is good, different modalities of therapy are good. But he said the number one way that we healed trauma is by having experiences that contradict the traumatic experience. And I think that's such a good way of putting what I was trying to communicate in my book as well, is you have to do the opposite of the trauma. You have to experience something that is the opposite of the traumatic event for you to heal and for you to understand that there's hope, that there's something different other than the trauma.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

God kept dropping people in the midst of the horrific darkness and the experiences that you had. And it's mesmerizing, as I was going through the book, I was just like, "This is unbelievable." And I want to drop in a note because I know you do too. Tori, you are a real champion for foster care. You want to see foster care reform, you want to see things done the right way because you understand the dark side of it. You also know that there are wonderful people out there who step up into the moments who actually help rescue children. You're an advocate, by the way, strong pro-life, we're going to talk about that and more later on.

But Tori, in the journey, God kept dropping, I think, pieces into your life. As an adult, as you look back, you may have really struggled as a child trying to see the light in the darkness, but He was there, wasn't He, Tori? He was showing up by a school teacher who challenged you to really chase after education so you wouldn't follow in the path of your parent or parents or what have you, break out of that pattern in life, which is hard to do, Tori, because people don't understand how significant environment or culture can be and it's hard to break through those kind of systems. And when you're marginalized and more. By the way, you talked about being biracial and how that was a challenge for you, even today. Do you mind jumping into some of that, Tori?

Tori Hope Petersen:

I love that you said that about the people being dropped in just by the grace and love of God. Because the more I think about my story, and I hope this is what people get from the book when they read it, I feel like my story, it has a little bit to do with me, but it has so much to do with people who were willing and who were obedient to God and who said, "I want to reflect His love and I am going to walk out what God has called me to with and for this young girl who is made in His image." That's really what the story is about. It's about people that loved me so well.

And in terms of the biracial confusion, identity, always feeling like I'm floundering, yeah. By the Black community, I mixed, so I've always been considered too light. Or my pro-life beliefs, I've been told because of those things, "You don't belong. You're not Black." Because I married a white man, "You're not Black." But then by the white community, there's the one-drop rule. And I have experienced discrimination because of my ethnicity and because of my race. And so I've just always been like, "Okay, I don't belong. I don't belong in all these homes in the foster care system."

And that's what was so healing, I think, about these people that God put in my life again and again and again. Because these were the people that said, "There's no criteria for you to belong. There's no condition for you to belong. This is the church and we're just going to have you here and we're going to love you without an agenda." Because that's what love is, right? Love is, I have an agenda for me, but I don't have an agenda for you. And I think that's what these people, the church did so well in welcoming me.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Tori, wanted to ask you before we close today's broadcast, we talked about light and darkness. When you grow up in brokenness, maybe you're searching for the love of your father or your parents in the arms of others, you begin to reach for anything that'll anesthetize the pain, anything that will fill the hole in your heart and your soul. As you were going through that, no doubt you cried out at times trying to understand. Somewhere you were introduced to a relationship with Jesus Christ. That relationship with God began to unfold in a meaningful way. Can you take us there?

Tori Hope Petersen: I think again, it started with the people that God placed in my life. And I was very skeptical of God because there were people, foster parents who proclaimed His name and then they abused their children. And we are all sinful. And so I don't say that they're not Christian, but it just caused a lot of confusion in my heart about the heart of God. Because when I was learning about Him at church, He was love. He was gentle, He was patient, He was kind. And that's the Jesus that I was so drawn to. And so when my foster parents were hurting their children, it was so confusing to me. But then there were also these people who proclaimed his name, reflected His love, stood by me, sacrificed a lot for me to be where I am today. And I was like, "Okay, that is the love of God." It really can manifest in His people.

And I was kind of a bully in high school. You know that idea that hurt people hurt people? That was me. I was not very nice to my peers. And I just always made the excuse, "Oh, I'm just being blunt." But I knew that I was actually really hurtful. And again, that was a lot like my mom. And I was like, "Man, I just don't want to be like that." And these people who God put in my life, they spoke words of life over me. And I was like, "Wow, I want to do that for other people." And I knew in my flesh, in my hurt, in my sin, I was not going to be able to do that on my own. And so I was like, "Jesus, I want your love to enter me. I want you to dwell in me like people say you can do and I want to live a life that looks like you."

And then I was still skeptical, saying these prayers, still skeptical. And then I was singing the song, Good Good Father at church. And I was always like, "Jesus, God, yeah, yeah, yeah. Good Good Father. Yeah right. If you were so good, you would've given me a father." That would've made a lot of sense. That would've fixed a lot of my issues. Wouldn't have went to foster care, wouldn't have all these daddy issues, chasing all these dudes. And then it would just hit me. And it was like I could see again these videos of my life, of God protecting me and Him preparing me for the next home, Him preparing me for the next thing in my life, whether that was track or academics. And I was just like, "Oh, I have had a father. I do have a father. And He has loved me and protected me. And He has a purpose and plan for my life and He has all along and He fills the gaps that no earthly father could ever." And that's when I was like, "Okay, Jesus, this life is yours. Do what you want to do with it."

Dr. Tim Clinton: There's so much more to this story. You won't believe it. You don't want to miss tomorrow's broadcast. Our special guest again today has been Tori Hope

Petersen. Her brand new book out called *Fostered: One Woman's Powerful Story of Finding Faith and Family through Foster Care*. She has become an amazing, passionate voice around foster care reform, adoption advocacy, and vulnerable populations and seeing the love of God change people's lives. Tori, it's been such a light to have you on broadcast today. Can't wait to have you with us again tomorrow. Thank you for joining us.

Tori Hope Petersen: Thank you.

Roger Marsh: Wow. What an amazing testimonial and a victorious work in progress she is. You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and that was our own Dr. Tim Clinton with his special guest, Tori Hope Petersen. Tori is the co-founder of the Beloved Initiative ministry, a nonprofit that seeks to change the narrative for youth in the foster care system. They are just getting started in this conversation, so be sure to join us again tomorrow for the second half and the conclusion of this powerful discussion. And you can always go to our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org to find out more or to listen to the entire program. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. We hope you'll join us right here for part two of our conversation with Tori Hope Petersen. Until then, may God continue to richly bless you mightily as you walk in faith and grow deeper in your relationship with Him.

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