



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Light from Lucas: Lessons in Faith From a Fragile Life – Part 1

Guest(s): Bob Vander Plaats

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome, everyone, to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute, supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Do you ever feel like sometimes life throws you a curve-ball that you really didn't expect? Well, today's program is the first of a three-day series with our own Dr. James Dobson and his dear friend, Bob Vander Plaats. And it's from our 2023 Broadcast Collection. First, though I'm excited to announce that all this month there's a special matching gift in place just in time for the end of the year and the holidays. So, for any amount that you donate to the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute today, it will be doubled, instantly matched dollar for dollar.

Now, we are a listener supported broadcast outreach, and every donation you make helps protect life, save marriages, and encourages someone to draw closer to God. So, as you feel led to give, remember you can easily do so using the JDFI Family Talk app right on your smartphone or give a gift online at drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org. And please know how much we greatly appreciate your prayers and your financial support. And now, here is Dr. James Dobson to introduce today's guest right here on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: I want to introduce my guests today. They've been friends for many, many years and they're sitting in the studio with me today and I'm delighted to have them. They're Bob and Darla Vander Plaats. They've been here before. And we're going to be talking about some very personal things to them. They've been married for almost 40 years. They have raised their kids well. They have four boys that have turned out well, and we're going to talk about one of them today. We talk about the highs, the lows, the joys and the tears of parenthood. Bob is a conservative Christian. He is president and CEO of The Family Leader, which is a family public policy center focused on state issues in Iowa, an organization that I had a hand in helping to start way back in the day.

Bob earned his master's degree in education from Drake University. He began his career as a teacher and basketball coach and soon became a high school principal of two high schools. And in 1996, Bob was the president and chief executive officer of Opportunities Unlimited. That's an organization that

provides rehabilitative services to young adults with brain or spinal cord injuries. He has reason to know a lot about that subject. Then he moved into the political part of his career at the Iowa State Chair for the former Republican presidential candidate, Governor Mike Huckabee in 2008, and served as a national co-chair for Ted Cruz. In fact, I went up and did a rally with you.

Bob Vander Plaats: You did great. That was awesome.

Dr. James Dobson: That was 2016. Can you believe it's been that long?

Bob Vander Plaats: No.

Dr. James Dobson: Bob ran for governor of Iowa as a Republican in 2002, 2006 and 2010. You just didn't get the message. Despite the fact that he did not win public office, these campaigns led him to his current position as president and CEO of The Family Leader. It's a position he has held since 2010. Bob married his high school sweetheart, Darla. In fact, what a story that is. You guys knew each other in kindergarten.

Bob Vander Plaats: We've known each other for a long time. Everything goes back all the way to church nursery school. We've been around each other for a long time.

Dr. James Dobson: And married for 40 years. You think it's going to work?

Bob Vander Plaats: I think it's going to work. I tell a lot of people, Dr. Dobson, if she ever leaves me, I'm going with her.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, you were here once before, you and Darla, to talk about your son, Lucas. And you've written a book about Lucas. It's called *Light from Lucas*. Explain that title to start with, light from a child and a disabled child at that.

Bob Vander Plaats: Well, Lucas was a child we didn't anticipate, we didn't expect. We had two healthy, normal children, if there's such a thing of healthy, normal children, with Hans and with Josh. And then Lucas came into our life. And right away, we knew there was complications, there was issues. He was a baby with issues, is the way the doctor put it. And they didn't know if he's going to live for two days, or two weeks or two years. And there were a lot of highs and lows, which included me resuscitating Lucas three separate times. Us having five life flight helicopter rides, ICUs, the neonatal intensive care, the IVs, the blood draws, the seizures.

And as we were on this journey with Lucas, where you're really embracing each day at a time and you're really not even contemplating what does the next day look like. You're just trying to get through that day. But at some point, I decided to write a manuscript called Lessons from Lucas, meaning that if God were to take Lucas from us, I didn't want our other boys, Hans and Josh, the two older brothers to Lucas, or Logan, the gift God gave us as the younger brother to Lucas, and I didn't want those boys to miss the lessons. And little did we know,

all of a sudden, folks on the family, they read the manuscript. Larry Wheaton, who was the head publisher said, "We need to publish this."

Dr. James Dobson: Was I there at that time?

Bob Vander Plaats: You were definitely there at that time. A matter of fact, I think you were the reason we got in to have the book published. And Larry really wanted to publish it, he and the team did. Part of it because it was just a transparent, authentic look at raising a child with disabilities, with unique healthcare challenges.

Dr. James Dobson: Special needs.

Bob Vander Plaats: Special needs.

Dr. James Dobson: We're really dedicating this program today to all those parents out there who have a child with special needs. They're in a class all by themselves, and that's a lonely responsibility, but a very rewarding one, isn't it?

Bob Vander Plaats: It is. And you talked originally about how Darla and I, we graduated from kindergarten together, eighth grade together, high school together, college together. Darla and I were supposed to have kind of like this perfect marriage, perfect family. And as if God threw the fastball through the picture window and we were left to pick up the pieces. And so, these families who are dealing with their own special needs child, uniquely gifted, uniquely crafted, uniquely given a purpose to carry out. But these families still have to deal with the reality of the special needs child with spina bifida, the special needs child with down syndrome, the special needs child with whatever, autism, whatever the case might be. And for us, there's a chapter in the book that's called it could be worse, and I believe that's God's grace. He can always have you look at something and say it could be worse.

And so, for Darla and I, part of it could be worse is that Lucas couldn't walk, he couldn't talk. He was confined to a wheelchair, he had a tracheotomy, he had a full spinal fusion surgery. Anybody who gave just a glance at Lucas knew he was severely disabled. And so, right away, a lot of people had compassion towards Lucas because of him being in that condition. However, there's other children, especially children with autism, they look normal, there doesn't seem to be anything abnormal at all, but yet they have their own high hurdles. And so, that sometimes can be a very tough thing for parents to navigate on how do you navigate that when they look normal, but it's not always the normal response to things.

Dr. James Dobson: This book is intensely personal. You read it on every page. And it's in many ways written to Lucas, isn't it? Many of your letters and commentaries have gone to Lucas. Even whether he may not understand them, it was still from your heart, a dad talking to his child.

Bob Vander Plaats: You bet. And so, I wrote the majority of the letters. Darla wrote a letter after the chapter, thank God for moms. Ruth, who was our angel that God put into our life, she wrote a letter after there's angels among us. And our oldest son, Hans, wrote a letter to Lucas too after the chapter, leadership isn't optional. You don't have a choice if you're going to lead in this situation or not, you need to lead. But I thought Darla's was particularly touching when she said, "Lucas, I believe when we get to heaven I will become more like you than you will become like me." Meaning, Lucas had this sense of unconditional love, whether it be to nurses who just stuck him to get blood draws or after a seizure and a life flight helicopter ride. Or whether it be with us in the family Suburban, and just starting it up and him hearing the GMC engine roar, that he would clap his chest and smile. He took such satisfaction in the little things. And we really do believe that God uses the weak to teach the strong. And He certainly did that with Lucas.

Roger Marsh: This is 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 lessons he's learned from the life of his son, Lucas. Sadly, Bob and his wife Darla lost their third son in November of 2021. Lucas was battling a very rare brain disorder and ultimately he lost that battle due to pneumonia. Well, there's so much more to dive into, so let's rejoin Dr. Dobson and Bob Vander Plaats right now, right here on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, the name of the book is *Light from Lucas*. I want you to explain that. And the subtitle is Lessons in Faith From a Fragile Life. Bob Vander Plaats and Darla, you had a role in it as well. I'm going to ask you to read a chapter or a portion of this book that was descriptive of the night Lucas was born. And this came obviously from your heart. It starts on page seven. It's the one that grabbed me by the throat. And you described what took place. First of all, tell me if you had anticipated the depth of the difficulties that Lucas was going to deal with.

Bob Vander Plaats: No, we didn't expect that Lucas would be significantly disabled. He was born in 1993. We had two normal pregnancies prior to that. Darla had mentioned that this pregnancy with Lucas was calmer. He wasn't kicking as much. But after our second child, Josh, who loved Josh, but very rambunctious little boy. And he kicked a lot, so Darla, this is probably a good thing that he's not kicking as much. But the only real concern we had at the time is that Lucas was in breach condition and the doctor said, "I believe we should take him by C-section versus natural delivery, because of his breach status." And that was the first real indicator that we had that something could be wrong. We still expected a normal, healthy boy, being a basketball coach, I was expecting a small forward, would be delivered at this time. I already had a point guard and off guard, I needed a small forward at this point.

Dr. James Dobson: And you were looking forward to that.

Bob Vander Plaats: I was looking very much forward to that.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, it's obvious that you were discovering things that were wrenching to you, Bob. I'd like you to read, and let us hear and feel what you went through in that long night.

Bob Vander Plaats: You bet. It begins on page seven. And I think for a lot of parents, the title of expect the unexpected, because you don't know what's going to happen. And the way this one starts, it says, "Bob, Bob, wake up. We're going to have our baby." Darla's voice was filled with anticipation and excitement as she informed me that it was time. This Sunday morning would be the day that we'd experienced the birth of our third child. We had run this drill twice before, giving birth to two healthy, normal boys. Hans was five going on an intellectual 15, while Joshua was in the midst of his terrible twos. We felt fully prepared for this baby. Naturally, the baby would have unique personality traits and physical characteristics, but we knew all about the labor and delivery process and the many demands of having a newborn. Although, we didn't know the gender of the baby, all of our expectations seemed to be in order.

When I was a high school business teacher and basketball coach, I'd tell my students of my ambition to have five sons. I would joke with them about my plans to create the perfect basketball team composed solely of my own genetics. I'd already identified Hans as my point guard. He was gifted at handling the ball and had an uncanny feel for the game. Josh would be my shooting guard. Joshua loved shooting. He loved kicking, hitting, and anything else that would produce offensive assault on a worthy opponent. This Sunday, June 13, 1993, I was certain that Darla would deliver another member of the perfect starting lineup. Maybe he'd be a talented forward, the perfect compliment to the skill sets of Hans and Josh. I was well on my way to coaching the championship team composed exclusively of my own genetics. Wow.

Unfortunately, the plans I teased my students about were quickly thwarted when reality proved much differently than lighthearted antidotes. Darla did indeed give birth to a son, but thoughts of championship basketball games grew faint as our own delivery room drama unfolded. The baby was breached in the birth canal, preventing a vaginal delivery. I looked on as the doctors and nurses administer Darla with an epidural and began cutting into her. I looked on as our son was brought harshly into the world. And I looked on as medical personnel rushed around him with urgency, signaling that something was very wrong.

His head was abnormally large and completely out of proportion with this frail body. His lips and skin were parts blue, craving oxygen. He wasn't pinkening up, which heightened the suspicions of everyone in the room. As I looked on in fear, the doctor took me by the arm and led me away from the commotion. He had ordered an air ambulance to transport our newborn son from our hometown hospital in Sheldon, Iowa to a better equipped hospital in Sioux City. The words that he spoke still ring in my head today, "Babies with issues don't belong in rural hospitals." Issues? What did he mean? Babies with issues? This is my baby, Darla's baby, a future member of the Vander Plaats basketball team.

Darla and I were the perfect couple. We started out in the church nursery together. We were classmates together and high school sweethearts. We have two normal sons and now we have a baby with issues. It didn't make any sense to me. Thoughts whirled through my mind relentlessly, yet I was determined to remain calm on the outside, appearing strong for Darla and those attending our son. In the midst of the sudden sea of instability, I reached for stability by phoning our parents. This birth announcement was quite unlike those we made with Hans and Josh. It was void of laughter, excitement, and statistical information. Instead, it was one of stunned reality and requests for help.

"Mom, can you stay with Darla at the Sheldon Hospital? Dad, can you go and meet at St. Luke's in Sioux City? Can you make the necessary phone calls to family and friends? Dan and Beth, can you look after Hans and Josh? Please tell everyone to pray for the son we've yet to hold." Circumstances were spinning out of control, and I was pretending to be strong. Friends, doctors, family members, nurses, strangers, flight technicians, and people requesting signatures came in and out of my confused consciousness, yet I can recall them with vivid detail. Kissing Darla goodbye, headed for the van. My dad was with me as I began the one-hour drive to Sioux City, yet words are inadequate to describe the intense loneliness I felt as the helicopter carrying our son passed overhead. I was completely helpless. The drive was consumed with rushing thoughts and questions.

I don't even know him. He is my son and I can't do a thing for him. Will he be all right? What went wrong? How is Darla? What about Hans and Josh? What will the future hold? Where is God? What if our baby dies? What if he lives? When we reached the hospital, we were quickly directed to the neonatal intensive care area. The specialists explained the best case scenario first, saying that our son could just be a big baby with a big head struggling to breathe. The optimist in me became hopeful. Then they explained numerous other possibilities. He could have a syndrome that would go undiagnosed for several months. He may have birth defects that could result in a multitude of disabilities. His cranium could be filled with fluid and house little to no brain, resulting in death within weeks or even days. My rising hopes were dashed as I signed for the necessary tests.

Once the tests had begun, the rushing stopped. It was time to catch my breath and begin processing the chaos. After a deep sigh and a moment of prayer, I picked up the phone to call Darla. She was surely experiencing the same numb helplessness. A mother's designed to nurse, bond and care for her newborn. This process has been coldly interrupted with the chopping of helicopter propellers and now she sat in a hospital surrounded by people all alone. No Bob, no Hans, no Josh, no baby. She was left with bland walls and recovering procedures, and during physical and emotional pain. Our phone conversation was mostly business. We discussed the doctor's information in detail. To the best of my ability, I described the tests that were being performed on our son. And we talked about the range of possibilities from mild to severe disabilities, from normal to dead.

Words were sober as our phone call drew to a close, and the question that Darla asked me still sends a chill down my spine. "What are we going to do if he's not right?" The emotion in her voice characterized our fear. We were adrift by the unraveling of the day and terrified by the future. What began as excited anticipation and predictability, excuse me, had turned into a moment by moment battle for composure. I am rarely at a loss for words, but Darla's question hit me like a ton of bricks and I clambered for an answer. "What will we do if he isn't right?" I paused in silence, remembering my role in this reality drama. I'm the man. I am supposed to be tough. I should be able to handle anything that comes my way. My voice was quiet and broken as I said, "We'll get through it. We'll get through it."

Dr. James Dobson: The passion I spoke of is there in your voice. The reason I ask you to read that, Bob, is that we're talking to many people who have been right there at that moment. They've experienced it. There now, it's not over for them. They're still going through it day by day, by day. I spent 17 years at Children's Hospital of Los Angeles in the divisions of medical genetics and child development. I saw a Lucas, many, many Lucases, and I saw the pain in the parents. And I wanted to do this program today, because I wanted you in your own way to minister to those people who are crying right now. They've been there. They've given birth to a child who isn't right, and that was just the beginning. Now, you lost Lucas a couple of years ago?

Bob Vander Plaats: It was November 22 of 2021.

Dr. James Dobson: And there are a lot of decisions to be made from the time of the birth until the time that you lost him. There was a point at which you had to admit he needs more care than we can give.

Bob Vander Plaats: 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.

Roger Marsh: Wow, what a powerful testimony from Bob Vander Plaats on today's edition of Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, inviting you to join us again tomorrow for part two of this special three-part series featuring Bob Vander Plaats and our own Dr. James Dobson. All throughout this month we are presenting to you programs that are included in our 2023 Broadcast Collection. Now if you enjoyed today's program, make sure you go to drjamesdobson.org/2023 and find out how easy it is for you to get a copy of the entire 5 CD set or a digital download of this year's 2023 Broadcast Collection. Everything you need will be right there on that page when you go to drjamesdobson.org/2023. We'll be happy to send you a copy of our 2023 Broadcast Collection as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the ministry here at the

JDFI during the month of December. In this 2023 Broadcast Collection, you'll hear seven of the best programs from the year featuring our own Dr. James Dobson. And also, eight bonus programs from a special event as well. So, keep it, share it, or give it to someone you love.

Remember, you can also easily obtain a copy of our 2023 Broadcast Collection over the phone. Dial 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825. And keep in mind, that just for the month of December, thanks to some very special friends of the ministry, we have a special matching grant in place here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Your gift of any amount will be doubled. Those dollars will be used to impact lives, encourage mothers and fathers and to build stronger God-led families. So, if you'd like to make a contribution, taking advantage of this matching gift, simply go online to drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org or keep in mind you can always make a donation over the phone as well. Call 877-732-6825. That's 877-7832-6825. And from all of us here at the JDFI, thank you so much for your generosity and your prayers and financial support as well. I'm Roger Marsh. Thank you for joining us today. Be sure to join us again tomorrow for part two of this special three part series featuring Bob Vander Plaats and our own Dr. James Dobson, right here on Family Talk. Till then, may God continue to richly bless you and your family.

Announcer:

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