

Week 31

7/26/12

Randy: Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Randy Robison. This is my wife, Debbie. My parents are taking a little break. But we have some wonderful guests with a story I know is going to bless you, challenge you, I dare say. Would you welcome to *LIFE Today* Joy and Tait Cruse?

Thanks for being with us. The Cruses have put their story into this book called *Hope Transformed*. The photo on the front is Connor, their son.

Thanks for coming on the show and telling your story. It is not an easy one to tell. But take us back to that day in 2005 when Connor was having what, a stomach ache? And the doctor said, "Let's see how he does." And he wasn't doing well so you went into the emergency room.

Tait: Yeah, the day before he had a tummy ache, he was lethargic, and just wanting to nap. He would go out and run in the backyard and come down and lay down again. So Joy and I decided after about a week or two weeks of this that it was probably appendicitis, which Joy had had as a child. So we decided on Sunday, May 15th, 2005 that Connor, we'll take him to the hospital if it happens.

So that morning, he woke up, he had the pain, a mild fever. Joy takes him in. It's probably appendicitis; we'll miss our Cabo trip and chalk it up as three or four days. And darn it, we're going to miss our trip but it will be appendicitis. So she goes down there and she's gone most of the day.

Do you want to kind of tell them about the beginning of that D day?

Joy: Yeah, our first -- D day was diagnosis day. They just ran a lot of tests and ended up doing -- they thought maybe it was pneumonia. They had done a chest x-ray and they saw a spot on a lymph node so then they ran a cat scan. They came in and they had this grave look on their face. And like Tait says, they wrote on a napkin, "neuroblastoma" -- just a little dinner napkin.

They said, "Do you know what this is?"

"No."

"It's cancer. And we're 99% sure your son has neuroblastoma cancer."

It's the second most common tumor cancer behind brain tumors but they give kids maybe a 30% chance of survival. Usually it's a stage four by the time they're diagnosed, meaning it's in the bone marrow, bones, and several tumors, which was Connor's situation. So they didn't give us a very good picture at that time of survival.

But we found out later they thought it was a lot worse than they let on with us.

Tait: Like a three month survival.

Randy: So he's four years old at this point?

Joy: Yes.

Randy: So what do you do when you find out, they say, "Hey, it's bad."

Tait: From there, I've never experienced where the room is going vertically and horizontally spinning at the same time.

Joy: He actually fell and a friend had to catch him.

Tait: I'd never felt that.

Joy: After the shock wore off, you kind of pick back up for your kids and you focus on them and their survival and beating the odds and doing everything you can to help them survive and to beat this and fight it, and yet you have three other children at home that you have to try to keep things normal for them. So honestly, at this time, we clung to God. Tait says it was our faith, family, and friends that we clung to and we had a great support group through it.

Randy: On a practical level, what happened over the next few months?

Tait: We had just moved into our dream house and I had just moved into a great career. Everything was going great so we were like, how did this happen?

So after the initial shock, we went to -- we actually went to the sonogram the day after Connor was diagnosed for Mason, our fourth. So where it's usually a joyous time we're in there bawling our eyes out. So once the diagnosis happened and after six hours of doctors huddling around the x-rays trying to figure out surgery and this and that, Joy

goes, the first night in the hospital, the first of 200 nights in the hospital, Connor spent about 200 nights in the hospital and I went home and all she had was a beeping machine and a bewildered son; that was the first six hours of cancer.

So it was our faith, our family, and our friends and I remember waking up at 3:00 in the morning getting on my knees going, "Help!" If someone's coming in to rob your house or if your house is on fire you go fight for your child, you're the dad. So we quickly turned to God immediately. We were believers but now the fire was testing and we were being honed and tested by fire right then and there.

Joy: I grew up a preacher's daughter and so my whole life I had known Bible verses and I thought I had faith but when you're thrown into this, it's like God takes what you've got in your head and he puts it in your heart, and that's when you put faith in action. That's really where, for us, Connor went through rounds and rounds of chemotherapy, two long surgeries, one in Boston, one in Houston, radiation, pills and pills and pills. All these visits to the clinic, and blood transfusions and...

Randy: How long was this going on?

Joy: It was a four and a half year battle.

Tait: There were 18 rounds of chemo, 18 rounds of radiation, 75 pills a day.

Randy: And what did it do to the neuroblastoma?

Joy: Well, luckily, a miracle that it wasn't growing. They couldn't remove all of his tumor in Boston; they removed 70%. And every doctor said, "If you can't get all of it out, it will grow; it will continue to grow." And it never did. In fact, later tests, when they pulled more of the tumor out showed it necrotic, it was 100% dead. It was a miracle.

Randy: So he basically beat it.

Tait: Yes, he beat it.

Joy: Then in December of '08 they found a new cancer called malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumor and it was created by the radiation that they had used to treat the first cancer.

Randy: And how bad was it?

Tait: So we had another D day.

Joy: A doctor told us when a cancer has been created by radiation, it is like a monster on steroids. It's not just a monster but it's a roaring train and it was. They took a lot of that tumor out, the cancer, and they did a cat scan six weeks later and they said it's like they never took it out.

Tait: We were on vacation in Hawaii and we could see it, little pinky poke out of his stomach right here.

Joy: That size of the tumor, just really small. We go, "I wonder if that's the cancer?"

Tait: That was in March. Then the first of April it was a golf ball, the first of May it was a softball, first of June it was -- but when he died in July it was almost the size of a cantaloupe.

Joy: Like his whole stomach.

Randy: How do you -- so this bad news happens with your son, you spend years -- you've mentioned a vacation to Cabo, a vacation to Hawaii, you have a great job, you make a lot of money, fair enough to say? So you can throw at that cancer everything you could do.

Tait: We did. We flew him to Guatemala, we went everywhere.

Randy: So you did more than what most people could even afford to do and here you think you've got it beat.

Joy: Yeah. They were going to take his port out. You're done with treatment.

Tait: They told us in December, you beat it!

Randy: And then what you were doing to beat the cancer caused the cancer that killed your son. Where are you left at the end of that?

Joy: Angry. Frustrated is an understatement. I just remember thinking, I was confused. I asked God, "Why did you heal him of the first cancer, for him to get a second one? It just seems cruel."

I definitely had a lot of conversations with God. I remember whenever they came into - they felt like they had gotten all the cancer out the second time with that new cancer and if you can get it all out, then you're good. Then he'll survive because there is nothing to treat it except for completely removing it.

But then they came in and said, "We got the pathology back, and it was actually -- that new cancer was growing into that old inoperable tumor so there is nothing we can do."

We tried chemotherapy. I remember going to the bathroom, I didn't want Connor to see me. I shut the door and I said, "God, I can't do this again. I can't watch my son go through this again." We went through at this time four years -- almost four years and I'm like, I can't tell him he has to do chemotherapy again. I can't tell him he's got to do all this over again. He is enjoying this new normalcy, this new freedom of being a normal kid. The treatment wasn't that bad. He's thinking, he's taking the port out.

Tait: He didn't remember much of it either. In fact, in New York in '07 they told Joy to take him home and let him save our family because there's something like a 80% divorce rate. And our marriage has been great and God has protected our marriage and our family, and yet, they told us to go home and save your family because it's that big of a battle.

So when the second cancer came and we were diagnosed in Houston, I went in and dry heaved all in the bathroom. I come out and I'm wiping my face and the doctor recognizes me and he goes,

"We diagnose cancer every day." He said, "What just happened is unfair. It's below the belt." Because now we have two completely separate dragons trying to devour our son.

Again, how as a father, you want to go out and slay the dragon and you can't and you've got to sit there and take it. And when it started growing again, when we saw it in Hawaii, you just have to sit there and take it.

So when we go to Connor we say, "Well, Connor, the cancer is back and you've got to do chemo."

His only response which I've learned so much from my son, he goes, "Oh, man!" That was it! "Oh, man!" That was it. No complaining. He never complained. We've learned so much from our son from this.

Debbie: Didn't he have a favorite phrase that he would say throughout this?

Joy: They asked him, "If you had anything to tell somebody going through cancer or fighting this, any kid going through this, what would you tell them?"

He said, "Have courage and believe in Jesus."

Tait: That was it.

Joy: And that was after the second cancer, when he was two months -- well, a month from passing away. He still... he didn't waiver.

Randy: You referenced you were asking God, crying out to God, angry at God, looking for answers, all the things that we totally understand, what did he say?

Joy: Well, it was frustrating, especially after he passed away. Even before we got to the point where we were doing everything, I mean we were... holistic treatments, going to Guatemala, all kinds of stuff. And we got to the point we said -- it was the day before Connor passed away. I said, "God, we --." I was so frustrated.

We went on the patio and we just prayed and said, "God, I can fight all day long for him. I can do blood transfusions. I can do treatments but if it is not your will for him to live, then take him home..." because he was suffering.

Tait: It was torturous.

Joy: It's just a sense of powerlessness that I had as a mom and he had as a father that you can't -- you can't fix it. You can't make it right for them. That our lives are in God's hands, he's sovereign. For me, that's kind of been my struggle even after Connor passed away that you can fight until the day is long and you can pray.

I mentioned to y'all earlier that I felt like I had a checklist on my prayers to make God answer my prayers. You know the Bible says, when two or more are gathered in his name, pray for others that you may be healed, faith of a mustard seed, all these things, cleanse yourself before you pray for -- all these things and it didn't work. Where do you go with that? That's what I think brought up a lot of my anger. I felt like he wasn't listening to me. He wasn't hearing my prayer.

Tait: And we thought we heard him in the first cancer. I believe we did. But when the

second diagnosis happened, which is right around Christmas Eve '08, nothing, we never heard --

Joy: Well, every prayer was not answered in our favor, in Connor's favor so that's why we felt he wasn't --

Tait: It was a fast train -- it was a fast train.

Randy: In your book you talk about an incident that occurred several years later. You guys now have a foundation in his memory to fight cancer.

Tait: Team Connor.

Randy: And you do a run. Take me to that day where you're running up that hill to finish up that run. Just to set the stage, in the run you have how many people run this race?

Joy: Well, it's a 500-mile relay, so people run it in pairs or by themselves. A five mile --

Tait: Forty or fifty people.

Randy: And you guys end it.

Tait: So it's five-mile tracks and we had already run a couple and it was the last one and we're running together up the hill and there's about a quarter of a mile where the crowd can see us. So you come up and all the sudden you appear and they start clapping. And I'll let you --

Joy: Well, they started clapping and yelling our names and I thought, that's what it must have been like for Connor when he got to heaven, all the people that had been watching him from above, he must have thought, "Wow, this is awesome!"

A lot of times I can just hear Connor say, "Mom, it's going to be worth it. It's going to be worth it. Hang in there and fight and run the race strong, run it hard because it's worth it. All that you go through down there, it's worth it to be up here."

Tait: Remember when he talked about his second home? That's really impactful.

Joy: Well, it was a year before he passed away. He said, "Mom, I'm ready to go home."

I'm like, "What do you mean? You are home."

He said, "Well, if God's my heavenly father, then heaven is my home."

I said, "So you're ready to go to heaven?"

"No, not yet... not yet, Mom." And he passed it off, and he didn't say anything else.

But I just saw God working on him. We never talked about his imminent death because we believed that God would heal him, up to the very end. I think that's where when you place such faith in God and you expect that healing and that's where the frustration came, for me, and the anger because you believed and then you felt let down and sometimes I felt like God didn't love me.

Randy: Is that where that transformed hope comes from that you allude to in your title?

Joy: Yes. Because the whole time Connor was sick, our hope was that God would heal Connor but ultimately, our hope is found in Christ.

A month before Connor passed away, I had read this passage in the Bible and it talks about where John the Baptist sent out his disciples to talk to Jesus. And Jesus says, "Go back --." And John is in prison.

Jesus said, "Go back and tell John that I am healing the sick and I am making the lame walk and the blind see and the deaf hear."

And Jesus says, "But don't let that be a stumbling block."

I thought, what does that mean? But in reality he meant, "I'm healing all these people and I'm doing all these things but John, I'm not going to rescue you."

And just like he didn't rescue Connor, on this earth, but ultimately I could think on July 10th, 2009, Connor's eyes did open, that's the day he passed away --

Tait: Spiritually he was rescued, just not his physical.

Joy: And his eyes opened to see the face of God.

Debbie: Well, I love how that was like the ultimate victory you said because as a Christian, we have that but as a non believer you don't.

Joy: And he had been in a wheelchair the last month and his legs walked and danced on the streets of gold. I think when I worry or I question, is God good to let that happen? Does he love me? I thought, well, yes, he rescued us for eternity. He rescued my son. So that's where our hope was transformed.

Randy: There is something in your book that I want people to hear. And Tait, I believe you wrote this. I'll just read straight from the book and I want your reaction. "While waiting for Connor's chemo to drip on a summer day in 2005, we both looked out at the west and dreamed. We dreamed of going to Texas Stadium and seeing the Cowboys play. I started telling him about the rock concerts I'd seen there. We talked about playing outside, running, laughing, chasing and tumbling to the ground in exhaustion. A little boy in pajamas and a dad in shorts dreaming about baseball, bike rides and fireworks.

When Connor's drip was done and he was able to leave the 10th floor oncology area we went down to the hospital lobby and out the front door. I carried him to a small 20 by 20 foot patch of grass where the parking lot met the street. I cleared the trash and cigarettes and we laid down in the grass. Our minds drifted to the rolling hills of Ireland and a sandy beach in Hawaii. We covered the globe on that day and we stayed there until the moon came out and the stars put my son to bed. We dreamed big in the biggest backyard in the world that day." You didn't have that chance to do those things with your son but God gave you a glimpse.

Tait: I did that night. I did that night. I am so grateful for eight years with that boy that I'm not bitter over 50 I didn't get. Because there were tons of events and instances like that, God -- that was an awesome night. It was great. I have had those events with him. We lived big that night.

His last baseball game he hit the winning RBI and he could barely walk. He could barely walk and he literally swung the bat, it was so perfect, the other team saw it. He hit it, and it was the same thing like that: He hit it, he pushes the kid from third to home. He barely gets to first. They're trying to throw him out.

Joy: He was so thin his pants wouldn't stay up so he has to run holding his pants up.

Tait: He could barely lift the bat, he was loaded with cancer. I wouldn't trade that

with Peyton Manning's dad, Tony Romo's dad, my son won the game. So eight years of a glorious life.

Randy: And he won the race.

Joy: He did!

Randy: Thank you guys for sharing your story. We talked earlier about something we're doing where we're trying to save kids' lives around the world.

You know, if you're a parent, you're a grandparent, you know you'd do anything -- anything to save that life and all the expense that the Cruses went through and all the travel and all the sleepless nights, or sleeping in a hospital bed, it was worth it -- it was worth it. We do what we can to save the kids. Go with me to a place halfway around the world where we have the opportunity right now to save so many lives. Watch this.

On the mission field:

Randy: This is an amazing area. We're in Cambodia on a river that's about 15 miles wide and there are floating villages. Yet when you look at all this water, it's death. And in one small pharmacy alone, which is the only medical facility they have in one of these floating villages, the retired nurse there said that he's seen a child die on average every other week.

Randy: They cook with it, they bathe in it, and they go to the restroom in it and they die by this very water.

Randy: Tell them we will do what we can so he doesn't lose anymore grandchildren. We can change their lives. We can stop the sicknesses that are killing their children and grandchildren. We can just simply give them clean drinking water.

End of clip

Randy: As I talked to that couple there, they are actually grandparents, they look young but they're grandparents; they lost a grandchild to waterborne illness. I asked them a couple of things, a couple of very practical questions because I always want to know what's really going on here in these areas where we're doing these things. I said

two things, "Why don't you move?" Because that river is just awful and there's children dying far too often.

They said, "Where would we go? We don't have any land. We don't have any money to buy land. We were born on this river, this is where we live."

I thought, wow, they're stuck. They would go if they could but they're really stuck. Then I asked them what really probably sounded like a dumb question to them. I said, "If we drill a well on shore, which is just a few hundred yards away, would you go over there and get the clean drinking water?"

She looked at me with this expression that kind of made me realize that it kind of sounded dumb to them. Of course, they will go get the water. They know the water is killing them. They would do anything for their grandchildren or their children, just like you and I would. If they were in our neighborhood, we would invite them over and say, "Drink this water." Well, the only way we can impact them that far in Cambodia, in Africa, in Southeast Asia, all over where we're drilling water wells is to join together.

I understand your financial resources represent your work, your time, your talent, that's what I'm asking you to give. If we will all work together we can reach our goal. When we drill hundreds of wells around the world, it averages out to \$48 helping ten people -- ten people! And not just for a short period of time but for a lifetime!

If you can give \$1200 we'll send you a beautiful bronze that will remind you of the sacrifice you made and the impact you have had and you can join with three others to drill a well. Some of you can give \$4800 or more and drill an entire well. It's a gift that will keep on giving. You can make an impact right now at whatever level you can give.

I'm asking you just to join with us. I'm inviting you to join with us on this wonderful mission to change lives, to save lives. Pick up the phone right now. Call the number on the screen or go to the web site, make a gift, join with us, join with others as we reach out and share the love and the life of Jesus Christ by giving living water to those in desperate need. Thank you!

Begin video clip:

Announcer: Every day millions of children are forced to make a dreadful choice, drink filthy polluted water filled with deadly disease or die from thirst. No child should ever be faced with this decision!

The good news is there is a solution! *Mission: Water For Life* is one of the most exciting and viable demonstrations of God's love in the world today. Suffering can end because clean water changes everything! With your gift today, we can establish and drill 350 new water wells for remote villages in 12 different nations. Your gift of \$24 will help provide clean water for five people! A gift of \$48 will help provide for 10 people. \$72 will impact 15 people. And \$144 will help provide fresh, clean, disease-free water for 30 people for a lifetime!

With your gift be sure to request *Arise*, a beautiful new daily devotional featuring words of encouragement from inspiring women who have shared their faith on *LIFE Today*. With your gift of \$100 or more, you may request the *Arise* audio visual devotional featuring 40 days of inspiration from *LIFE Today's* favorite women guests.

Please prayerfully consider a gift of \$1200 to help provide water for 250 people or a gift of \$4800 to help sponsor a complete well. And be sure to request the 2012 commemorative bronze sculpture, "The Lion and the Lamb."

Please call, write, or make your secure gift online today!

End of clip

In the studio:

Randy: Thank you so much for supporting Mission: Water For Life. It really means so much to those we impact.

Would you thank the Cruses for being here on *LIFE Today*?

Before we let you go, I want you to tell us where people can go to help Team Connor.

Joy: Team Connor is www.TeamConnor.org. It is C-O-N-N-O-R.org. And for the book you can go to HopeTransformed.com and find us both on Facebook.

Randy: Please do. Please check it out, especially if you're in that situation or you know someone that is, or if you've asked the hard questions.

Once again, thank you for being here. And thank you for watching *LIFE Today*!

Announcer: Faith, family, and freedom are under attack. As America faces battles within, many wonder where to turn. In their new book, James Robison and Jay

Richards call us to stand together before it's too late as one nation truly under God. *Indivisible* -- The New York Times bestseller now available in paperback and online and retail bookstores.

Joy: Why did you answer their prayers but not ours?

Announcer: Next week, two families faced with tragedy and struggles ask the tough questions.