

Season 7 | Episode 2

## **Relying on God's Daily Bread Amid Cancer, Uncertainty, and Suffering**

**Roberta Dunn**

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Stephanie Daniels:

Hi friends! I'm your host, Stephanie Daniels, and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. We're sharing hope as we answer real questions about disability. Join us every week for an honest and encouraging conversation, along with practical ways to include people with disability in your church and community. So, grab a seat, and let's jump in!

Roberta Dunn is no stranger to hardship, or seeing God at work in the midst of it. She was raised by family members living with mental illness, and in our previous conversation, we heard how disability came into her life unexpectedly. Then in 2020, she also received her own cancer diagnosis.

Roberta joins us once again to talk about the Lord's faithfulness, and how he has carried her through it all, and how she has learned to suffer well.

Welcome back to the podcast, Roberta.

Roberta Dunn:

Thank you so much Stephanie. Glad to be here.

Stephanie Daniels:

Oh, I'm so glad you're here too. And we'll go ahead and jump right in. I wanna back up to the beginning, to when you were growing up. Your mom had schizophrenia. Can you talk about what the Lord taught you during that time and how he held you while growing up?

Roberta Dunn:

You know, when I think back to my earliest years, I remember that there was a lot of confusion. A lot of what was going on in my life didn't make sense to me as a child. But I didn't know any different. Most days would look like anybody else's life. It didn't look all that remarkable.

But then there would be times when my mom would have a manic episode maybe need her medications checked. In the earliest years she had not received a diagnosis and there's still so much social stigma around mental health that there was a lot of misinformation shared about mental health.

Now I'm a big advocate for making sure that people just have good conversations, talk to their doctors about how they're feeling. If you're feeling that something's going on in you or a loved one, to ask the hard questions and not to assume that maybe it is just that they're in a bad mood.

At one point people were saying my mom was just going through menopause and that somehow these hormonal changes were causing this. But I can assure you that the two don't look anything alike. And that it was unfortunate that my mom had to go so many years without a proper diagnosis and therefore without proper treatment. And so, she really struggled.

Now what that looked like for me when those times were going on, I was very fortunate to have a strong circle of people in my life, and I really do believe that the Lord handpicked those people for the seasons that I needed them.

For example, I remember the Sunday school teacher I had when I was just six years old. It was in his Sunday school class that I accepted Jesus. When I think back to that, I also have to remember that even in the most difficult times with my mom, it was my mom who made sure that I had 75 cents, my Bible, and was ready to catch the bus that would pick me up to go to that Sunday school. And that would be even through the throes of chronic, chronic, depression. Sometimes my mom would go days without getting out of bed. But yet, the Lord worked through her and supported her in making sure that I got to Sunday school.

Then as I was growing a little bit older, there would just be different people that crossed my paths. And each one of them, again, I give so much glory to the Lord that he put them in my path. When I was younger, I had a Pastor, his name was Pastor Jones and his wife Virginia, and they happened to know my family. They would be kind of a wing of protection or a covering for me...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

...even when my mom wasn't able to be.

Years later when I was 13, my mom attempted suicide and it was Pastor Jones and his wife that picked me up, took me to the hospital, supported me in finding out what was going on.

Stephanie Daniels:

Wow.

Roberta Dunn:

And then remembering singing songs like, "Do you hear Jesus knocking at your heart?" And then having that scripture come to life even as a younger child. I just received that as the Lord letting me know that he was with me. And Stephanie, I think of the old hymn, In The Garden. That hymn, I grabbed on and I thought, this is a God who walks with me, who talks with me, and he doesn't tire or bore of me. He lets me lean on him when I need to lean on someone. The one thing that could have been the absolute worst was to feel alone. And I didn't.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

I felt like the Lord was with me and in a manifestation of his presence, I felt he ordained the people in my life that were with me.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. That's so precious. Hymns are so rich. And we know that Joni loves hymns, and I remember Todd sharing that he sings hymns. Todd, your son that was on our last podcast episode, he sings hymns when he's feeling fearful. So, I understand why you hang on to those, why you kind of grasped a hold of those.

I'm curious, you talked about your mom's schizophrenia and it taking a while to find a diagnosis. I feel like it's with family members that we see the signs of things. It's kinda like with me and my mom. My sister and I were the ones to say, mom, we're concerned about your brain and what we're seeing. That led us to make doctor's appointments and get down to a diagnosis of Alzheimer's for her. I'm just curious, was anybody sharing with your mom? Was it when she attempted suicide that she finally got a diagnosis? How did that come about?

Roberta Dunn:

That's a really heavy question. As I think a lot of young people who grow up in a similar situation where things are a little unsteady, I grew up much faster than you should have to.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

And I later as an adult would say that I co-parented my mom with my dad. And I co-parented my younger brother with my dad. So, you just pick up a mantle of responsibility that a child's not supposed to have to have.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

And in some regards, that included researching why my mom was like my mom was. I remember asking relatives questions because of some of the things my mom would say when she was in a schizophrenic moment, an episode. She would say some things that had made me think, well maybe she had had a trauma, or maybe she had been sexually assaulted, maybe something had happened. And so, I'd ask questions. And my mom's relatives, they were not happy to be asked those questions. There was a strong desire to deny that anything was the matter, to the point where it would raise up in anger. Anger that I was even asking.

My family did try to get my mom's support in one way or another, but it was her suicide attempt when she finally was hospitalized for a period of time, and they determined that there was definitely a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia and the need for medication.

I think that the stigma I mentioned before is still in 2025, horrible. It's so difficult for people to have conversations about mental illness. It's one of the reasons I'm so comfortable talking about it, is because I want the next person that's walking in those shoes to be comfortable talking about it.

But I had some relatives that were angry that I even wanted to talk about my mom and her challenging behavior. And then I had another relative that said that my mom was possessed. So, a complete different side of the pendulum. But no one was really talking about her mental health.

Stephanie Daniels:

Wow. That is so loaded. I think I just have so many thoughts um, in my mind right now. And I think it's beautiful that the Lord allows us to go through so much. It's hard while we go through it, but when I'm thinking about you and hearing your story, I feel like you have gleaned so much along the way.

That's why you're such an amazing advocate for Todd and why you advocated for your mom. You are in this field because you love and care about people because of the things you've been through.

Roberta Dunn:

Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Daniels:

And so, with that in mind, you know, how important were those lessons when you learned that your twins had Down syndrome?

Roberta Dunn:

So, I think that sometimes we can be kind of flip when we throw around Bible verses. But for this, I would say that the Bible verse in Esther, “for such a time as this,” I really became comfortable with the idea that the moment that you're in, and what you're walking through right then, is for such a time as this.

So, whether or not it was as a young person walking through my mom's diagnosis and my mom's treatment, ups and downs, because there were many of them. Or if it was when my twins were born and we learned that Todd had Down syndrome, when you have a mindset that right now is the moment that the Lord has you in, you've come to peace with the idea that you're not doing it alone, then for such a time as this you feel more equipped, more called, more prepared, more maybe submitted to living out the moment that the Lord has you in.

I think that as I had shared about that diagnosis, and the day that we received that diagnosis, I think my husband and I happened to both be in a similar place where you don't throw the cards down, you don't storm off, you play the cards you're dealt. Thinking of it in maybe a more biblical way, for such a time as this.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

You, you walk where the Lord has you.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. And I do believe that he equips you. It's like you're walking through hardship, you're building muscles as you're doing it, and so he's equipping you. Whether it's your faith is being built up in him, or you're learning how to trust him more. Your hope is growing stronger. Your relationship with him is growing deeper. He's equipping you.

Well Roberta, in 2020 you were diagnosed with stage three ovarian cancer. When you first learned this news, how did you keep yourself from going down the rabbit holes of fear and what ifs?

Roberta Dunn:

I think it would be fair to say that I'm sure on any given day, I probably was way deep in a rabbit hole. So, I wouldn't want to pretend that there was no time spent in rabbit holes. But I think that in processing it, again just the idea that I feel like my lived experience prepared me for such a time as this. That mindset just really set me up well.

Jesus is with me, he's walking with me, he's talking with me, he's there for me, he's listening. Whether or not I needed to be crying out to him, crying tears of emotion, crying tears of fear, crying tears of anger, I believe that our God was big enough for all of it.

There were times when I felt like I wanted to tantrum. I wanted to say, "Why?" You know, "Not fair, party foul, God, that's not okay with me."

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

But then ultimately, I got to a place where I was thinking of all the things that I had just shared with you, that this isn't a surprise to God and that I wasn't gonna do cancer alone. That I was gonna do cancer with Jesus.

My prayer was, let me do cancer well.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

That whatever this journey's gonna be, and whatever it's going to include, let me just do it in such a way that it brings glory and honor to Jesus.

Stephanie Daniels:

I love that idea of just, Lord, whatever I'm doing, and that makes me emotional. If I'm worshiping you, let me worship well. If I'm waiting, let me wait well. If I'm suffering, let me suffer well. Man, that's hard. One of our guests this season, Abigail Brown, talked about God meeting you in the middle of the mess.

Roberta Dunn:

Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Daniels:

And I love that idea that he doesn't make you go through things alone. He is right there with you in it.

Roberta Dunn:

Absolutely. And it's not a surprise to God we're broken. So sometimes when we mistakenly think we have to fix ourselves, pretty ourselves up, use the, thee, and thou in our prayers, that's drama we are creating. That's not drama the Lord's creating.

When I think of the verses in the New Testament when Jesus is calling the children unto him, we're the children.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

The snotty crying...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

...temper tantrum throwing children. That's us!

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

So, I just love the idea that that's the great big God that's ready for us.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's so true.

Roberta Dunn:

And so, on that journey, one day I might have been praying, Lord heal me, and the next day I might've been saying, okay Lord, if you are not gonna heal me, help me be okay with what this is gonna be.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes, yes!

Roberta Dunn:

So that changed. You know, one day I might have been shouting out Jehovah Nissi, fight this battle for me. But the next day I might have been saying, Jehovah Rafa, heal me, Lord I don't wanna go through this. I don't wanna have to fight this fight. Jehovah Gyra, be my provider, providing what I need right now, Lord. And ultimately, I'm thinking of Elroy, the God that sees me. That's the one I wanted to remember. God sees me.

All of those feelings, they can all be in me at the same time. I can be thinking, fight this battle, be my provider, heal me...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.



Roberta Dunn:

...and Lord God, see me, right here where I am. And I think that that was very reminiscent. I think it was a muscle memory exercise for me in that I'd been doing it through my childhood. I'd been having to say, Lord, nothing right now in my life is making sense, but you are the God that sees me.

Stephanie Daniels:

He absolutely does and I love that. That makes me think of Exodus 2:25 and it's when the Israelites have been crying out to God and it says, "God saw the sons of Israel and God took notice of them and he was concerned." And I just love the idea that God is not just this God that sits in the heavens over the clouds and lifts them up to look at us and be like, "They're still there." You know? He is just like, "I see you."

Roberta Dunn:

Yes.

Stephanie Daniels:

"My eyes are on you." And he is intimately acquainted with where we are and what we're going through.

Roberta Dunn:

I like how you said that Stephanie, "intimately acquainted," because I think that's the thing is somehow, we feel in our humanity that we can pull the wool over his eyes.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

If you are sad, be sad with Jesus. If you're angry, be angry with Jesus. If you're afraid, be afraid but with Jesus, he's there. He sees you. So, you don't have to pretend to be anything else. Take those feelings, your fear, your anger, your sadness, and be with a loving father that wants you to be that close that intimately. He is that intimately aware. You're not pulling anything over on him if you're trying to pretend otherwise.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. That's so rich. Well, as you were newly diagnosed and in a rabbit hole from time to time, were there any scriptures that you went to as you navigated this season?

Roberta Dunn:

I had what they call chemo fog or chemo brain. It became really hard to read, and yet I really did enjoy being in my Word every day. So I'd have my Bible in my lap, then I'd have the Bible app open, and then I would have this third app, the Bible.Is app, that reads aloud, so I'd have it read aloud to me.

This multimodal way of being in the Word really refreshed me. And on days when I just couldn't even string sentences together, I was able to have the Word wash over me. And so, I am forever grateful for the opportunity to be able to have the Word speak to me that way.

A specific verse that I really did have a moment that I grabbed onto: the verse in the Lord's Prayer that talks about, give me this day my daily bread. And it was a prayer of acknowledgement of provision and that the Lord was gonna provide what I needed, whether or not, and in full submission that it could be healing, or it could not. It could be the health through my treatment. I didn't know what it was gonna be, his provision, but it was a faith that my God was gonna be my provision and that I didn't have to think about what my provision was gonna be tomorrow, or in six months, or in a year, but that it was gonna be for the day. Boy that was liberating.

You know, on a cancer journey, it's a journey. You're in a season where you're getting the diagnosis, you're in a whirlwind, and then all of a sudden you're on a treatment plan. My chemotherapy would take all day long and then I would be out practically sound asleep for 24 to 30 hours or so because of how hard it was. You're in the season where one day you have hair and the next day it comes out in your, in your hand. I remember posting in some of my social media saying, I only have three eyelashes left. Because at that point you're counting them. Seasons are gonna come and seasons are gonna go. But when it comes to the Lord's provision, that verse, give me this day...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

...my daily bread, that became my life verse. And still today, even if I'm in the middle of the night, maybe something has me anxious, maybe I've got a pressing deadline or maybe a unresolved issue with a family member or a friend. Sometimes just from my bed, I'll stick my hand out from under the sheets, and I'll open up my palm and I'll say, give me this day my daily bread. Again, sometimes we make it too complicated Stephanie. If you're having anxiety...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

...ask the Lord to be what you need right then and there.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's such a beautiful reminder and encouragement for me and our listeners. And I hope that we will take that and just say, God in this moment, I need you. Thank you Jesus. I'm so glad that you're on today and sharing all of this with us.

So, you get this diagnosis, I'm wondering as a working wife and mother, 'cause you were working at this time, and we know you have three sons and one who lives with Down syndrome.

Roberta Dunn:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Daniels:

But I'm just like, how did you do it all? Uh, you know, taking care of your family and caregiving, how did you advocate for yourself?

Roberta Dunn:

So, when thinking, Stephanie, about advocating for myself I remember knowing that I was having these symptoms, but my primary physician was dismissing them.

Ovarian cancer is known as the silent killer of women because the symptoms aren't as obvious. And what I would tell women that might be listening is heavy and abnormal bleeding, bloating that is just ongoing and chronic, fatigue that you can't explain, and weight loss. Those are some of the symptoms of ovarian cancer. And I was having those symptoms and the final time when I reached out to my primary care doctor, my cancer journey was right along parallel with all of our Covid experience.

So, the world was shutting down for Covid and I had reached out to my doctor and I said, well, everyone is complaining about gaining the Covid weight. I said I'm losing weight. And so, I was bloated and visually my belly looked extended but when I got on the scale, I was losing weight. And at that point, the doctor referred me to see a specialist and it was that advocacy saved my life. The Cancer Antigen test for ovarian cancer, your number should be less than 40. And when

I first was seen by the specialist, she took that blood work and called me on a Friday evening after hours saying that she wouldn't want me to get this information in my chart or some other online way. She wanted to be talking to me when I got this information, and she let me know that my cancer antigen numbers were over 7,000.

And so, had I not seen that specialist, had my doctor just poo-pooed it, one more time. Stage four ovarian cancer is almost always indicative of it already having spread.

Stephanie Daniels:

Right.

Roberta Dunn:

And so, my stage three cancer, because of that diagnosis and being able to get that diagnosis was still within my uterus and my ovaries and so, a complete hysterectomy, three rounds of chemo, and then five additional rounds of chemo, and I'm on the right side of it, but it was advocacy.

I think that I put a lot of my personal energy into making sure I was aware of what I needed to be aware of for what my body was going through. And I felt called into the Word. Just making sure that I could prioritize that quiet time in the Word, that was really important. But I think that as far as advocating for care, I had to advocate for myself, with myself and say, Roberta, let people help you.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

I learned we're not very good at letting people help and sometimes the struggle is with knowing how to articulate what the need is.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

But when I was going through my cancer journey, I needed to let people in. And now granted, I've met women that on this similar journey, they preferred to keep it very, very private. I feel

like the desire to be private can be misconstrued as you not needing help or care. I think that it is really important to let people in.

When I was losing my hair, a great group of friends did a chemo cap party. Where they each shared a chemo cap that I could wear when I had lost my hair, and different creams, and ointments and lotions, that had worked for them when they had cancer journeys. And special blankets that were really soft that brought them comfort, they pass it along to me that it would bring me comfort.

I know that's a weird way to answer a question about advocating, but I think that making sure you're open...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

...to being supported.

During cancer treatments, my doctors and my team always said, "No question is a bad question, and let us know everything. If you think even something slightly different in how you're feeling, you let us know." Well, as a relatively strong, independent woman, we tend not to take people serious when they say that.

Advocating for yourself is saying no, make sure to let them know. I had developed a small rash. I didn't think it was anything really horrible, but it was inconvenient. Maybe my body just wasn't liking chemo. I happened to mention it reluctantly. I had to tell myself, he said, tell them everything. And it turned out I had developed shingles in the middle of my cancer treatment.

And you know, Stephanie, I don't think I mentioned this earlier, but I just celebrated my five-year cancer free anniversary.

Stephanie Daniels:

Woohoo.

Roberta Dunn:

And I went in to see my oncologist and my cancer antigen test is seven.

Stephanie Daniels:

Come on.

Roberta Dunn:

So comfortably under 40...

Stephanie Daniels:

Thank you, Jesus.

Roberta Dunn:

...and she shared with me that if a person has a recurrence of ovarian cancer before the five-year anniversary, then the statistical odds of them passing away from their cancer go up much higher. If you can make it to your five-year anniversary without recurrence, your statistical odds that you will not have recurrence go up dramatically.

Stephanie Daniels:

Wow.

Roberta Dunn:

So, it was a real celebration to get to that point.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's so wonderful. I'm so glad we have you on right around your anniversary.

Roberta Dunn:

Yes!

Stephanie Daniels:

That's incredible. Thank you, Jesus. You know, something that's also interesting to me that you mentioned, and this is, I mean, not a huge factoid, I guess, but I think it's really impressive that

you're a triathlete. And you were saying that you just got to the point where you couldn't even walk around your block, right?

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah. So in 2015, my husband and I had been doing triathlon. And in 2015 we both did half Ironman. And so that's 1.2 mile swim, I believe it's 56 mile bike ride, and then a 13 mile run.

Stephanie Daniels:

Gosh.

Roberta Dunn:

And so, in 2015, I was in the best shape of my life. But when I was going through cancer treatment, that dear friend, my prayer partner, she would come over and her goal, her soul mission was to get me on a walk.

And because mobility was super important, and this is individualized you know and different for everyone, but my chemotherapy impacted me the most greatly in joints. So, I was sore. All of my body parts hurt. And so, she would come over and get me to go for a walk and if we could just make it like around our complex, that was a huge success.

And there were times when even at the smallest of incline, she'd have to hold my hand because I just didn't have the gumption, the get up and go, to make it up even the smallest of hills, she'd..

Stephanie Daniels:

Wow.

Roberta Dunn:

...you know, just hold my hand, help me. And it's been five years now, I'm not doing any half Iron Man, but I'm definitely in better shape after having been on the journey that I was.

Stephanie Daniels:

Wow. Wow. I'm just thrilled that you have made it five years out from this whole ordeal and that you are healthy and you've lived to tell the tale.

I'm curious, Roberta, how did your cancer diagnosis affect your family? You know, sweet Todd in our last episode was the one that shared that you had gone through this journey and my heart just went out 'cause you can just tell he loves his mama so much.

And so, how did this affect your family, your husband, and your boys? And how did Todd process the news when he found out?

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah. It's very similar in a sense to how we processed the news that we had a son that experienced disability. When the doctor first came in and said, "Mrs. Dunn, do you know what Down syndrome is?" My reaction was "No, but I'm gonna have to figure this out. So yes, bring me a book. Yes, bring me a brochure. Yes, connect me with a support group."

My husband, on the other hand was "No, and don't tell me anything until you know for sure, and then we'll do this." So, we had to process that and then we got synced and started to work well together. Flash forward to getting my cancer diagnosis. When my husband and I, again, because of Covid they were only letting the patient in. Because I was new and I was gonna be receiving a diagnosis, they let my husband come with me. So, we got that diagnosis together. When we got home, I stopped him and I said, honey, this is a serious thing, this cancer. Because we needed to sync and we needed to sync quickly.

Stephanie Daniels:

Right.

Roberta Dunn:

And we did. Then as I would share with the boys, each one of them did respond to the news differently. My oldest son, I happened to be at his house the day that my hair started to fall out in clumps. I was playing with my granddaughter, and we were trying on different little hats, and when I took one of them off, a whole bunch of my hair came off with it.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

So, I went to my son who wears his hair buzz cut and I said, honey I need you to shave my head. He didn't miss a beat. He said okay. He got up, and my daughter-in-law later shared with me that he went into the bedroom and cried.



Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

He was being really strong for me. But that it was much harder on him than he let on that I was asking him to shave my head. And then my one son, Jay, Todd's twin, he's my prayer warrior.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

He's a schoolteacher and he had a prayer group at the school he was at. He would call me up, "Mom it's Tuesday morning, what are we praying for? Well, how are we lifting you up?" So, it was always us and Jesus, mom, we got this.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

You know? And so that was always very reassuring.

And then sweet Todd. He wouldn't talk about it. He didn't bring it up. And we provided him information as we thought he needed it, but we didn't wanna overwhelm him. But one day he came over to walk the dog, he was maybe about 10 feet from me. And uh, said, "Hey mom." I said, "Yeah?" And he says, "Are you gonna die?" And I thought, oh boy, that's heavy. And that's obviously had been really sitting on his heart weighing heavy on him. I was curled up not really able to move much, and I thought, what am I gonna tell him? So, I told him the only thing I could think of, "Not today." And he was like, "Okay."

Stephanie Daniels:

Aw.

Roberta Dunn:

And that's what he needed to know...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

...that not today.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

Mom is not dying today because I couldn't give him promises.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

And I didn't know what the journey was gonna look like, but I knew that that day I wasn't gonna die. And he was okay with that answer.

Stephanie Daniels:

He's so precious.

Todd had made an association. So, he met his favorite worship leader, Jeremy Camp. Can you share a little bit about that?

Roberta Dunn:

Sure. So, Jeremy had heard that Todd was his number one fan and while in town made arrangements for Todd to get to hang out with him backstage for a little bit. Todd was familiar

with his story, that Jeremy has a brother that has Down syndrome. So, Todd felt an affinity for him in that regard, but then he also had an affinity for him because Jeremy's first wife, Melissa, had died of ovarian cancer. The "I Still Believe" movie about Jeremy's story and Melissa's death, Todd knew that in the movie, the person with ovarian cancer dies.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

And so that was the context that he had to work with.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's where his question came from. And I love that you were able to say, not today.

Todd is pretty independent. So how important was community then in regards to Todd and your family?

Roberta Dunn:

I think community's always super important, but it's critical when you're going through something like this, for a plethora of reasons. Sometimes it's the need to just have someone you can talk to.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

Todd asks some really deep theological questions and sometimes they're not so deep, but they're deep to him. Just having a friend that he can hang out with and have those conversations with is huge.

Todd had been attending our church's young adult program. He had a great group leader Johnny, an amazing young man. He does not experience disability. He didn't necessarily have prior experience or any training in working with someone that experienced disability, but he saw Todd coming regularly, getting dropped off by his mom. So, Johnny texts me and said, this is Johnny, Todd's small group leader, would it be okay if I give Todd a ride to and from small group?

That relationship started before cancer. And then when I was having cancer, Todd had someone that he could talk to. And that relationship now, five years after cancer, is still strong, even though Johnny is on the East coast studying theology. They still call one another. That sense of community is super important.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. So, you mentioned the Lord's Prayer earlier, and in Matthew six, Jesus taught us how we should pray. I'm wondering what place did prayer have in your spiritual journey after your diagnosis? The Lord's Prayer specifically.

Roberta Dunn:

I really think that the posture of praying the Lord's Prayer is one of submission and one of recognizing God's omnipotence. His majesty.

I think it was really just, the whole prayer. But when I would start with, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," it was just in his majesty and appreciating our God's not a little God, our God's in control. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Thy will, not mine. I'm not a master artisan. I couldn't create a mountain or an ocean or this body, but I know of God who does. Who can and who did. So, thy will be done. You know, give me this day...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

...my daily bread. So, as I would have such an appreciation for the person that created my body and that his will is happening in real time, that he's gonna be my provision...

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

...whether or not that provision was healing, or the support I needed through my journey.

Stephanie Daniels:

Right.

Roberta Dunn:

Whatever it was gonna look like, because thy will be done.

I mentioned earlier different people that the Lord had put in my life. I had a youth group leader, Florence Petes was her name. And I attended a little country church. There were only three of us in our high school youth group.

Stephanie Daniels:

Wow.

Roberta Dunn:

Three. And Florence was in her sixties, but she was the one that volunteered to be the youth group leader. And when my two friends and I let her know that, while we had memorized the Lord's Prayer, we didn't really understand it. Florence Peets got up on the chalkboard...

Stephanie Daniels:

Come on.

Roberta Dunn:

...and broke the Lord's prayer down and walked us through it. And I didn't know that 45 years later I was gonna so appreciate that sweet woman and her willingness to take the time to share with me the words and the power in that prayer. And I'll take that all the way to heaven. You know? That's just gonna be something I'll treasure.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah, I love that. Did you find it easier or harder to pray as you walked this journey of cancer? And was there anything specific that helped strengthen your prayer life?

Roberta Dunn:

So, I don't know that I would say it was either easier or harder. But what I did notice is it was more authentic. I may have sang the song, I may have felt that the Lord was always an ever-present companion in whatever I was going to. But I don't know that I used to pray authentically.

I now, with no disrespect, I know that a lot of people really hold on to their King James language or to their doctrinal prayers and prayer books and whatnot. But I got real, real with Jesus.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

And I really am comfortable with that. just an appreciation that I don't cry a tear he doesn't know about. I don't hide or shudder in fear that he doesn't know about. It just became much more authentic. And when you're praying authentic and you're being just your very raw self, I also feel like prayer isn't a time of day or a thing you do...

Stephanie Daniels:

Right.

Roberta Dunn:

...it's an attitude that you hold. Whether I was praying for that IV drip to put those chemicals into my body to go right where they needed to go, or whether I was praying that I wouldn't be nauseous or that I would have a quick recovery on the other side of that treatment. I just was always in a constant conversation...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

...with the Lord.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. That's so good.

You talked about, suffering well earlier, and I just wanna know, what does that mean to you?

Roberta Dunn:

When we think of the Philippians verse, "We can do all things through Christ that strengthens me." We can suffer through things through Christ who strengthens me. And so, it's the idea that you're allowing the Lord to season you. I often use the phrase salt and pepper you.

So, what you're experiencing is seasoning you, applying that salt and pepper, but you're appreciating that suffering well is that this is gonna manifest something in you that the Lord is gonna use. So, nothing about it was for naught.

Stephanie Daniels:

Right.

Roberta Dunn:

In my marriage, in how I parent, in my relationships, vocationally, nothing was for naught.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

You have suffered well if in through it, you have appreciated that the Lord is there with you and that he's doing something through you and through what you're experiencing.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. I love that. Nothing is wasted. God uses it all. You talked about God being Jehovah Raha and seeking his will in our suffering. It's not wasted. He uses it. So, there's purpose in it and it's like you said earlier, God, heal it, but if you don't, help me be okay with it.

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah.

Stephanie Daniels:

And use it for your glory.

Roberta Dunn:

Amen.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

Help me to do cancer the best way I can.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

And in a way that brings you glory and honor.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

And that wasn't a surrender, which I think that's the conundrum. We tend to think that it's one or the other that we're either praying for healing, or we've given up.



Stephanie Daniels:

Right.

Roberta Dunn:

We're just praying, be with me while I die. And sorry to be so crass, but it's not that. It's that in this all, let it be what it's gonna be and let it bring you glory...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

...and be what I need to go through it.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah. Yeah. Hmm.

What advice Roberta would you give to someone who's processing a new diagnosis?

Roberta Dunn:

At the risk of being redundant, I would reiterate the idea of: be your authentic self. Just fall at the foot of the cross and be your authentic self with a very loving father God that wants to envelop you. That wants to hold you. You don't have to have it all together. You don't have to have processed it. You don't have to feel like you are prepared to lead the next support group. Just be your authentic self and let the Lord know where your heart is and what you're feeling.

And then two, just do that in community. You know, if you have a Pastor you can talk to or someone at church you can reach out to. A loved one that you can share with. I'd encourage that as well.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah, yeah. Well, you've gleaned some really rich wisdom through your life experiences and your childhood with your mom, with raising your boys, and Todd with Down syndrome. And as I've listened to you, it does seem like it's more than a lifetime of wisdom. And I think that my favorite thing that you've shared was when you said that the Lord told you to get in his hand...

Roberta Dunn:

Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Daniels:

...and I would love for you to share that with our listeners today.

Roberta Dunn:

Absolutely. So, starting off when I was really young, I think the first memory I have of this happening, I was maybe seven or eight years old, but I was scared. I was crying. I was trying to pretend and project to my community. So, to my little peers and to my teachers, I wanted everything to look like it was okay, and that I wasn't having problems at home. But I was having problems at home. And so, all of that could only manifest for so long before I just couldn't do it anymore as a little child.

And I remember, not in an audible voice, the Lord just saying, "Child, get in the palm of my hand." And it was enough of a visual image, and maybe it's because of some of the old hymns, but I very much received it. I feel like, spiritually I got in the palm of his hand, and I would just sit there and I would cry, or I would feel the feels that I need to feel. But I'd also, in doing that, feel the assurance that I was in the palm of an almighty, heavenly Father...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

...who wanted nothing but for me to know his peace. So, from that time throughout the years, that occurrence would happen. Life can be hard.

Stephanie Daniels:

Oh yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

Life can have lots of ups and lots of downs. But the one thing, whenever these seasons would come, I just remember a very similar feeling of the Lord saying, okay, back, get back into the palm of my hand.

When we were new to disability and very, very much so, and in a very intimate way for me when I was going in the cancer journey. I still to this day will say, Jesus and I had a journey with cancer. Because I don't think I did it alone.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

I didn't....

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

I wouldn't want any woman that's going through that journey to feel like they need to do it alone. You have a loving God that wants to do cancer with you. I would share that imagery with you sweet sister who's listening, who's feeling that they're doing it alone. His palm is open.

Stephanie Daniels:

Man.

Roberta Dunn:

His palm is open. And he invites you. Whether or not, you're feeling little and tiny, or you're an adult and you're feeling overwhelmed, you're never too big, you're never too old to get into the palm of his hand and let him carry you.

Stephanie Daniels:

Amen. Oh man, that is definitely where I wanna be, right in the palm of his hand. Roberta, I could talk to you forever. You are just a wealth of information and I'm so thankful that we've had this time.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that our founder, Joni Eareckson Tada, has had two bouts with cancer and she has encouraged our Joni and Friends community so well through her own journey and experience. And we have a lot of resources on our website. If cancer is a journey

that you're walking through right now and you need support, or you need resources, we have linked several of those resources in the show notes for this episode. And we pray that you would be encouraged through that journey.

Roberta, this has been just a really sweet time. And we're so thankful for you joining us again to just share the wisdom that you have gained through so much of the hardship you've endured. Thank you for joining us today.

Roberta Dunn:

Thank you, Stephanie. Always a pleasure.

Stephanie Daniels:

We hope this conversation touched your heart today. If it did, consider sharing it with someone who might be encouraged as well. And don't forget to follow us on your favorite podcasting app so you never miss an episode. See you next week!

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