

Unfavorable Odds

References to conferences, resources, or other special promotions may be obsolete.

Episode 11: The Upset

Guest: John Driver
Air Date: September 30, 2019

John: I asked him in my first interview, “People are tweeting about you around the world right now. Can you help me understand—there are so many kids who are sick out there. There are so many stories. Why you?”

I said “I’m not being mean, Tyler, I just want to know why? Why you?” He said, “Because I asked God. I told God when I got cancer the second time ‘Don’t let me waste it like I did the first time. But if You will, will You please use this story? Use my life for Your glory whether I live or die.’”

[Recorded]

Tyler: I was really hard on myself because I felt like I hadn’t really used my story for the Lord’s glory. I felt like I could have done more with my cancer to glorify the Lord. I went through some really dark patches / ruined a lot of relationships / lost a lot of friends because of how I dealt with things. So I was really hard on myself and felt like I hadn’t done enough. So when I was diagnosed for a second time, I felt like it was the Lord really pushing me to turn the whole struggle over to Him and use it for His glory.

[Studio]

Kim: From the FamilyLife podcast network, this is *Unfavorable Odds*. I’m Kim Anthony. *Unfavorable Odds* is about finding hope and help in those seasons of life when things are pretty tough. Jesus has promised us that whenever we walk through those dark valleys, He’s always with us. We will never have to go it alone. So on each episode of this podcast, we’ll be talking with people who have learned how, during those dark times, to draw their strength from Jesus.

Tyler Trent was 20-year-old student at Purdue University. At age 15, he was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a rare bone disease / an aggressive form of cancer. Tyler burst onto the national scene when his story went viral on ESPN and social media. He was passionate about sports, raising funds for pediatric cancer research, and most of all, he was passionate about using his story to point people to Jesus.

One of Tyler’s dreams was to write a book that would carry on his legacy long after he was gone. Well, he accomplished that goal with the help of his parents, Tony and Kelly Trent, and collaborative writer, John Driver. I spent some time with John, and I was able

to get a behind the scenes look at the life of a young man who asked God to use him to have an impact on the world. And then, he saw God do far more than he ever thought possible.

John, you got to have a bit of an inside look into Tyler's life. Tell me a little bit about who you are and why you were able to get this opportunity to serve in such a way.

John: Absolutely, it's still something amazing to me that I even had a part at all in this story. Because it really is an incredible story that's changing lives still today / an incredible young man.

I'm a pastor near Nashville. I'm the teaching executive pastor here at my church. For about 10 years now, I've also worked as an author and collaborative writer. It was something God led me to do. It was kind of out of the blue; not something I thought that I would do.

But over the last several years, collaboration has really become a passion. It's a way for me to partner with somebody who maybe doesn't have the opportunity or the time / the energy / the bandwidth to give to a project to really help interpret their message. I work with a lot of different speakers and pastors and other people that as you know, what you say to the public doesn't necessarily translate to the paper. So I really consider myself an interpreter in that way that I help.

My agent, is a dear friend, reached out to me in October to tell me "Hey, I don't know if you've seen this video that's going around but this family is looking quickly to try to work on a book"—that's one of Tyler's dreams before he passes. So he was already a writer for his newspaper there at Purdue—had written a lot of different op eds and other things at different newspapers around. So he had a great writing voice already, but I had that opportunity.

We immediately, the next week, jumped in a car / drove to Indianapolis and began the process of capturing as much as we could with him and collaborating together. So it was just an honor. He was an amazing inspiration to me from the moment that I met him in his home.

He was in a hospice bed there in his living room they had set up. He was just a delight even in that situation. He was already paralyzed completely except for his right arm but still pretty quick witted and had a lot of funny things to say—very intelligent / very sharp and just a young man that's impacted me deeply.

Kim: Describe what that collaboration looked like. Did you have conversations daily?

John: Sure. Well, I mean collaboration is different in every various project. It always is something that's going to vary depending on the situation. With him—and I wrote about this some in sort of the writer's note up front because we knew that people were going

to go “Okay, you’ve got a guy who is paralyzed / who’s laying in a bed the last couple of months of his life, are we supposed to believe he penned this book on his own?” Most books don’t happen with somebody sitting around writing about themselves anyway. It usually takes a team.

So having a writer—his mind being a writer’s mind helped a lot. Immediately I just began capturing audio recordings. I stuck a microphone—and that’s how I usually do it—just began to take in and then you transcribe those files. But the amazing part of this was that there were so many people who had other footage.

In fact, there was a guy named Scott who was a friend of theirs and went to church with them who just felt led by the Lord a few years ago to just start capturing as much video footage—It was when he was diagnosed with cancer the second time. They went out to eat and he just asked them “I know this is weird, bro, but can I start following you with a camera and interviewing you?” So it was a terabyte almost worth of footage that he had just taken *when* Tyler was still way more mobile and able to get around. So they had kind of followed so much through there so all that was shared.

ESPN who had done all the documentary work that—It was only about a two-minute piece that they aired that day but there was hours of footage with different members of the family and other things. They just graciously shared all of that as well.

And then finally, his parents, we knew when we started there was a chance that he’d never get to hold this book in his hands and that he wouldn’t be around to help us polish off every word so we were very intentional about “What is it that you really want to say? What are those predominant messages and stories?” and those things. And then, his parents have really been the stewards of that.

Tony and Kelly Trent are just phenomenal people. So they became the stewards of his story while he was sick and while they’re caring for him and then after he passed as well—helping it be accurate / helping it have all the things inside of it that we knew that God wanted to say through Tyler’s life, and Tyler wanted to express in his own story.

Kim: You also give his parents an opportunity to express what they saw during Tyler’s life. Whose idea was that? It’s brilliant.

John: I think that in the beginning we knew that they would most likely be the ones to continue to carry the story and so we wanted them to be able to speak. Also there were things that they wanted to say about Tyler. He was a very humble young man. There were things they wanted to say about him that he would never say about himself. You couldn’t talk about how intelligent he was and brilliant and all of those things, so they wanted to dote on him and have that moment to really enjoy their boy in the book.

It was painful and that process is still painful and difficult because—I will just say this, Kim, it was a crazy—the craziest collaboration process, timing wise, I’ve ever been a

part of. We initially started and began sort of the standard pitch to publisher's type thing and as things became more imminent with his health, it became apparent we had to move faster, and we had to take a less traditional route. We ended up basically writing this manuscript in about 30 days which is—usually would take about six months to do so—just to pen the original parts much less the edits.

So everybody swarmed around and Tony and Kelly in the middle of what all they're doing. Of course, they're traveling to the college football hall of fame to accept this award or they're doing interviews, but above all they're caring for Tyler.

One of the last events that he did was the Music City Bowl when Purdue played in Nashville which is where I live. We met up there. He had a special suite at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel, and he was the guy who went out on the field. That was one of the last times he had the—he really didn't have the energy. He didn't think he could make it. He was very, very close to passing. I think that was December 28th. and they wheeled him out on the field for the coin toss. He was the honorary captain for both teams that day and literally by the time they had him back in the tunnel, he was beginning to go downhill just at the Music City Bowl. They put him back on a plane and flew him home.

So all that's happening as we're writing. I went to the hotel and met with the family—all that's a part of the book—so we're literally experiencing it in real time, a lot of it as we're writing it. Which was the most fascinating thing I think I've been a part of and seeing God move in those things, watching the family be willing to share honestly the things that they're struggling with, and also how the gospel is unveiled and revealed through Tyler's words and through the things they want to say and really going back and forth.

Usually you have a lot of time with the publishing team to go "Hey, how is this going to work? What message do we want to say?" They were making those decisions from a raw place. It was just pure. It was a pure thing. Again, so much pain and grief and yet so much joy and hope and that mixture of the two it was just a place where you could see the work of God.

Kim: What kind of guy was Tyler before his life was interrupted?

John: I didn't know Tyler but I have seen a lot of video and obviously, talking to his friends and being even at his funeral and all the childhood stories and of course, a lot of time with his parents and I can just say he was—his nickname was Smiley—just always a smile on his face / really a jokester, very intelligent and loved to cut up.

There's so many great stories of him and his friends playing board games until all hours of the night and the early morning—very competitive in that sense. So always witty and sharp and really, sort of the life of the party, if you will, even though he accomplished a lot. He was always a good student and those kinds of things—those things came naturally to him. But really just the guy with a smile on his face and always a happy word for everyone around him.

Kim: Walk me through how Tyler found out about his cancer.

John: Yes, it was a couple of crazy stories. He went through this several times but the first time, he just had this pain in his arm, sort of up in his humerus area and he had been playing basketball. He was in summer workouts for basketball and just had attributed it to a muscle pull or a strain. When you're that age—you're 15—you don't freak out. It's growing pains; all kinds of things are happening. They had spoken a little bit with some medical friends: "Oh yeah, put some ice on it and try this." Everyone just assumed it was sort of a sports injury.

It went on and on. His mom wanted him to go to the doctor sooner, but he always had a trip. It's that prime of life. He's off to this camp and off to this event. He threw a Frisbee at his best friend's birthday party and had just the most incredible sharp pain in his arm and after that it was almost immobilized. He had to put in into a sling. That was when they began to suspect it was maybe more than just a muscle strain. He still insisted and waited and tried to avoid until his mom forced him to go.

Basically, in the moment when they're doing the scans, she can detect from the reactions of the people in the room that something is terribly wrong. He had actually broken his arm throwing that Frisbee. That was how the tumor was so involved and had weakened the bone so much that he actually broke his arm in that moment. That was the beginning. Immediately their lives went from everything you think about in a normal teenager's life to something completely different and it was never going to be the same again.

Kim: How did the diagnosis affect Tyler?

John: He in the beginning—especially after he started his treatments, and this is something we write about in the book quite a bit and something—it's one of those sort of middle grounds and how people will think of it and we wrote it that way. Tyler hit a deep dark depression. He even became suicidal at one point throughout the course of really starting treatments.

[Recorded]

Tyler: You know when I was first diagnosed, I was 15 years old so I was very immature I would say. I entered a state of depression / of questioning God / asking the question of "Hey, will I ever be able to throw a football with my kid one day?" Because of the way osteosarcoma works is before they had any treatments, they just amputate your arm. They just get rid of the tumor and they had told me that. That's scary for a 15-year-old. So there's a lot of "Am I going to live? Am I going to die?" And I entered a state of deep depression because of that. Basically, I had decided in my mind that I was either going to kill myself or the cancer was. I actually tried a couple of times and by the grace of God, I did not succeed.

[Studio]

John: He really felt bad when he went into remission and sort of had grown in maturity. He constantly felt a need to make up for that in the years to come even as he was fighting cancer the second, third, and fourth time in different ways.

But during that season, it just hit him, and he became very bitter. He became bitter against his friends who were experiencing all of the novelties of adolescence and all the things that we all want to experience and he's in treatments. It was about nine months especially where he's in treatments and surgeries and other things and always recovering.

I think the thing as parents we try to really bring out in the book is that he was also dealing with chemo brain—you know is what they call it. I don't know what the official medical terminology is but he wasn't himself. He had a lot of different poisonous chemicals going through his body. He's dealing with treatments in a way that affects you psychologically and certainly even chemically.

So he again was just the kind of kid who held himself very responsible. He wanted to be responsible. He took life very seriously and his role in it. He wanted to steward his life well. So he always spent his life repenting for that. A lot of people around him said "Hey bro, you are doing the best you could do with what you had." But it was a hard, hard moment for him in life especially not knowing if he'd make it through.

Osteosarcoma is one of the most aggressive forms of cancer and there's not really a lot of new treatments. I mean there may be new techniques or new equipment but the basic way that it's been treated has not changed in 50/60 years is what they've discovered. It's one of the reasons the Trent family is so passionate about cancer research.

Also, because about 95% of funding for cancer goes to adult cancers and not to children's cancers. The survival rate is much higher among children because they have the ability to adapt and all those things. He just was facing these really heavy realities at such a young age and the whole family really dealt with the weight of it. It hit him like a ton of bricks for sure.

Kim: I believe I read that his parents said, "When Tyler got cancer, the whole family got cancer." What are some of the things they experienced as a family when Tyler was going through his treatment?

John: That line when they said that to me affected me so deeply not just as a writer but just as a person. Because it is such a profound truth, I think, to anybody in a family situation who is dealing with something on that level. Certainly something so severe and life threatening.

I think that the hardest thing was keeping up with it all. Tony—they each had their own thing and I respect them all so much for what they dealt with individually and respectively. Tony in particular is trying to still provide. He was a small business owner. He owned his own business and felt the need to continue. But of course, they're running to a different treatment every day.

He's homeschooled but in a homeschool co-op. So there is once a week that he's in a classroom environment and then that begins to change. So they're dealing with him and his depression. Then Kelly is running back and forth basically becoming nurse. In fact, one of the hospice nurses pulled aside Tony after Tyler had passed and said "Kelly Trent may have been the most remarkable mom who did more for her son during all these years that we've ever seen. The people who were beside her the whole time.

So she full immersed herself in caring for her son. Well they have two other sons, Ethan and Blake, as well. And so this was hard on them. It's a complicated question.

So dad's dealing with it, running around, asking God to save his boy. He's there for his son as much as he can; also trying to provide and deal with the ends and outs of it. Tony's a real self-proclaimed—he wants to be in control if he can. He wants to try to affect the situation. What dad would not want to positively affect the situation and do as much as he can to relieve the stress and pressure but there's only so much he could do in this situation.

Then again, Kelly just went into caregiver / complete caregiver—lost herself in that role. Then there's a chapter / section that Blake wrote in the book where he talks about how he got into some negative things in his life—that he felt lost. His faith was shaken. Not just faith in God but really there's this feeling when you're young that you're invincible and immortal. No one has to tell you that. You just kind of assume.

Even if you see grandparents or other people in your life pass away or deal with sickness that's one thing. But when your own brother whom you share a home with / someone close to your age / in your generation begins to deal with that kind of mortality and that kind of suffering, it just shook him at a foundational place and God reached out to him in a remarkable way to bring him to a new place of faith.

So everybody sort of found their way through it. I think even in the aftermath when Tyler went into remission—which is such a happy moment—it's really the part of the story they remember the least. For about a year he was cancer free.

Kim: Really?

John: Yes, they don't recall a lot because they lived at such a frantic pace for so long and with so much unknown around them. They took a trip to Hawaii—I think there was a Make a Wish trip that happened during that time—and they kind of have vague passing thoughts about it. Really, depression sank in for Kelly because now the constant giving

of herself and having no self-care caught up. There was tension between them in terms of how to—How do you go back? How do you go back to a quote unquote normal life after dealing with all they had dealt with?

So even in health it wasn't like it just went away. They were forever affected. Then always there's that fear hanging over your head that cloud that this is a highly reoccurring cancer and a highly reoccurring diagnosis.

So as much as they want this young man who is about to graduate high school and finally go to college and has this bright future. He's on scholarship. He's brilliant all those things. There's just that nagging feeling. They learned to live with it and put their trust in God completely, but it was always there. It was a reality that did come eventually to haunt them again.

So it was difficult to know when the situation itself would be resolved. There was no resolution they could find outside of being 10/15 years outside of it. But in the immediate couple of years, it was going to be a constant reality. Tyler's cancer became sort of the thing they revolved around in terms of daily life.

Kim: How do you come alongside a family like the Trents, who were dealing with cancer, to provide support and encouragement? What do you say? Some people would want to maybe say nothing at all and disappear from the scene because they don't know exactly what to say.

John: We talked about it a lot. In fact, Tony and I were speaking last night on the phone and I just said "We both know God put us together. That was evident from the get-go that me—" Being a pastor is my day job. That's the other thing that I do. I mean I'm around hospitals and death and suffering and all those things.

I believe all of God's people—I don't believe you have to be a pastor or somebody on paid staff. I think that's God's will for all of his people that they would in that kingdom of priests—that they would be the light and the one to carry the weight for those around them. I think that's really the call of the gospel upon our life that we often miss because we pawn it off to the quote unquote professional staff.

But it was something familiar I think is my point in that. I've learned a long time ago that I don't know enough to speak into situations beyond what is encouraging or beyond what is me just really being present. So I did my best in those moments not to counsel.

I think that's a good thing for anybody out there that if somebody's going through something like this it's easy and even Tony talks about that in the book "Hey, if you want to share a scripture, there's a way to share it where it's not a 'Hey, this is going to make everything okay now' instead of a 'Hey,' in humility and brokenness 'I understand it this way. I'd like to share it with you and maybe this will encourage you.' I'm not trying to fix

it. I'm not trying to take it away. I'm right here with you. We don't have to say anything." Just try to be there with them.

For them getting into this crazy book writing journey that we took over the course of those few months, in particular the one that we're writing, it gave them more to do. In fact, not just with the writing of the book and story, but Tyler went everywhere during this time. He's in a wheelchair. He's got tubes going everywhere and they never just sat at home and waited for the inevitable. They decided and it's in there, the book, as a moment. They decided we're going to live life for as long as God gives it to us and we're going to let our boy experience everything.

So those moments were the most influential of Tyler's life where he was speaking hope to millions of people. He was a nationally trending topic on Twitter. He's on ESPN all the time. He's being interviewed by Robin Roberts. He's everywhere. He's sharing his hope that he has in Christ as he's doing all those things.

So it was an amazing time and yet, behind the scenes—I was with him in Atlanta. Talk about coming alongside a family. We were just in a mall. He was there for the college football hall of fame. He's sitting next to everybody who's in the sports world who's famous and Heisman winners and everybody's around and they're all coming up to get Tyler's autograph and they're all coming up to talk to him. It wasn't put on.

There was a genuine sense that—In fact, even some of the ESPN guys would say to me "We just don't know what it is about this kid. What is it about this story?" There's lots of people out there who are sick and lots of tragic things but this one really did something to them in their hearts. So that's all happening as we're walking through. People are stopping to get his autograph but we—I'll never forget—we went to Chick-fil-A in a mall food court. The whole family is there, some of the Purdue University representatives, and David Blough, the quarterback, who plays in the NFL now—an incredible young man who loved Tyler and cared for him so well.

We're just sitting there and they're just a normal family. Tyler—his medicine would cause him to be emotional and he would be uncomfortable and something about his tubes or something about his situation would need to be changed. There were medical supplies that they needed that they forgot to bring and so they had to drop ship them. So they're down in the foyer of the hotel trying to get all the equipment they need. And then, oh, by the way, the little brother got the wrong drink and he needs a different drink from the place, and only had to find a way to wheel him through.

In all of the midst of this crazy amazing story that's internationally known, you just see this family just having to be a family as well. They still have to pay bills and they still have to figure out how they're going to transport from this place to this place. Of course, with a disabled young man as one of their children at the moment. So we'd be in a bookstore shopping and they're just laughing. Of course, I'm the writer so I'm taking this all in. I was a former youth pastor as well, so I love watching teens and kids and

watching the little brothers. Blake and Ethan are shopping for these things at the College Football Hall of Fame: “Hey Dad, can we get this?” “No.” They’re having that same talk that any of us parents have while their brother is in a wheelchair next to them and doing an interview on ESPN.

So coming alongside them I just tried to really be their friend to answer your question—to try to listen to what they wanted to say / to try to add comfort. There were lots of conversations we had that I felt really honored to just be present. We’d be on the phone and maybe I could just speak an encouraging word or maybe I could remind them of something they had told me that encouraged me, and they still do.

I think it was just again, God put us together not because—I mean there were a thousand other writers who could do the job better. But I was honored that God allowed me to be able to serve them because I really wanted to serve them. This was more than a book project. This was a chance to come alongside like you said a family and love them through something difficult that I’ve never been through and they all hope that we never have to go through—any of us—but there are those who do go through it. So these are people who are speaking truth and hope in the middle of that pain and it was an honor to get to be next to them.

Kim: I love that not only were you able to contribute as a writer of Tyler’s story, but you were also able to contribute as a pastor / as a listener / as someone who brought comfort to their lives. It’s truly divine; divine appointment for sure.

John: It’s also humbling, truly humbling. We throw that word around a lot but truly, it breaks me to think about it. These are just precious people, precious people. It gave us a lot of opportunity because of pastoral background to really decide how to frame the message. Because the main message of this book is the gospel and that’s not popular. He’s not in Christian circles as much. I mean Christian circles know about him but he’s on a national stage.

Even the guys today, the sports center anchors or whomever who are tweeting about this book—and when they’re tweeting right now, they’re not just like “Hey, we love Tyler. You should go read this.” You can tell they read it. There’s something of substance to what they’re saying. This is something deep and moving.

We’re addressing suffering and sovereignty and mystery and the middle ground between all of those things. In going back and forth, I loved that so many nights on the phone with Tony—Tony and I, especially, would spend the majority of our time on the phone talking through the details and we would have just these big time gospel conversations like “Are we really going to say this or this? How does this affect the person reading from this perspective or this perspective?”

It sharpened because we got to be together. It sharpened what it is they really wanted to say in the middle of a moment they knew would be a once in a lifetime moment for

Tyler. So what is his message? It was just so beautiful for me as a writer and a pastor to get to witness that and people saying “Hey, we know in the middle of our pain what’s most important to say.”

Kim: You mentioned a little earlier that Tyler wanted to fully live his life and one of the ways that he chose to fully live his life was to go to college at Purdue. What did that mean for Tyler?

John: Well his dad was a Purdue alumnus, but he liked to kind of pick and poke at his dad a little bit growing up, and so he was actually the exact polar opposite of a Purdue fan. He was an Indiana fan which was almost like heresy inside the home. He writes in the book he did it just to bug his dad. So they had this banter going on back and forth.

He also thought he would be going to NC State. There was a moment there—he was in remission at the time and had been offered what he thought was this big scholarship and then there was a mix up in the offer. So he had celebrated; he was all excited. It was this roller coaster ride and then, found out that it wasn’t what they had said it was. He was very disappointed and turned his eyes a little bit towards Purdue as a possibility.

In retrospect then, seeing that immediately before he could officially enroll, he was going to be back in cancer treatments. In fact, he had a hip replacement two weeks before class started and he said “I am going to school.” So you could see the video—there’s video of it in the ESPN piece—where he’s literally on crutches walking on to campus after just having a hip replacement and still undergoing chemo treatments. So Purdue meant a lot to him. They don’t know about the Indiana / NC State thing unless you read the book because he is known as the Purdue super fan—like he’s the guy.

Kim: I was actually surprised to hear that he was an IU fan before that and then there was an NC State element in there as well. But God is so in control, and God placed him at Purdue which you would later learn that you know what? That’s exactly where he needed to be.

John: I think he would have been a number one guy on campus at any school that he went to because that was just sort of his way. That was God’s path for him as well. He had that effervescent personality / that ability to go all in and so he actually produced sports. He was a sports writer—that’s what he really wanted to do. He actually enjoyed the statistical side of things and so he was constantly crunching numbers. He was one of those people that would memorize all the stats for all the figures of his favorite teams for years and years and could recite them—who did what in 1965 on what day.

So he had that brilliant mind and he was applying it to where he was. Wherever he was he was all present and so he was going to be all present at Purdue. They were not a very good football team and that’s the thing. Tyler was really a part of the impetus of a wave of change across the spirit, in terms of school spirit, at what happened at Purdue.

So of course, he goes and makes this famous—now famous prediction on national television that they were going to upset number two, Ohio State, who was undefeated at the time. He actually had the year before had actually camped out when nobody camped out. There was no need to. He camped out. He came straight from a cancer treatment and camped out on the concrete.

[Recorded]

Tyler: You know when the media first picked up my story? Because me and one of my best friends had a really stupid idea of camping out for a Purdue football game which was unheard of. They wrote a story on us. Here's this kid with a crutch, who's bald, camping outside of the Purdue football stadium. And why was he bald and on crutches? Because he had just had chemotherapy and just had pelvic reconstruction surgery and was crazy enough to camp out for a Purdue football game.

[Studio]

John: So the coach came down and Coach Brohm came down and met with him and that's where the local news stories really began to pick up what was happening with this kid who had cancer. It's just amazing. Purdue meant everything to him.

One of the things that got me—I don't know if you read this in the book but the President of Purdue—I believe it was at commencement possibly—sometime towards the end of the school year when he was speaking to the student population, he said “When you look back on your life some day and what happened in your life, you'll remember that you were at Purdue during the year of Tyler Trent.”

Kim: Wow.

John: “You were there for his time.” They're naming and putting up a whole memorial for an entrance to the stadium. I think it's right where he had camped out. There's scholarship funds named in his name and lots of cancer research in that area / in the Indianapolis area. So it's not just that Purdue meant everything to him because it did. But man, he means everything to them, as well, still to this day. It's a beautiful relationship they had.

Kim: It is. He really impacted that campus, and he's had an impact around the world.

John: Yes.

Kim: You mentioned the Purdue-Ohio State game prediction. Talk about those days for Tyler leading up to that big game.

John: So Tom Rinaldi and the ESPN crew had picked up his story and they were on campus, if I remember correctly about a week or so before the game. So that's where they were shooting all the interviews and all the footage.

Well, they didn't realize at the time—if you watch that interview, his words are very garbled / very belabored because he had these tubes in his kidneys that were necessary for his kidney functioning and one of them was actually malfunctioning. They didn't know it at the time and so he was really becoming toxic and was close to death and they didn't realize when they were recording all of that. I mean everyone knew that he was terminal, but he almost went down that week.

That's one of the reasons why with the medication everything that he was so emotional in the interviews in terms of he couldn't stop himself from crying and other things. There were times he was like that but there were also times after that interview where he was not like that. I met him after that interview, and he was a little more himself. So that week, he did the interviews and went through it and then, they weren't sure he was going to make it. They went to sleep. He had a surgery—a very, very painful surgery.

Kim: Talk about that.

John: It was a surgery where basically, he felt everything—that the anesthesia did not work but he couldn't tell them. So he had felt—and some of the details, I hope you get to speak with his parents at some point because his mom, especially, can correct and tell you exactly all of those things. So some of those details are not going to be as accurate with me but my understanding was very, very painful.

They weren't sure if he was going to recover. It's Friday night, they go to bed knowing that this could be close to the end and of course, the game is the next day. They wake up on Saturday morning and it's like a miracle. He's not cancer free but he suddenly feels 100% better—more like how he had felt before this kidney crisis. So they decided to go to the game.

My favorite part of the whole book is him describing and him talking about that day because so many unique things happened that day. Obviously, they did upset Ohio State and that was one of the things that caused that. Of course, the story aired that morning on ESPN across the nation, so it becomes this huge thing. He just—basically, by the end of it, they have secret service agents that are taking them to the game.

They're in this suite up top watching. It's just dignitary after university official after anybody that could come up to come meet him. ESPN guys / everyone to come and encourage him and speak with him. He honestly said it distracted him. He had trouble watching the game a lot of the time because of so many visitors. So that's a part of his journey. Then he ends up going down to the field towards the end and even into the locker room.

The locker room scenes are just amazing. He gives a little speech. It was all for Tyler. These players loved this kid. He'd been around a lot because he was a sports writer—had interviewed a lot of them. He was a very good sports writer / a very good interviewer. So they wouldn't acknowledge when he was talking / writing for the paper—for the Purdue Exponent. They wouldn't necessarily acknowledge that he had cancer. They were very professional, and he was just Tyler.

So they knew and they would talk to him off camera or outside of the interview / off the record about those things. But they *loved* him. He really was the captain / always their captain. So it was such a special moment / just a God moment that brought his story to national prominence, but I think is such a treasured memory—always was for him / just that moment.

Even when, after the first interview, I was driving away from Indianapolis and we were thinking about book titles and concepts and all those things, *The Upset* just jumped into me—like this is it! The whole thing is his life is this upset and this crazy underdog story. There's no way Purdue can beat Ohio State. There's no way that he can win and these odds and yet he has hope. He keeps making these crazy predictions about what hope and life is really about—just like he did for that game. From the get-go it encapsulates what God did in this young man's life.

Kim: What did that game day do for Tyler?

John: It energized him. Tyler did not want to talk about himself. He really, really didn't. That was one of the things he would always say when he spoke. He would say "I really wish—I don't like that we're talking about me right now. I wish I could hear about you and your story. Everyone has a story."

[Recorded]

Tyler: Because my whole thing afterward was everyone has a story to tell. There just needs to be someone willing to listen to it. That's really important to me.

[Studio]

John: So he got a lot of attention that day and he wasn't the kind of kid that—and I'm sorry I call him a kid. I know he was a young man. That just lets you know how old I am not how young he was. [Laughter] He didn't take it in some way that made his head big; he took it as love. I mean he really felt the love of people. In fact, Ohio State fans were cheering for him especially when he came out on the field. I mean that's a bitter rivalry and I know that sounds silly but in college football those kinds of things are not—

Kim: That's a big deal. [Laughter]

John: Yes, not very common. So they would even say things like “Hey, if we had to lose to somebody in this manner, we’re glad it was to Tyler’s team. There was such a support for him there. So that day felt like love to him. Both from God—that God would allow him to have a spark enough to go through the process.

In fact, they were in the locker room still at 1 am and it was about time to go home and they didn’t want to go. Even when they got back to the house, they didn’t want to go to sleep. It was that special. It was a full, special day that never should have happened in a hundred different ways. It was just a gift. So for him, it just energized him.

Kim: There was one point in the book where Tyler says that he—I think he arrived at the stadium and there were signs. People had signs with his name on it and he said, “I couldn’t believe that they took the time to make a sign for me.”

I thought “Oh how precious! This humble young man who had just demonstrated the love of Christ / the humility of Christ in the midst of such excruciating circumstances.

John: No, absolutely. I do believe that God uniquely made him to be who he was for what God was going to do in his life through the brokenness of this world and all the things and obviously, the balance between suffering and sovereignty and mystery and all of those things is something we don’t try to answer completely.

We do in the book talk about what we do know and there are a lot of things that we don’t. It doesn’t belittle or take away the pain of people in suffering and all those things, but you did have a unique young man who did feel that his journey was the journey that God allowed to have in his life and was going to use for His glory.

In fact, he said—and it was such a strange thing to say when he got cancer the second time. In fact, I asked him in my first interview, and it sounds so insensitive. So we had been speaking for a little while, so I try to be delicate. I just said “Okay, Tyler, I mean here you are, you’re funny and smart and this is a tragedy and you’re laying here mostly paralyzed and people are tweeting about you around the world right now. Can you help me understand—there are so many kids who are sick out there. There are so many stories. Why you?” I said “I’m not being mean, Tyler, I just want to know why? Why you?”

He had the answer and I think only people of humility would have the answer. He said, “Because I asked God. I told God when I got cancer the second time ‘Don’t let me waste it like I did the first time. Don’t let me waste it but if you will, will you please use this story? Use my life for your glory whether I live or die.’”

Now, he wanted to live and asked God. He didn’t resign himself and never stopped fighting. “But no matter what I have to go through, would you not let me waste it and be that guy who lost hope the first time.” He said that’s why. It’s the only explanation. There’s no reason. The ESPN guys who say, “I don’t what it is about this kid.” In my

mind I'm sitting there going "I know what it is." This was a divine thing that was an answer to a prayer that is still being answered today every time that we get to discuss this in a forum like this and every time someone opens the book.

It's such an encouragement to know that his humble prayer was something God took seriously. I think God takes humility seriously. He is thinking and dreaming above and beyond what we can possibly think or imagine / what we can't do on our own and not even imagine God has those plans for us. Tyler, I don't think ever thought it would be this. He never thought. He didn't necessarily like that.

Now being on ESPN Sports Center was like a dream for him as a sports writer. So he had those moments that he really enjoyed. It was really cool for a guy who was so sports driven and interested to have so many cool sports moments. But above it all, above it all, it was an answer to a prayer from a humble heart that said "If I'm going to suffer, I want it to have meaning and purpose and to bring You glory and light," and I believe God is still answering that prayer.

Kim: What were those last days like for Tyler?

John: I wasn't there for a lot of the last days. In fact, I knew I saw him on December 28th which was my birthday. We went to Opryland and met up with the Trents for a few minutes and I could tell he was pretty bad off. We were discussing more research and different things and I talked to him a little bit. My wife got to meet him which was a special moment.

They asked us to leave the room a couple of times. They had several hotel rooms but because he needed to rest. So I knew it was pretty bad. Then hearing later on, like I said, they had a big talk where he just wasn't sure he could do it. He made this big faith declaration like "Hey, I'm doing this regardless of how I feel."

So then he began to really decline almost as if that last—not to be cliché or to make light of something so weighty but in many ways it felt as if sometimes like Purdue's football season sort of went the same way as those few months of Tyler's life did because he was so connected to them.

So they got destroyed by Auburn in that bowl game, but they were never supposed to be in that bowl game. They'd already had a better season than they thought that they could. But it was almost as if it was time for their season to end and God had—again, I know it sounds—I'm not trying to hyper spiritualize sports and athletics and those kinds of things.

Kim: I get it.

John: But for him his friends were on that team and his commitments. It was a stewardship thing to him like "I said I was going to be their captain." He would say things

like that. “I’m going to finish this.” So I think that God even honored that regardless of whether God cares about football outcomes and those things I’m not speculating on. But there was something bigger than the game going on.

Kim: Yes.

John: That was sort of the beginning of the end. I really didn’t hear much. I was in the holiday time and researching and thinking “I’ve got to get this done” and working on it for a couple of days there. Then I began getting the texts on New Years that he had passed. The reason I hadn’t heard because Tony and I spoke daily often many times a day during those times and I didn’t hear from him for a bit. I think I texted him once and he said things are pretty bad.

They took their family time and friend time and all those things to really say their goodbyes and gather around him. It’s I’m sure something they would share in a much deeper capacity than I can. I can’t imagine the pain and the difficulty of it because it’s their boy and their brother and just so much there for the family. But he never lost hope. He never stopped trusting.

One of the things he would do is when he couldn’t speak anymore, he’d do numbers with his fingers—one four three and it would mean I love you. So he never stopped loving on his friends and family all the way to the end. I can’t imagine the devastation.

But the hope / the hope we have in Christ has taught me so much. It’s not like pastors know everything. It’s not like that those things don’t affect us. The human condition is something that we’re all supposed to feel so that we understand the magnitude of the grace of Christ / understand the magnitude of what He’s done. I think sometimes when we theologically try to rise above—you know almost intellectualize things to a point that we don’t feel especially when we are quote unquote professionals in Christianity.

I think it causes the world to not understand necessarily exactly how much grace has been given and what we’re being delivered from and how the brokenness is being addressed by a rescuer. It affected me deeply without having all the answers. I can’t imagine how it affected them.

But man the hope that continues / continues to go forth from it just reminds me that this is bigger than me and bigger than all of what we do in religion. It’s bigger than whether or not we have all the right answers—that Jesus is the protagonist of this story of creation and humanity and history and eternity. And because He is, we can trust and rest in the fact that He will complete all the plans that He has for us. It’s a good thing that we’re not in control and in charge but that we have One who’s trustworthy who is.

Kim: You and Tyler did a tremendous job of helping to illustrate God’s grace in Tyler’s life. The details he gives about what he experienced, even in his chemo treatments, it really brings the reader into the story and helps them to see the things that they weren’t

able to see on national television—the behind the scenes things that the Trent family went through.

I believe that perhaps there are people who would never even give the gospel a second thought that Tyler Trent was able to reach because of what God allowed him to go through. I think of all the sports figures and there are people who probably, you know atheists, who don't really give faith a chance and they were able to see this young man's life and it softened their hearts, I believe, and it allowed the gospel to seep in.

It's amazing. And I think "What could God do with us?"—whether we have a short time on this earth or a long time. What could he do with us if we would just yield our self / if we would just say as Tyler said / if we would fully live for Him and give it our all, even until the end?

John: No, you're right, and a topic of conversation often was we could put pretty gospel bows on this and the Trents just said no. There's a chapter in there that is hard. It's really hard to read. The story follows him chronologically but there's a chapter that's by Tony and Kelly that they really wanted everyone to know exactly.

It's graphic in places of what it was like to care for someone going through what he was going through. They talk about the friction in marriage that comes from that, the friction in their home, the mental constraints of it all, and then the physical caring 24 hours a day for a young man who can't walk / who can't get to the bathroom / can't whatever. They did that because they didn't want—I pray and hope everything you're saying is true—that there are those whose hearts are softened in a way that they wouldn't have been willing to acknowledge before.

Because it is a unique story. It does have a unique opportunity it seems in the culture. It has a unique window. It still hasn't gone away. It still hasn't gone away. We're still telling his story on ESPN last week when they—I think it's going to air this week. He's accepting the Stuart Scott Humanitarian Award at the ESPY's. It just continues. Even Disney and ESPN and all of these companies that know that this is an explicit telling of Jesus. No one's hiding that here and I don't know. That's exactly what Tyler dreamed of and prayed for. Its effectiveness and limitations, we won't know.

It's one of those things you won't be able to measure by book sales or measure by how many likes on a Facebook page or how many views on a YouTube video. It won't be measured in that respect. And there were hard conversations along the way when we work with various people, editors, and professionals as we're getting that book going. They saw there were other ways to say this.

An unbelieving audience may struggle with this part or this part because it allows there to be mystery about who God is. We're not just saying God's great and nothing bad ever happens to His followers. Though that's not necessarily the message that is constantly explicitly stated, there's a lot of people who that's what they believe. Then

they're constantly disappointed in God either as believers or unbelievers because they feel like there is a promise that's been broken that was actually never made. So the promise that has been made is often not even been heard. So they're basing their viewpoint of Jesus and his goodness and their hope upon a gospel that was never even in scripture.

Scripture and bringing out that reality felt like to the Trents—I mean it was a mission for them. “Hey, we want to say this. We want to be willing to mourn. We want to be willing to hurt and invite people in and say we don't have all the answers to all of that pain day to day, but we have a hope that is above and a hope that is deeper that keeps sustaining us. It doesn't mean we're all happy go lucky and skipping down the sidewalk all the time. It just means that there literally is something bigger than life and death that is happening in us, that we're leaning into, and that brings us hope and strength to walk through something that is unwalkable.”

So absolutely, I pray everything that you're saying happens. That God continues to use that as a seed in people's hearts and that it continues to ramp up. I pray that this message rings forth for years to come and that it has a thousand other ways to get out there. Whether it's more books, different versions, audio books. Whether it's movies and other kinds of things, I hope that Tyler's story continues to draw people to that because that's really all he wanted. That's what he wanted especially when it became apparent that his earthly life was not going to go the way he originally planned. So he just immersed himself in a different plan and it was beautiful. It still encourages and equips me today.

As a guy in my 40's, it still causes me to think “Wow! There's something bigger here than just a kid who had a good attitude. There's something deeper here that God was doing.” It reminds me and encourages me that God's divinity is greater than our humanity and that we can rest in that. We don't have to work our way through it. We can rest in it.

Kim: Amen. Tyler was very passionate about finding a cure for pediatric cancer. What was he able to accomplish?

John: Well, I mean he's raised—The V Foundation, the various foundations, Riley Children's Hospital, all kinds of organizations through Purdue and other places have raised millions of dollars. He's partnered with them in various ways and his family still continues to partner with them in various ways. The money's a big deal. Like I said cancer research for pediatrics is a field that needs to continue to grow.

He took that very seriously. He would meet with other patients. He was a hero in the hospital. He was like a celebrity and would meet with kids all the time and he's there for his own treatment. But he took it very seriously.

The bottom line—the thing in the book that got me the most though, to answer your question, were—they're called the T2 cells. He donated cells from his cancer to research that are literally growing. In fact, his parents told me—and is something that again, they tell the story so much better than me—but the other day, they were at—I think it was in Arizona possibly—They were at a facility where research is being done and their son's cells were active and alive in a tray right there in front of them.

Kim: Oh my goodness.

John: They're growing them to explore how to help this not happen to other kids, but it was a part of their son's life was there. Even though it was the bad part, the hope that was being brought to other people through those things.

So again, I mean the T2 cells was just the most fascinating thing I'd ever heard of—that not only would someone donate those things. I could see that but that even those are Tyler Trent big / Tyler strong. It's got that hashtag type feel to it. That God's going to let every part that has been used for bad and suffering in his life, He's going to redeem every part and nothing's going to be wasted. In the end, certainly for eternity, but nothing's even being wasted now. There's so much hope for them. I think just those cancer cells that may save another kid's life being still there from Tyler's body are just wow! That blows my mind the way he's still affecting the dialogue and the conversation about pediatric cancer.

Kim: That's incredible. It really is. Well, as you mentioned Tyler Trent stepped into the presence of Jesus on January 1, 2019 at the age of 20. How's his family doing?

John: I think that it's one of those things when I speak with them, it's grieving and mourning and it's not something I could answer directly to know. Only they could say what it is. They're continuing the work. They're continuing the work of what they're doing.

Of course, the book came out a few months after that. So for Tony in particular, we talked about this, it seemed to give him a continuing task of Tyler's / a continuation of one of the things Tyler wanted to see happen which he wanted to be an author. He wanted to write a book.

So in the immediate aftermath, we're still on the phone. We're still doing interviews and talking through details, and it's all so fresh because he's just passed. It was hard but I think there was also some therapeutic moments to it. It's what I prayed for and I would tell them "Guys, let's stop talking anytime you want. You don't have to answer anything you don't want to answer." They were always so gracious to me in that respect but also, I think it gave them the chance to see this is going to go into a format that will never go away.

Sometimes when I work authors, I'll tell them that someday when you die, your story will continue to live on if this book is sitting on a shelf somewhere. Knowing that his words at the age of 20 will still be ringing 20 years from now—maybe 50 years, who knows—I think brought them comfort. But in all reality, they're devastated. They're devastated. They've lost their son. There's nothing you can say to bring him back. They're leaning into Jesus and into their community.

Tyler's funeral was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. Their pastor—you just talk about how God sets people up to be in the right community at the right place and the right time. He just released a book about the biblical act of lamenting. He just happened to be coming out almost the same time all of this is happening. He talks a lot about lamenting. Even lamenting—He says he's going to do a book down the road—a lamenting for the purpose of racial reconciliation. Instead of us just trying to fix everything, sitting and talking about how all of this hurts, and sitting and listening to one another. So the funeral was so God honoring in that respect in that they grieved together.

The book opens with *You Are My Sunshine*. Those were Tyler's words he wrote out of the gate, his exact words, and he wanted to open with his voice saying those things. At the end of the funeral, they walked out singing *You Are My Sunshine*—all the crowd / everybody who was there. They went to the lobby and they had some refreshments. The deal was if you wanted to go greet the parents—there were thousands of people there and that's fine. It was going to be an exhausting night for them and they're gracious and did it because everybody loves them. But what they really wanted you to do was stand around and share a story about Tyler and share something that had happened.

So there was just all this bustle of conversation going on among thousands of people sitting around and glorifying God as they honored Tyler. So I hope and pray that—I told them that. I guess that counseling side of me like I just pray you guys lean into people who love you / lean into family / lean into me. I'm a long way away. I'm in Nashville but call anytime. But it's just a process they're going to have to continue to go through. That they'll never be the same. God will restore and redeem all things.

Kim: He does.

John: For the moment, they're a family that lost their boy and my heart just breaks for them. The short time I knew him, it's affected me so deeply. I can't imagine as a father. I can't imagine what that's like. So I think that they still need our prayers.

It's easy for us to talk about Tyler and this amazing story and forget that we still need to lift up the Trents, and Ethan and Blake, and grandparents. Grandma would bring him his special drink from Starbucks every day. It was just a special relationship. Imagine losing a grandchild and all the things that the family is facing and how holidays are going to affect them. The first of everything is going to be so difficult. So how they're doing? I

think there are doing as well as anybody I could ever imagine, and I imagine that's pretty hard.

Kim: Will you please let the Trent family know that I am one of the many people who will continue to pray for them?

John: Absolutely; I'd be honored.

Kim: John, thank you for joining me.

John: It was a pleasure. Thank you so much, Kim, in letting me share about a young man that just really impacted my life. It means a lot to me.

[Recorded]

Tyler: I say a legacy is really important to me so leaving a legacy—what it means for someone of my age to leave a legacy and leave an impact on the world.

[Studio]

Kim: As I considered Tyler's story, I'm reminded that God is good, really good. He's present. He's full of grace. He's merciful, kind, generous, trustworthy. Tyler prayed for God to use his life / his story / his struggle / his pain to reach others with the message of grace and redemption. And it all started when he made the decision to fully live life and not to just survive.

So I had to ask myself: have I decided to fully live my life? Or am I allowing the fear of the unknown or fear of change or whatever else to keep me in survival mode? Now don't judge me y'all. I have had seasons of fully living life but lately, life has gotten a bit overwhelming for me. I sometimes find myself just trying to survive / trying to make it through another day.

So seeing Tyler's determination to live every moment to its fullest, it's convicting. What I face in my everyday life is no where near as difficult as what he went through. And why did God allow Tyler Trent to get cancer? I don't know that anyone could answer that question but God himself.

But if you will, I'd like to speculate. Maybe it's because God knew that Tyler would grow closer to Him as a result of the experience. Maybe it was because God knew that Tyler could be trusted with all that God wanted to do with his life. And maybe, maybe God was thinking about all the people who would never be open to listening to or reading the gospel without this extraordinary story surrounding it. Tyler's story translates the gospel in a way that disarms and embraces the masses with this message of hope in this world and beyond the grave.

As you think about Tyler's story, would you please pray for his family? I can't imagine the pain that they're experiencing right now. To many people his story may be something that is here today, gone tomorrow. But his parents / his siblings / his family, they will miss him always.

I'd like to close with scripture that Tyler wrote on the door of his hospital room during one of his cancer treatments. It was 1 Peter 5:10. It reads "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

Thanks for listening. If you'd like more information about John or his book, check out our show notes on the *Unfavorable Odds* page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts.

If you enjoyed today's conversation, I hope you'll consider subscribing to the podcast. You can search for *Unfavorable Odds* on Apple podcasts or Stitcher or wherever you go for podcasts. Oh, and by the way, we'd love to get your feedback, and any positive reviews are greatly appreciated.

On the next episode of *Unfavorable Odds*:

Josh: They were talking about preserving fertility and chemo. Then a mastectomy. Then radiation.

Ally: Yes.

Josh: And at 26, you hear people talking about years in advance and you're thinking "What are you talking years?"

Kim: Josh and Ally Taylor, next time.

I'm Kim Anthony. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Unfavorable Odds*.

Unfavorable Odds is produced by FamilyLife® and is a part of the FamilyLife Podcast Network.

We are so happy to provide these transcripts to you. However, there is a cost to produce them for our website. If you've benefited from the broadcast transcripts, would you consider [donating today](#) to help defray the costs?

Copyright © 2019 FamilyLife. All rights reserved.

www.FamilyLife.com