Bob: When Zach McLeod suffered a traumatic brain injury in a football game, he was still the same Zach, but he was very different. Tammy, Zach’s mom, says that meant her relationship with her son was different, too.

Tammy: I couldn’t talk to my son anymore—I couldn’t talk about what we were learning in the Scripture; I couldn’t pray with him. When I prayed with him, he was silent; and he would just say, “Mm,” when he agreed. He couldn’t say any words, and we couldn’t sing together. Everything that I used to do with Zach changed, so I was having a hard time revising the attachment.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Friday, January 31st. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You can find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. Zach McLeod’s football injury meant that everyone in the McLeod family had to learn how to grieve what they would later call an ambiguous loss. We’ll hear more about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. Did you ever have a frightening moment, as your kids were playing sports growing up? Did you ever have broken bones, or a phone call, or something you saw happen on the field, where you thought, “Oh, I wonder if he’s going to be okay”?

Ann: Yes; because all of our boys have played sports, and all three have had concussions in football. They haven’t had broken bones, actually, but the concussions have been really scary.

Bob: You saw some hits, where as a mom, you went, “I wonder what’s going on?”

Ann: Yes; for all three I can remember distinctly—because the one son walked to the wrong sideline. Another son—he got in the car; I took him straight to the hospital—this is at seven o’clock at night—he said, “Why is the sun so bright tonight?” The sun’s not even out; I had to give him sunglasses.

Dave: You know, Bob, what comes to my mind is—I was on the sideline when Mike Utley, the Detroit Lions player, was paralyzed for life. I mean, he was the one that—thumbs-up as he went to the locker room. I was heading to that hospital room with [him] and his parents.
And then a few years later—the day Barry Sanders breaks the 2000-yard, which nobody probably remembers—Reggie Brown went down that day as well. I’m literally on the field, praying in a huddle with our whole team as the whole stadium goes silent. In another hospital room, you know, walking with a family through their darkest moments.

That’s one of the scariest things you can ever imagine. We love the game; it’s wonderful, but that’s always a possibility. It’s so scary when it happens.

**Bob:** We’re hearing this week a story of that happening for a family, with a high-school player, in Boston. Pat and Tammy McLeod join us, again, on *FamilyLife Today*; welcome back, guys.

**Pat:** Thank you.

**Tammy:** Thanks so much.

**Bob:** Pat and Tammy have shared the story of their son, Zach’s, injury, as a high school student, playing football. It was a scrimmage, where there’d been a pile-on. All of a sudden, he was collapsed and had to be airlifted and had brain swelling—had to have a clot removed from his brain. The brain continued to swell; and all of a sudden, life had changed for you guys.

I’d encourage our listeners—if they haven’t had a chance to hear Part One of this conversation, they can go online to FamilyLifeToday.com or get a copy of your book, *Hit Hard*, which tells this story.

How long was Zach in the hospital after his surgery?

**Tammy:** He had six weeks in the ICU and four months in acute rehab, so we were in hospitals for a long time.

**Bob:** That, all of a sudden, becomes what your life revolves around; doesn’t it?

**Tammy:** Yes.

**Bob:** And you have two other kids and a ministry that you’re involved with. Life still goes on around you, but there’s a new center of gravity in everything that’s going on; right?

**Tammy:** Yes. We had two kids at home and one in college, so we were trying to figure out: “How do you do support, long-distance?”

**Ann:** What were the family dynamics like at that time? What was going on between the two of you, between you and your other kids?
Tammy: So, Chelsea was upset because we didn’t call her right away. She found out from a friend that Zach was injured. We were trying to repair that relationship from not calling quickly enough. Soren and Nate just went about their daily schooling; but at night, some things came out.

One night, when I was talking with Soren, he said: “I can’t believe you sent me to this school! Why did you send me to this school? I don’t want to go here!” We had just switched him to a new school that year, so he had no support in the school; he didn’t know anyone. Then he said, “And I can’t believe you let me play football!” He was still playing football.

I told Pat what he said. My response to Soren was, “Yes, we’re not going to let you anymore,” and there was no response back from him. Basically, it was like him, I believe, asking us to say that he couldn’t play. I told Pat that night, and we agreed that that would be the end of football for him. Things came out at night, but they tried to just keep going in a normal rhythm during the school day.

Bob: Pat, I’m thinking about the fact that all of your kids had gotten a certain amount of your attention, and your affection, and your involvement. Now, all of a sudden, one of your kids is getting the lion’s share of your life; and the others/the younger kids are having to kind of fend for themselves. Life has changed for them in a pretty dramatic way.

Pat: Yes, I would say that’s true. I would also add that for Chelsea—I mean, this was devastating. She’s beginning her first year of college and finds out her closest friend in the world is lying—he’s in a coma at home.

Thinking about that: thinking about Soren being in a new school, Nate just being at a very vulnerable age of just—you know that transition to young adulthood as a teenage boy—I mean, this is actually the major impetus for the writing of our book; because it has been a devastating experience for the kids and our family. Yet, for Tammy and me both, we were incredibly and surprisingly met by God, and strengthened by God, and sustained by God through this process. Not that it was easy—I’m not saying that—but in a way that did not result in us getting rid of our faith or losing our faith. For them, that’s yet to be a determined, in a way.

We wrote a book so that they could hear the story and be ready, at some point in life, to read it, when they wanted to, about why it was that we still believe in a loving and all-powerful God in the midst of this senseless tragedy that happened to their beloved brother.

Bob: What about your marriage in the midst of all of this? When you’re both grieving differently and looking at each other and wondering: “Are you really feeling this? Are you really as sad as I am?” that can put a strain on a relationship. Tammy, you’re smiling like, “Yes.” There was some strain there; right?
**Tammy:** Definitely. Not many marriages make it through situations like this. Pat would want to stay in the hospital room and be near Zach; and I’d want to get out to the river and run, and cry, and pray there; so we didn’t understand each other: “What are you doing? Don’t you love him? Don’t you want to stay by the bed?” “Are you in denial?! Do you not see that something’s wrong here?”

**Ann:** So you’re both grieving in different ways.

**Pat:** Exactly.

**Tammy:** Yes; so it was helpful to be able to figure out what type of loss we were dealing with; but it just took us a long time. It wasn’t until year five that we found out about ambiguous loss, and—

**Bob:** Explain what that is.

**Tammy:** Pauline Boss wrote the book called *Ambiguous Loss*; she coined the term. There are two types she writes about: one is when you physically don’t have the person; but psychologically, you have them in your mind—divorce, adoption, immigration, kidnapped kids, things like that. The second type is what we’re dealing with, where you have the person; but you don’t have them the same, emotionally or cognitively: dementia, Alzheimer’s, traumatic brain injury, mental illness, addiction—things like that.

We’re dealing with the second type; but when they talk about you either go toward the “having” side or the “not having,” because ambiguous loss—you both have and don’t have the person. Pat was going more toward the “having” side, thinking about things that he really loved about Zach that we still have; and I was more on the “not having.”

It was interesting why, I think, I could see these things. In his relationship with Zach, he could still do the things that he did. He would just sit there and watch a game with Zach; and he could still watch a game with Zach, even though he was severely disabled.

I couldn’t talk to my son anymore—I couldn’t talk about what we were learning in the Scriptures; I couldn’t pray with him. When I prayed with him, he was silent. He would just say, “Mm,” when he agreed; but he couldn’t say any words. We couldn’t sing together. Now, I’m strumming the guitar with my right hand; because he can’t strum, and he’s playing the left-hand chords. Everything that I used to do with Zach changed, so I was having a hard time revising the attachment.

When Pat’s more on the “having” side and I’m on the “not having” side, it just is a lot of clashing. We had conflict and had to deal with it.

**Bob:** Pat, you made a statement that—you talked about your son’s remarkable recovery. I remember reading the book, thinking, “I’m waiting for the remarkable
recovery.” [Laughter] The remarkable recovery you’re talking about—he’s living in a group home today, with diminished ability, an I.Q. score that’s under 70, and functionality that is limited. You said he’s blurring the line between ability and disability. And you call that a remarkable recovery. [Laughter]

**Pat:** Yes, you’re onto something; aren’t you, Bob? [Laughter] You’re beginning to pull out of us the sort of storyline of *Hit Hard*, which is two people having very different reactions to ambiguous loss. As Tammy said, I think the challenge to living with ambiguous loss is learning to live well with both having and not having at the same time. You either do one or the other, not both; and for me, it’s been the having. I’ve been completely obsessed with the son I still have and in complete denial about the son I lost.

This is why the climax of the book is important, because that was—I think, had that continued to go on, I think it would have resulted in a pretty serious depression. There’s a lot of grieving that’s happened by writing this book and acknowledging that they’re real losses for me.

**Bob:** Yes; what’s it like for you, on the other side?

**Tammy:** Like Pat says, when Zach walks through the door, I’m so excited to see him/hug him; and then within three minutes, I’m like, “This is a tragedy!” He’s choking on food at the dinner table, or falling off the chair, or tripping. Yes, it’s difficult. I try to find things that I can do [with] him, like the revised playing of the guitar.

**Bob:** Why do you still have hope and faith?

**Pat:** I think that what has changed in me is my understanding of what healing can look like and, often, does look like. It’s not always simply just the restoration of physical health; but it’s more being introduced or immersed into the peace, and the joy, and the love of God.

I think all of life—whether it’s happiness or suffering, health or sickness, ability or disability—is part of bringing us into or sort of ascending into that kingdom of God, or the presence of God, or the reality of the Holy Spirit. Those are the things that I feel like we’ve experienced with Zach, and that Zach himself has experienced. He reflects God in ways that boggle your mind; I mean, they really do.

**Bob:** —for example?

**Pat:** Well, he exudes a joy that has no comparison. He’s the most joyful person I know. He’s also the most present person—like attentive to moments—because he lives in the moment. He doesn’t worry about the past, nor is he worried about the future; he’s very present with people. I notice people now that used to be sort of invisible to me. There’s a lot of people in our lives—in the service industries, for example, that are around us—
like the janitors, for example. I notice these people and connect with them, because Zach does. He really just notices people.

There’s this episode in the book—it ends on this, actually—of him just sort of connecting with this homeless person that others—this whole crowd of people that we were following out of this theater—we just all were going by him, including me; but not Zach. He stops and connects with this guy, and that guy connects with him. That’s, to me, a reflection of God’s sort of preferential option toward the poor, and the marginalized, and the unknown. God knows them; Zach knows them.

**Dave:** So Zach hasn’t lost his faith?

**Pat:** No, it’s stronger than ever.

**Dave:** Really.

**Pat:** Yes, without a doubt. He prays more than anyone I know. He sings louder than anyone I know, now, and pretty much on key. A little bit embarrassing—he’s lining up our church, for sure. Our church is a New England church that’s very conservative. If you listen to a worship service, you’ll hear Zach over the—

**Dave:** Really?

**Pat:** Yes.

**Dave:** That’s one of the things that struck me, even reading the book. Worship is a powerful pathway for me with God, singing. I just thought, “How has that impacted you?” It sounds like something that’s a connection for you, Tammy.

**Tammy:** Yes; so when we pray together, even though it’s sad that I can’t hear his voice, I still hear his agreement with me. We can still pray together; it’s just a little one-sided. [Laughter] I love—every time I ask if he wants to read the Scripture, he says, “Yes!” so we read the Scripture together on Sundays.

We actually sing together in church for Lenten service each year, and then for the disability service. That is really a fun time. Sometimes he gets lost in the audience, like waving to people—[Laughter]—like, “Stay on the court!” But sometimes he just closes his eyes in worship. He’s not even looking at the chords anymore; they’re all memorized, so he doesn’t need the music; but he gets lots in worship.

**Dave:** I remember when—Ann will remember this better—when her sister died at age 44 and left four sons—a very quick cancer diagnosis and death—but for the next year, at least, maybe almost two years, if we go to church—and I wasn’t playing in the band but I was in the congregation, and we would sing worship—we’d just weep. There’s something about, not only the truth of the words of God, whether it would be a hymn or
Scripture that you’re singing, but adding the artistic part of it—I’m tearing up right now—we just weep; you could barely sing. It was like there’s some connection there that goes deeper because of the art part of it/the singing part of it. Have you experienced that?

**Tammy:** Yes; and that actually led to a problem, though. I would do that, and that would mean I’d be emotionally wrung out every Sunday.

**Ann:** Yes.

**Dave:** Let me ask you this—because I’m wondering if somebody’s listening that’s going through a really dark valley—I can remember the day I heard my wife *laugh* again after her sister died. This was her best friend; talked every day on the phone; pretty much, Barb led Ann to Christ, in some ways.

My wife’s a joy-filled, laughing *nut*; she’s a *nut*. You never know what she’s going to do any moment—she makes a memory all the time—that’s the woman I’m married to. For 18 months/almost two years, no laughter. I remember I was in the kitchen one day, and—I don’t know if she remembers this—she was in the garage, and I just heard her burst out in laughter. I’m like, “Oh! First time I’ve heard that in awhile!”

**Tammy:** “She’s back.”

**Dave:** Is there a moment where it came back?

**Tammy:** Pauline Boss talks about having ceremonies for ambiguous loss, because it’s important to validate the loss. We have ceremonies when people die, but we don’t have any in situations like ours. It was great that she told us to do that, but she didn’t say how to do it; so we just had to make it up ourselves. We did an ambiguous loss ceremony, back to back with a birthday party for Zach, because we wanted to show holding joy and sorrow together, and the having and the not having.

Zach was injured on September 5th. On September 7th was his birthday; so on September 6th, we had the two ceremonies. The first one Zach was not there. We had video and some of his favorite songs, and then we had our children share what they missed about Zach. I shared also. We had people take a time of silence and write on blue cards what they missed about Zach and then stand up and share if they wanted to. It was interesting to hear other people share, so just sharing our grief together.

Then we walked across the street, and went into a boathouse by the river near Zach’s school, and had a party for him. He was at that ceremony, and he was screaming with every person that came in, was hugging them. Then we had people write on gold cards things they have appreciated about Zach. They got up at a microphone and read them off, and then he hugged every single person. It was great to do those two ceremonies together.
I did wonder: “Would I be able to shift from the sad ceremony to the joyous ceremony?” and it actually worked. But I don’t want to make it sound too happy-happy—

**Bob:** It’s not like that fixed everything.

**Tammy:** Yes.

**Bob:** I mean, I think we need to understand. You said she’s been different since then—

**Tammy:** I’m different, but—

**Bob:** But it’s not like now everything is fixed; right?

**Tammy:** Right.

**Bob:** —that all pain is gone and you can kind of move on.

What parent, who’s lost a child, says, “Oh, there comes a day when all pain is gone”? I don’t know that it ever comes.

**Ann:** And it’s not just our children, either. I mean, all of us are experiencing loss. Last weekend, I was with my mom, who’s 90. She’s had Alzheimer’s for 15 years, so she’s just a shadow of who she used to be.

I love Nehemiah, when he says, “The joy of the Lord is our strength.” I think, when I came home from visiting my mom, I can relate, Tammy—I’m spent; I’m helping to dress her, helping to feed her. I have to run to God, because He’s the Source and Author of joy. I think we all experience loss; we have to remember where to run.

**Bob:** We are grateful that you guys went through the hard work of processing this for us. I know for yourself, too, because this was therapeutic for you to write this down; right? But now, it’s a gift for any of us who have experienced loss.

I smiled when I saw Jerry Sitzer’s name on the cover, because Jerry has written a book on loss that’s a profound book. He’s been a guest on *FamilyLife Today*. He lost his mom, his wife, and a child in the same accident. Loss is a part of life; and to have somebody, who’s been down that trail, and say, “It’s a hard trail; but God says, ‘Even though you walk through the valley of the shadow, I’ll be with you, and My rod and My staff will comfort you in the midst of that.’” You’re a model of that.

Thank you guys for sharing your story, and thanks for this book.

**Pat:** You’re welcome. Thanks for having us.
**Bob:** We have copies of Pat and Tammy’s book, *Hit Hard*, in our *FamilyLife Today* Resource Center. You can go online to order a copy, or you can call to order the book. Again, the title is *Hit Hard: One Family’s Journey of Letting Go of What Was and Learning to Live Well with What Is*. Order online at FamilyLifeToday.com, or call us to order at 1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

David Robbins, who is the President of FamilyLife®, has been listening as we’ve been having this conversation with the McLeods this week. You know these guys and have known them for a long time.

**David:** Yes; I’ve had the joy of knowing Pat and Tammy, serving in the same campus ministry for awhile that they did. They are clearly very smart people. I mean, if you’re going to work effectively with students at Harvard for this long, then you’d have to be pretty smart. But their smarts is not what hits you as you hear their story; it’s actually their depth. God’s comfort hasn’t come to them through the intellectual answers, but through His crucified presence.

It reminds me of something I heard Nancy Guthrie say: “Trusting God when the miracle does not come, when the urgent prayer gets no answer, when there is only a seeming darkness; this is the kind of faith God perhaps values most of all, because this is the kind of faith that can be developed and displayed only in the midst of difficult circumstances. This is the kind of faith that cannot be shaken because it is the result of having been shaken.”

You know, God doesn’t always give us the easy answers; and sometimes, it seems like no answer at all in some of the seasons that we’re walking through. But He will give us His presence. He does promise His presence to His children. He will come alongside you in your circumstance, whatever you’re walking through; and you’ll know Him and the gospel deeper than you ever did before.

**Bob:** Yes, I have to think there are listeners, who needed to hear that today. Thank you, David.

We hope you have a great weekend this weekend. I hope you and your family are able to worship together in your local church. We want to invite you back on Monday, when Hannah Anderson is going to be with us to talk about how we can help cultivate, in our own hearts and in our children’s hearts, a sense of biblical discernment so that they can recognize what is good, what is right, what is pure, what is noble—all of those things that are talked about in Philippians, Chapter 4—how we can be discerning people by focusing on the good. I hope you can be with us as we have that conversation with Hannah.
I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. Have a great weekend. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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