



Season 14: Episode 3 | Chris Houston | Letters from a Hospital Bed: A Son's Journey with James Houston

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur, I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society, and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode. Today, Chris Houston will be interviewed by seasoned journalist Lorna Dueck.

Chris Houston joins us to share an adventure he had with his well-known father, Dr. James Houston, the founding principal of Regent College in Vancouver. Chris Houston is a business consultant, and he lives on a farm near Guelph, Ontario. And Chris's father, Dr. Jim Houston, was the lecturer in geography at Oxford College, but left that work when he felt God leading him to help establish a Christian college in Canada.

James Houston led that founding of Regent College, which became a thriving Christian school of higher learning on the campus of the University of British Columbia. James Houston was the first chancellor of Regent College and an inspiration to generations of students. He wrote or edited over 30 books, and that demanding work meant that the Houston children, including Chris, often felt that the school and its community knew their father better than they did.

And we're going to cover that in today's podcast. When Dr. Houston was in the last chapter of his life, and he was elderly, the whole family began a new story with their father. So today, as we talk with Chris, Dr. Houston's oldest son, we'll discuss the unique writing project he crafted around the end-of-life visits he and his siblings had with his father.

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That book is called *Letters from a Hospital Bed*. And here is Lorna Dueck with Chris Houston.

Lorna Dueck: Well, thank you, Chris Houston, for joining us from your office in Guelph or nearby Guelph, Ontario. There is so much to explore in *Letters from a Hospital Bed*. I am just thrilled with this booklet, which I stumbled across on summer travels to Vancouver, and it just became a devotional read for me that I went, wow, I need to talk about this book with you.

So, thank you for writing it, Chris.

Chris Houston: Thank you for reading it.

Lorna Dueck: Well, you put your dad's name in the byline, our famous professor James Houston, but it really is, he didn't write a word of it, did he?

Chris Houston: No.

He spoke it and lived it for the 70 years of my student-hood.

Lorna Dueck: So, you've really put together for us a beautiful picture of your dad. And I gathered that from your introduction to the book that you hoped as he neared 100 years of age, your dad would live his theology.

Give us some background on his health and why you were wanting that to happen.

Chris Houston: Dad lived, I have no memory of my father living with a retrospective view. He lived his entire life with a prospective forward-looking view.

And so, at 99, he was still full on, what is the Lord up to and how can I participate in it? But his capacity to communicate what his insight and what he was seeing and sensing was becoming limited by faculties of age. And then I saw that frustration for him. And he'd always been a communicator.

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Sometimes, some would argue effective or ineffective, but always been a communicator. And so that was what he did. And he couldn't very easily.

And I wanted to help him continue to live out that which he felt called to do in and so become kind of arms and legs and a mind to help him in that.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, just a little background before we get into that mind of his and how you two played a kind of back and forth with it. But what was happening physically for him at 99? Like, and he lives to 103.

He passed away early this spring.

Chris Houston: Yeah. So, he was living in a place where he had some help and some care.

So, my mother had died about eight years previously. And so, dad was living on his own, but with some care in the building, the facility that he was in, and he had a fall. And he ended up stuck by the side of his bed all day.

And it was a pretty traumatic experience. A bit like my dad, if there's drama to be had, we'll bring it on and we'll have it. And so, dad had a pretty rough time of that journey and was convinced that he was dying and that he should go to the hospice where my mother died. And there he would head home.

Lorna Dueck: Wow. After that fall, during that fall.

Chris Houston: After that fall. And so, we found him a space in the same hospital that mom had been in and they fed him. And basically, dad wasn't particularly interested in what happened from the neck down.

He was really only interested in what happened from the head up. And they looked after him and fed him and got him exercised and he just kept getting healthier.

Lorna Dueck: So, he's not going to heaven at 99?

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Chris Houston: He's not going. And he was quite prepared to and quite happy to but didn't happen.

His Maker had other plans. But I sensed his frustration at his lack of capacity. He was writing and trying to publish material that was really poor quality at this stage.

And people were nice to him, but the reality was he wasn't properly coherent and he couldn't publish or write at the same level of proficiency that he had as an academic through his whole life. And that was really hard for him. And so, I suggested, well, why don't we write letters to people, dad? And I had a blog in mind, but that's not something he would think about.

And so that's how it began. And I said, I'd ask him, what are you thinking? And I had a real respect for; there was an energizing force in my father that was his call by God to what He was doing. And I have a lot of respect for that.

It wasn't of me. It wasn't of him. It was what the Lord was doing.

And so, I had a sense of responsibility to be a steward of that and facilitate it where possible.

Lorna Dueck: So, at 99, at 100, there's an energizing ability for him to articulate his spiritual thoughts with the Lord.

Chris Houston: Oh, somebody once said to him, what are you looking forward to talking to the Lord about when you meet Him? And my father said, what are you talking about? We talk all the time. I'm not waiting for anything.

So that was part of, that's just part of who he was.

Lorna Dueck: Okay.

So how do you start then to be a good listener? How do you start to figure that out?

Chris Houston: Well, first off, it had been my life's work. I being a management consultant, my job was to listen to the heart, mind, and thoughts of my clients and

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help bring them to life. I always used to argue that the best asset I ever had as a consultant was the gut instinct of my client.

And if they were any good, we might succeed. And if they weren't, didn't matter. Anything I could do wasn't going to make it any better.

And so that was a toolkit that I had spent my life cultivating. And I was also an involuntary listener because my father had shared his thoughts with me for a lifetime. And so, hearing dad isn't complicated.

You just have to show up for it. And so, I did. But I also inherited a bit of my mom, who's a mischief maker and loved language, as I do.

And so, I could play with his language, or I could play with his ideas in a sense, more wistfully than my father ever could.

Lorna Dueck: Okay. You've talked about your mom now too.

And before we get too much more into the letters, I picked up a huge theme at the beginning of this book. And this is about families being faithful to each other, is it not? Is that not part of what this practice was of gathering your dad's thoughts?

Chris Houston: It's about a family. It's about children gathering around a parent and each exercising such gifts as they have to honor and sustain them in the ways, in a sense, in a reciprocal of how we had been nurtured and sustained by them.

So, there's a sort of circularity to that. I think the four of us felt, and we have a reasonably good relationship with each other, very different and very independent from each other. But we saw this as a task that the four of us could do, and we could do it well.

We had played a role together around mom's death, and we knew how to do this, and we were all deeply committed to doing it well. And that was honoring to the Lord. And so, each of us use different gifts because we have different gifts.

So, the writing stuff was just mine.

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Lorna Dueck: And then you had a sister do administration. It started out as an online blog, right? Just tell us a bit about where these ideas from dad through your pen, ramblings of dad, really, and then you finesse.

And tell us about the logistics, how it all works.

Chris Houston: So, my sister, Claire, she helped get a website set up for dad, jimhouston.org. And she administered it and managed it and posted things. And she also managed the database.

So, we started with dad's address list. And it grew to about 1300 people who would sign up. And so over the course of the year, the audience just kept growing.

And looking at the web data was kind of fun, because they were all over the world. I remember when the first pinpoint in Saudi Arabia came up, I thought, oh, somebody is reading letters in Saudi Arabia. Who knew?

Lorna Dueck: Yeah, it really is a beautiful blend of, you use this line in the book, being faithful to one another, a family being faithful, all these different gifts in the four of you kids just coming together.

Okay, so you shape yourself around this new task. How did your dad discuss the qualities of being a Christian in that jumbled up state of aging?

Chris Houston: So, I had tried some years before, I had asked dad, I said, you know, I didn't want to miss the point. So, dad, could you write me a paper with the important points, so I don't miss them.

And he ended up writing a book called *Joyful Exiles*. And it wasn't at the time, it wasn't what I thought I wanted or needed. And I thought, oh, this is not what I wanted.

Because dad didn't abstract about his faith. He just lived it. So, you didn't talk about an idea as an abstraction.

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He was immersed in the working with the idea, in a sense, he didn't stand outside of his faith and talk about it, as if it were something separate from him. He just was living it. So, the mental models of the really best illustrated in the book of Hebrews in terms of faith, he didn't talk about faith, he just expressed it, he activated it in in how he lived.

And so, to ask dad to step back, in a sense, and be an observer of himself, walking with Christ was just not something dad did. You had to go and become the observer, notice what was going on, make the connections between his thinking, and the way he was acting and his convictions and what he was excited. Dad had an enormous sense of being able to participate in what God was up to.

He got he was excited about it. And he would say so often, isn't it amazing? We just get to be in this place. Look at what God's doing.

And we get to be here. Like, that was his kind of, that was how he lived it.

Lorna Dueck: I want to with that context in mind, let's jump to letter number 36.

There's so many good ones, but that one kind of stood out to me, written in 2022. At age 100, you push your dad to want to know healing of the Lord in the realm of his emotions. Here's a quote, "May the healing grace of God reach deeper into my own emotional life than I have allowed before."

What was happening there? Why were you pushing your dad to go into his emotions?

Chris Houston: I wasn't pushing him. He was pushing us. And I was verbalizing it as his prayer.

So, my father thought that the healing of our emotions was a very critical part of our faith journey. And he talked about it a lot. It emerged out of him.

What I would then do, and this is illustrative of the pattern in the book, was I would project that out of his expression. Into a desire for the other, because letters are

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written to people. So, I was always saying, dad, what are you thinking about? And then I would convert it into a language that was for, in this case, an audience.

But that's not how dad expressed it. And so, he talked about the urgency of that healing of emotion. His kids would often wonder what on earth he knew about that subject, which was not an unfamiliar place for us as his kids.

Like, dad, what makes you the expert on this subject? That never bothered my father at all. If he was thinking it, that he had legitimacy to explore it fully and did. But I knew this was a desire that he had for others.

And so that's why that prayer is framed that way. But I frame it that way in a way that makes it more accessible to an audience because he's now talking about himself. So, the Psalms, for example, Dad didn't write any of those because that's not how he would express himself, but he lived that emotional reality.

And what I began to see was that there was a movement happening in him. And how did I codify that? And how did I describe this ascent that was happening when you're supposed to be descending, dad's ascending? It's like, huh, what's going on here? And so, I was looking for a narrative mechanism to be able to express that. The prayers, most of the letters conclude with a prayer because what I was trying to do was I knew his heart for these people that were his community and what was his heart for them.

And so, the prayers are my way of trying to capture his heart and express it for them in a way that they could receive it.

Lorna Dueck: Yet, um, sometimes you as his four children got less of him than that community. I think I heard that in your funeral tributes to him.

Isn't that right? He had a big world. He had a big family knocking on his door.

Chris Houston: He did.

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And that for all of us, for all four of us, that has actually been, that was one of the hardest parts of the whole journey. We've shared him our whole lives. And not easy to not be resentful about that.

So, all four of us have our own stories of people coming to us and saying how deeply moved they were by a conversation they'd had with our dad, and each of us in our own different ways, wondering why couldn't that have been me?

And, in the writing of the letters was a very intentional act on my part to not allow that sense of hurt to define how I related with my father and his community.

The Bible Course | New Edition: Before we continue with today's conversation, I just want to take a moment to tell you about a resource that can help you better understand the Bible. Do you want to understand how the Bible stories, books, and characters all fit together? The Bible Course New Edition can help across eight engaging sessions.

You'll trace the Bible's big story and gain practical tools for reading and applying it in everyday life. This new edition features refreshed videos, three new presenters, insights from Bible experts and an eight-week daily reading plan and practical exercises. And also, if you're leading a group, new coaching videos will help you host each session with confidence.

So, whether you're opening the Bible for the first time or have been reading it for years, The Bible Course is for you. Watch the first session for free at Biblecourse.ca. That's Bible course . ca and the link is down in the show notes. And now let's return to conversation.

Lorna Dueck: Thank you. That is tough. That is a redemptive way to respond.

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And I want to go back to something we mentioned just brief at the beginning, families being faithful to one another. So, you all four of you realize we need healing from having had such a dad who the world took a piece of.

Chris Houston: And Lorna, I also want to push on the "faithful to each other." Yes, there's a dimension of that. And it's in a sense what's expressed. But this is really about being faithful to the Lord.

This is really about saying, Chris, what is God called you to? And what does He equip you to do? And yes, that might be manifest as faithfulness within a family. But there's something else going on here that is not just inter-family. And for all four of us, there's a walk with the Lord going on, that is a sense of call.

And, you know, you might not have picked the, we're all of us in this place, which is, I might not have chosen all these cards that I have, but they're the ones I got. And they're the ones that the Lord has invited me to be good stewards of. During this process, I should just add, you noted the Psalm 1 on the wall.

And Psalm 1 is on the wall of my office, because the central word of that Psalm, the linguistic centre of Psalm is the word fruit. And during this whole period of my father's last years and the writing of the letters, I was actually working with a secular client dealing with family history and asset management and all kinds of related things. But one of my clients gave me this lovely phrase that I found very helpful, which is, what does a fruitful life look like? And so faithful to families, yes.

But that's a manifestation of something else, which is, am I faithful to the calling? And my father, dad had a very, very deep sense that he had been called to something about which he was going to be faithful for as long as he had breath. And he would quote frequently a text, "*O King Agrippa, I was not unfaithful to the heavenly calling.*" (Acts 26:19). And that was really at the heart.

And what I began to realize, Lorna, was that dad was being obedient to something that was bigger than me. And that my needs as his son were within that context. And that there was something bigger than me going on here in my father's life.

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And that that came from the Lord, and I needed to honor and respect that. And the Lord, He knew how to make up for pieces that I felt like I was missing. He had other ways of addressing those needs.

Lorna Dueck: Wow. I want to talk about the environment where you're in, as you are, as a family, navigating this beautiful season, healing season, faithful season of faithfulness with your dad, I mean, one of your sisters set up, right, like a website to organize him and everything. It's just like, who does this? But he actually liked long term care, he liked the community, did he, is what I gathered?

Like you really came to live in this place. And it was the staff that said, come on, family, organize yourselves.

You can't have this many visitors.

Chris Houston: Yes, that was. Dad just kind of moved in and lived life.

And so, the whole thing appeared on the poor doorstep of the hospital. And when dad shows up, so do a whole lot of other people. And in fact, one of his caregivers, Jocelyn. Jocelyn cared for our mother in the same hospital.

So, there was this real sense of continuity. And my sister Lydele handled... Lydele and Penny both live, two sisters live in Vancouver. And they handled the day-to-day logistics of which there were lots.

Dad had an Amazon account. So, books kept flowing through the door by the caseload. Lydele learned if he doesn't ask for it twice, don't order it.

And so, we had our moments of... (quiet scream), but why wouldn't you? But the hospital was, they were really terrific, and he had a beautiful room, and he looked out over English Bay. I mean, it was enormously blessed.

Lorna Dueck: Okay. I hear in you something that comes up on page 162 in the book. Your letter 51, where an audience member of your dad's great constituency asks, "to

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what Dr. Houston, do you attribute your long life?" And tell us how he responded to that.

Chris Houston: Well, I was with him.

We were actually in Brazil together, lecturing at a conference together in the South of Brazil. And I remember he was asked the question, and he just looked to the person. He said, "gratitude." No other words, just one word.

And you asked the question earlier about his interest in care. Dad just was really grateful to the people who came and fed him and did basic needs and all changed his bedding and got him out of bed. And in his very, very last months, he was not in a good place.

And I remember having a conversation where he was very grumpy and having this conversation with Jocelyn. Jocelyn said, that's not Jim. That's not Jim. If I walked in there, Jim would think I was the best nurse on the planet who just cared and loved and I was wonderful. That's Jim.

He was grumpy and angry, and she said, that's not Jim. And that was, he was just, he was very grateful to people.

Lorna Dueck: Do you have advice for families struggling to do elder care in their season?

Chris Houston: Very, very cautiously because our journey was a breeze compared with what some families live through. And so, I feel very, very hesitant to give people advice who are in much, much more difficult circumstances than we found ourselves in.

But my wife Jeannie and I have talked quite a bit about this with respect to all four of our parents. And I think what was really important was to understand who is this person in their fullness, though now impeded? Who is this person for whom perhaps this body has become a shell that is inadequate to hold that? Who is that person?

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And how do we enhance and enrich the fullness of who that person fully is? Even though all this infrastructure called bodies and minds doesn't work anymore.

And, I think dad taught us a bit about mum had quite severe dementia. And one day, mum said to dad, she said, Jim, I don't know who I am anymore. And dad said, Rita, it's all right. I know who you are.

And I think there was a very important thing going on there, which was to hold the identity of that person in safekeeping when they were unable to hold that identity for themselves any longer. And whether that's to express it physically, in my father's case, to articulate his mind, whether it's to hold memory that is now faded or gone.

I think Lorna, you probably know as much about this journey as many, but that will be my sense of "how am I a steward of whom," you know. Psalm 139, that image that the Psalmist gives us of this person who's fashioned and created out of grace and known before a single day of the was, how do we join the Lord in being a holding place for that?

And it raises some really difficult questions about, you know, what is the meaning in, of a life that is mostly now being held by another.

Lorna Dueck: Yeah. And there is such a gift going back to us as the healthy person while we hold that languishing, that exit to heaven so carefully, isn't there?

Chris Houston: Yeah, there is, but that doesn't make it easy.

Lorna Dueck: No, but it pulls, it's okay. A few more letters, a few more letters. He writes a Psalm after his 100th birthday.

I'm going to go page 129 here. I found that remarkable. Let me just flip to the page 129.

He writes a Psalm. Well, I guess you write the Psalm for your dad. It's Psalm 3 of Jim. You write Psalm 3 of Jim. Just tell us about that. Psalm 3 of Jim.

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It ends with, "that was my 99th year, Lord. Truth be told, I did not want it when it began. Now it is done. And I think I'll have a few more."

Chris Houston: So, the Psalms, the three Psalms in the book emerged afterwards. They weren't part of the letter series.

Um, and it happened because I realized, I noticed that there was an ascent going on as I pulled things together for editorial purposes and started looking at them all. And I'd lived it. And I had this sense that I'd moved from down by the side of a bed where he couldn't move to this incredible vigor at a hundredth birthday, and what had happened.

And I thought that was an important story to tell was this ascent because it's counterintuitive. That you're 99 and you get worse, right? No, you get better. Well, that's God's kingdom, right? It's always upside down.

So how to tell that? And I thought about writing a narrative along the way. And I thought that doesn't kind of work. Dad loved the Psalms and had written with Bruce Waltke a couple of books on the Psalms.

He was a passionate believer in the Psalter and in hymnody, more modern versions of Psalms. Um, and so I found in the Psalm, a literary genre device by which I thought I could express his emotional experience of this ascent journey. And it was based on my observations of him and the kinds of things that his heart would have said to the Lord, as opposed to what he would have written as academic literature.

Cause my dad didn't write like this, which is why a lot of his colleagues said, this is some of the best stuff he'd ever written, but it's cause it's light. And dad, when he read the book, I mean, I still remember I gave it to him. I was quite proud to give it to him, and I handed it to him, and he said, oh, this is really good, Chris.

But Psalm 3 is this kind of, closing of the ascent, the birthday. And the birthday came, I'm reading verse six in the Psalm, the birthday came and went, thank you for that

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gathering. First of family, then of friends, the cards were lovely, but I hope you didn't mind that I put them away all so soon.

So much to do, time to move on. Even a centenary so quickly over, so soon past, so yesterday. And dad literally came back from his hundredth birthday party.

And the next day took down all the cards in his room and put them away and said, well done. Well, why? Because he was on, he was moving. He was always going forwards.

And yeah, that's nice. A hundred good. But he lived in the anticipation that God was doing something and that he got to be part of it.

And now it's just where he lived.

Lorna Dueck: Okay. I want us as your listeners to just take that, challenge that we get on with the business of what has God's got for us tomorrow.

As your father lived to 103, the founder of Regent College in Canada, a great sacrifice you as a family did to see that college get established and to grow and be the beautiful resource it is for Canada today. Thank you for putting *Letters from a Hospital Bed*, together from you and your siblings and your reflections on your father. It's just a beautiful book, *Letters from a Hospital Bed*.

We'll have it in the show notes, how we can get a hold of that. Anything else you want to say as we say goodbye, Chris?

Chris Houston: Only just thank you and love the ones that you're here to care for. Um, it's not easy sometimes, but it's a privilege and it's a gift.

And it's the life we're given to care for those who God has placed into our, into our path. So, bless you as you do that in unique and different and distinctive ways.

Lorna Dueck: Chris, thank you so much for telling us about your famous father, Dr. James Houston. Thank you.

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Chris Houston: You're welcome.