

Praise You in This Storm

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
Proverbs 3:5-6

He Gives, And Takes Away

Laurie Edwards watched her little girl gasping for air and wanted to breathe for her. She wanted the Maker of breaths to swoop in and fill her child's lungs and dissolve every tumor with His mere glance. She wanted to hit the rewind button and travel back to June 2001 and start all over. She wanted another miracle.

It was in the early morning hours of Saturday, October 30, 2004. Ten-year-old Erin Browning lay in a hospice bed in her home, in such pain and shortness of breath that, in fear and exasperation, she could manage only one request of her mother.

"Just read the Scriptures!" she said.

So Laurie began reading the Scriptures. She included Erin's favorite passage, Proverbs 3:5-6. From 1 a.m. until 5 a.m., loved ones took turns reading aloud the Word of God over a child in the last, cruelest stages of cancer's grip. Little Erin had battled for more than three years. She was diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma, a particularly aggressive bone cancer, on September 11, 2001, of all days. While the world watched the smoke and rubble of New York's twin towers, a woman in Winston-Salem, North Carolina heard a doctor say her seven-year-old daughter was riddled with cancer, starting from the second toe of her left foot and running through her hip, lungs, shoulder, and skull.

And now the end was near. Laurie did her best to refuse to believe it. Her trust in the Lord remained steadfast. She was frightened and faithful all at once. She prayed for an eleventh-hour miracle.

So they did as Erin asked. They read the Scriptures.

Jeremiah 29:11

Matthew 17:20

Mark 9:23

Mark 11:24

John 15:5-7

Philippians 4:13

Philippians 4:19

James 1:23

1 Peter 5:10

Over and over, they read God's Word. At one point, Laurie placed her Bible on the floor and stood on it. She grabbed sheets of Scripture printed from her computer, and literally stood on the Word of God as she read over her child. Finally, after the long night

of reading Scripture followed by another long night of hopeful prayer, Laurie consented for a hospice nurse to administer an IV with medicine that essentially placed Erin in a painless coma on Sunday afternoon. There would be no more gasping for breath, no more strain on the child. Laurie had delayed the IV as long as she could bear. She was afraid to think what it could mean.

“She told us that she loved us so much,” Laurie said. “And we told her that we loved her so much....”

E-mail: Tuesday, June 15, 2004; 1:09 PM

Dear Prayer Warriors:

After Erin’s back and neck pain reached a level of “20!” on a scale of 1 to 10 and her sleep was interrupted due to difficulty breathing while lying down, I reluctantly agreed to have Hospice come and bring a hospital bed for Erin. I thought I could fool Erin by calling it an “adjustable” bed, but as soon as she saw it she knew what it was and was quite upset. We had our first visit with Hospice this past Friday and, although it was a very pleasant visit, many tears were shed over the weekend. ... Please pray that Erin will feel comfortable in her new bed. She is by no means bed-ridden and is enjoying her lazy summer. She seems to have the most fun when she gets a chance to go swimming.

Laurie Edwards

I met Erin Browning on Valentine’s Day, 2004 at Westover Church in Greensboro, North Carolina. Laurie had visited our website to share Erin’s story. Erin loved Casting Crowns, and, after six years of dance lessons, had choreographed a dance to our song *Here I Go Again*. When Laurie initially contacted us, we made arrangements to meet Erin, Laurie, and the family before our concert in Greensboro. Three months later, Erin danced for the last time as her mother and two sisters joined her for a performance of *Here I Go Again* at The Carolina Theatre.

I was gripped by the imagery of Laurie’s standing on her Bible and quoting Scripture over her sick little girl. After all the e-mail updates and prayers, that moment melted my heart and sparked the lyrics to this song.

The band was touring and preparing for our second album, and I was busy with our youth ministry. I kept up with Erin’s condition through Laurie’s e-mails detailing the family’s wrenching ordeal. Every e-mail described a change in Erin’s condition. One e-mail would offer hope: “There is a new treatment we’re going to try, so please be praying.” So we’d pray, and then the next e-mail would report, “It’s not working.”

Sometimes Laurie would be sad. Other messages were funny. Sometimes she had questions: “What’s going on? I feel like I’m all alone in this.” But I noticed through the course of her communications that her worship never changed. Her love of Jesus

remained fervent even though she questioned what was going on and didn't really understand the reasons. It was raw, rare faith, and it was inspiring.

On June 21, 2004, I e-mailed Laurie to tell her that I was writing a song for Erin entitled *Praise You in This Storm*. Upon the news, Erin screamed so loud that it hurt Laurie's ears. Erin never got to hear the song, but Laurie heard it for the first time when her mother bought the CD on the day it was released and took it to the school where Laurie works. The two women sat in the car, listened to the song, and "cried and cried and cried," Laurie said.

"Erin would be so happy to know that other people were being touched by something written for her, because she was never about herself. She was about other people," Laurie said. "Other kids at school would say 'I want to be like Erin.' And she would say, 'No, you don't. You want to be like Jesus.'"

I was impressed with Laurie's faith, but Laurie will tell you how much she was impressed with Erin's faith. Erin was six years old when she prayed to receive Christ after listening to the words of a song by Point of Grace. She was diagnosed with cancer when she was seven, and by the time she was eight she was visiting area churches to give her testimony, as Laurie describes below:

E-mail: Friday, July 9, 2004; 10:20 PM

Dear Prayer Warriors:

It started on Sunday, probably not unlike many Sundays that you have, too. We were running late for church, no one was getting along, and Erin started feeling bad shortly after getting to church. God sent five people to take care of Erin in the ladies bathroom. Some were massaging her back and tickling her arms and legs, one had some Bio-Freeze to put on her back, one went to the store to buy her some blue Gatorade, we were all praying for her, and one kept an eye on the time to let Erin know when it was her time to share. After all that, Erin felt well enough to share her sweet testimony with the congregation at Adams Farm Church ... and she did it with a SMILE!

Laurie Edwards

The first thing you noticed about Erin was her smile. It always arrived before she did. She maintained her wit throughout her ordeal, regularly making her heartsick parents laugh. On the day that she was scheduled for a chest X-ray that ultimately would reveal six cancerous tumors in her chest cavity, Erin walked into her parents' room to tell them how concerned she was about undergoing the X-ray.

"If I get skin cancer, I'm going to really be ticked," she quipped.

Another time, Erin's step-father, Joey, and two sisters were playing basketball in the driveway. Erin asked her mom to help her carry her oxygen tank down the front steps. She rolled her tank onto the driveway, stopped the action, and said, "OK, whose team am I on?"

Erin always had been an active child. In fact, she learned she had cancer only after injuring herself while roughhousing on the sofa. She lay down to churn her feet in

the air but kicked the top of her left foot. There was a loud pop that even Laurie heard. Erin cried, which was unusual for her. When the swelling never subsided, she eventually went for an MRI that revealed a tumor. The family still wasn't alarmed, thinking the mass only a part of the original injury.

Erin traveled to Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem for a needle biopsy, which revealed the Ewing's Sarcoma. Next came the fateful bone scan and its overwhelming news on September 11.

Then God intervened.

Four prayerful months after the first bone scan, Erin underwent a second scan. This time, the cancer was gone. Doctors called the results remarkable. Laurie and Erin called it a miracle. That was all Erin needed to hear. Emboldened by the Lord's clear hand in her life, she began regularly sharing her faith and giving her testimony.

"She had a desire to reach people to let them know there is no hope or joy without God. And even though she had reason in her life not to be happy, she was joyful because she had Jesus in her heart," Laurie said. "She wasn't afraid. She let the Lord speak through her, and when she would get up and speak it was like I wasn't listening to my own daughter. He would put words in her mouth, and it was just awesome."

In September 2003, two years after her original diagnosis and 20 months after the second bone scan revealed no cancer, Erin underwent a checkup. Tests revealed a spot on her lung. It was surgically removed. Another checkup in December revealed no further spots. I met Erin for the first time in February. One month later, in March of 2004, another test showed the cancer had returned. There were six tumors in and around her lungs and chest cavity.

This time, the cancer didn't go away.

The tumors grew so large that they displaced organs and created a visible bulge in Erin's chest. They pressed down on her spleen, pushed her heart to the right, and deviated her trachea, straining her breathing.

E-mail: Friday, July 2, 2004; 9:23 AM

Dear Prayer Warriors:

The doctor said Erin is a phenomenal patient and he wished all his patients could be like her. He said he has never had a Ewing's Sarcoma patient with cancer in every bone he knew a name for who has done as well as Erin! He continued to praise Erin by commenting on how she positively touches everyone with whom she comes in contact. She makes you think about what is really important in life.

Although the doctor does not think Erin has much longer, he agreed that we should not give up hope ... and we WILL NOT! He said you never know what God is going to do.

Laurie Edwards

Erin stayed as active as possible during her last summer. Her pain level subsided in late July, and in August she started fifth grade at High Point Christian Academy after finishing fourth grade with all A's.

In late August, Erin was hospitalized with severe chest pain and difficulty breathing. Her health began to deteriorate, and by the end of October Laurie's e-mail updates were desperate. Her last one before Erin's death came on October 30 and was a simple request in all caps: "PLEASE PRAY FOR ERIN!" It was the night in which Laurie stood on her Bible during the four hours of Scripture reading. The weekend crept into Saturday, when at 1:15 a.m. the hospice nurse told Laurie that Erin's vital signs and statistics suggested she had only approximately 20 minutes to live.

Fifty-one hours later, Erin finally gave up her fight.

In the early morning hours of Monday, Joey placed Laurie's sleeping bag on the floor beside Erin's bed. Laurie had not slept for 24 hours and was exhausted but wanted to stay with her unconscious daughter. At 1 a.m., Laurie lay down for a nap but prayed, "Lord, please wake me if Erin should need me."

Two hours later, Laurie awoke. Erin had not moved. As Laurie began praying, Erin lifted her head.

"Erin, do you want to sit up?" asked Laurie, who beckoned Joey at 3 a.m. to help her lift Erin into her arms. Laurie sat at the head of the bed and held Erin, who remained unconscious. Erin loved to hear Laurie's childhood stories, especially those describing how Laurie got into trouble for one minor trespass or another. So Laurie told Erin her stories again. She tickled Erin's face. She played with her hair. She whispered a mother's whisper.

At 4:10 a.m., Erin's breathing slowed. Laurie called in the rest of the family, and everyone stayed until Erin's last breath. Fourteen minutes later, Erin suddenly opened her eyes. Laurie said her first thought was not, "*Oh, she's waking up!*" It was a different kind of look. Laurie spoke to her daughter one last time.

"Oh, Erin, do you see Jesus?" Laurie asked. The nurses had warned Laurie that at the end Erin would gasp or grunt as she struggled for breath. She didn't.

"Erin, I think the angels have come to take you home," Laurie said. "You go see Jesus, and I'll see you soon."

Erin Browning went home at 4:24 a.m. on November 1, 2004.

Laurie still doesn't fully understand what happened next. She remembers only a tremendous peace and describes it as being under the shower of the Holy Spirit. She held Erin's body for 90 minutes while her daughter played in heaven.

"It was not like how I expected her last minutes to be. I thought I'd be hysterical, but I wasn't," Laurie said. "But she was where she always wanted to be. She told me when she was six years old that she couldn't wait to get to heaven. She said she had felt an emptiness in her heart, but when she asked Jesus into her heart she never felt it again because Jesus had filled her and would never leave her. For the 10 years she was on this earth, God used her in a remarkable, powerful way.

"I've learned that He can use an average, ordinary family to do extraordinary things and that He continues to use us despite ourselves. We are so far from perfect, but He continues to use us," Laurie said. "I don't feel very strong, but apparently I appear strong outwardly, and God has used that to help others going through cancer and divorce to find a peace. How He has done that is beyond me. But He has a plan and purpose. A

lot of times I may not like His plan, but I accept it. I'm just honored that He chose to use Erin and this family as He has."

Through it all, I was captured not just by Laurie's faith but also by her worship. She had the worship of Job:

The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

Job 1:21

I have a son and two daughters, and I was amazed at how Laurie faced a parent's greatest fear. It doesn't mean that she wasn't angry. It doesn't mean that she wasn't sad or doubtful, but at the base of it she was leaning on God even if she was angry, sad, or doubtful. I was reminded once again that just because we cannot see God's purpose does not mean He doesn't have one. I was reminded that God is faithful, regardless of the circumstances. I was reminded that God is sovereign, and we're not.

Finally, I was reminded that we cannot control how long our lifetimes last. We only can control how loud we sing them. Little Erin lived out loud for Jesus. Even her e-mails were in all caps.

I heard from her for the final time in August, just over two months before she died. She danced until the very end.

E-mail: Sunday, August 22, 2004; 6:29 PM

HI MARK,

I WAS JUST WONDERING HOW THE NEW SONG WAS GOING (PRAISE YOU IN THIS STORM). HAVE YOU BEEN WRITING A LOT OF NEW SONGS OR ARE YOU STAYING TOO BUSY TO? I CAN'T WAIT TO HEAR YOUR NEXT CD! I HAVE SIGNED UP TO TAKE LITURGICAL DANCE THIS YEAR EVEN THOUGH MOM DIDN'T THINK I SHOULD. I TOLD HER IF WE ARE PRAYING FOR A MIRACLE AND EXPECTING ONE, THEN WHY SHOULDN'T I TAKE DANCE? SO SHE LET ME!

PLEASE TELL THE BAND "HELLO" FROM ME! I PRAY THAT GOD WILL BLESS YOU JUST LIKE HE HAS ME.

*LOVE,
ERIN*

The Godline

Were I to designate a Godline for this song, I would have to write every lyric. The whole song is a Godline. When it comes to writing, I wasn't there for this one. I can't think of anything for which I should ever take credit.

There are so many lines that gripped me as this came together. The first one was:

For You are who You are, no matter where I am.

I'm saying, "You're not God based on my circumstances." That was a big line when I sang it aloud for the first time. The first line that came to me concerning Erin's battle with cancer was the first verse:

*I was sure by now, God, You would have reached down,
And wiped our tears away, stepped in and saved the day.
But once again, I say "Amen," and it's still raining.*

It took me a while to be able to sing that verse aloud. I was too emotional over Erin and Laurie. The bridge also is special to me. In remembering Laurie's update about reading Scripture verses over Erin, I added Psalm 121:1-2 as the bridge to try to capture the cry of a desperate mother. That's why I repeat the lines with increasing fervor:

*I lift my eyes unto the hills; where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Last summer, we took several of our student leaders on a mission trip to Israel, where we traveled to the very area where it is believed Psalm 121 was possibly written. Our guide showed us all of the surrounding mountains and hills and said the armies of Israel's enemies built altars to pagan gods on every hill. Everywhere the Israelites looked, they saw pagan gods. They saw lies all around them. In that context, the verses take on an interesting slant: "I lift my eyes unto the hills. Where does *my* help come from? My help comes from the Lord."

Sometimes we all feel that way, don't we? What wonderful assurance that verse provides.

I can remember exiting the interstate while returning home from Nashville when the second verse came to me:

*I remember when ... I stumbled in the wind;
You heard my cry to You, and raised me up again.
My strength is almost gone; how can I carry on,
If I can't find You?*

I'm saying, "God, I remember when this happened before and You pulled me out of it. But right now, my strength is almost gone and I don't know how I'm going to make it through this when I feel so alone and can't seem to find You." I'm sure we've all felt those emotions to some degree.

What is so remarkable about this song—and the very reason that I believe the entire song is a Godline—is how God already has used it. His reach extends beyond just

those struggling with long-term or terminal illness. Somehow, God’s providence made this song also apply to Hurricane Katrina.

Look back at the italicized verses above and consider them in light of the hurricane and its aftermath. Do the lyrics not fit the circumstances perfectly? Obviously, that wasn’t me. That was the Lord. Now read the channel:

*As the thunder rolls, I barely hear You whisper through the rain,
“I’m with you.”
And as Your mercy falls, I raise my hands and praise the God who gives,
And takes away.*

Amazing, huh? Now consider that this album was released on Tuesday, August 30, the day after Katrina devastated New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast. By the end of the week, a disc jockey somewhere produced a new mix for *Praise You in This Storm*. He spliced into the song sound bytes of news reports and even President George W. Bush speaking, and the result registered high on the goosebump meter.

While I wrote the song from my exposure to one family’s battle with cancer, I realized it would apply to many people who are dealing with tragedy and heartbreak. We’ve all been there, so I figured it would touch a nerve. But how could I have known it would have anything to do with a national disaster?

We finally heard the disc jockey’s mix while in the car. As I sat there, it was like God gave a whole new meaning to a song I had written—as if it were written for that too. Everything fits, the words in the song perfectly complementing the news excerpts. The quotes are spliced so that the questions are right next to the answers in the song. One of the excerpts has a hurricane victim asking aloud, “What are we going to do? Where are we going to go?” It is immediately followed by the bridge: “I lift my eyes unto the hills/Where does my help come from?/My help comes from the Lord/The Maker of heaven and earth.”

I sat in my car and stared. “Unbelievable,” I muttered. You think you know what God is up to, and then He takes a song you wrote four or five months before and unveils an entirely new purpose for it.

Behold, He indeed makes all things new. That’s what He did for this song.
And that’s what He did for little Erin.

The Bottom Line

- Do you view trials in your life as God’s abandonment of you—or as opportunities for you to abandon yourself to God? Explain your answer.
- What is your favorite Biblical example of someone persevering through a trial? Why? What part of the story most inspires you? What lessons have you taken from that account and attempted to apply to your life?
- In Job 1, the beleaguered Job professes that the Lord gave him everything he ever had and also reserved the right to take away everything. Earlier in the chapter,

God gave Satan permission to test Job—and it was God who began the discourse on Job in the first place. What does this say about God’s sovereignty? His justice? What does your response say about your level of trust?