

with David Thomas

# Jeremy Camp



I STILL BELIEVE

*a memoir*

## Praise for *I Still Believe*

Jeremy Camp is an extremely talented artist. But what many do not know is that he has suffered greatly in life. Out of this suffering many of the songs we have come to love have been born and have brought encouragement and comfort to untold thousands around the world. Now, for the first time, Jeremy Camp tells his whole story. This is a book you will want to read and then pass on to a friend. I heartily endorse it.

**GREG LAURIE**

Senior pastor, Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, California

Cancer. Love. Hope. Loss. Where do you turn when life is hard? In his new book, *I Still Believe*, Jeremy Camp shares his story—personal, painful, and promise-filled. If you need hope in the midst of a hard season in your life, pick up a copy of this book. It will encourage you, challenge your faith, and point you to the One Who is Hope, Jesus Christ.

**DR. JAMES MACDONALD**

Senior pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel

Jeremy's music has always had a powerful impact on me, and now I know why. Behind his voice is a heart that's uniquely connected with God. Through his pain, grief, sorrow, and loss, his life has become a crucible where the Lord's love and mercy are real revelations. Reading Jeremy's story has reinforced my faith in Him who is able and alive!

**BOB COY**

Senior pastor, Calvary Chapel Ft. Lauderdale

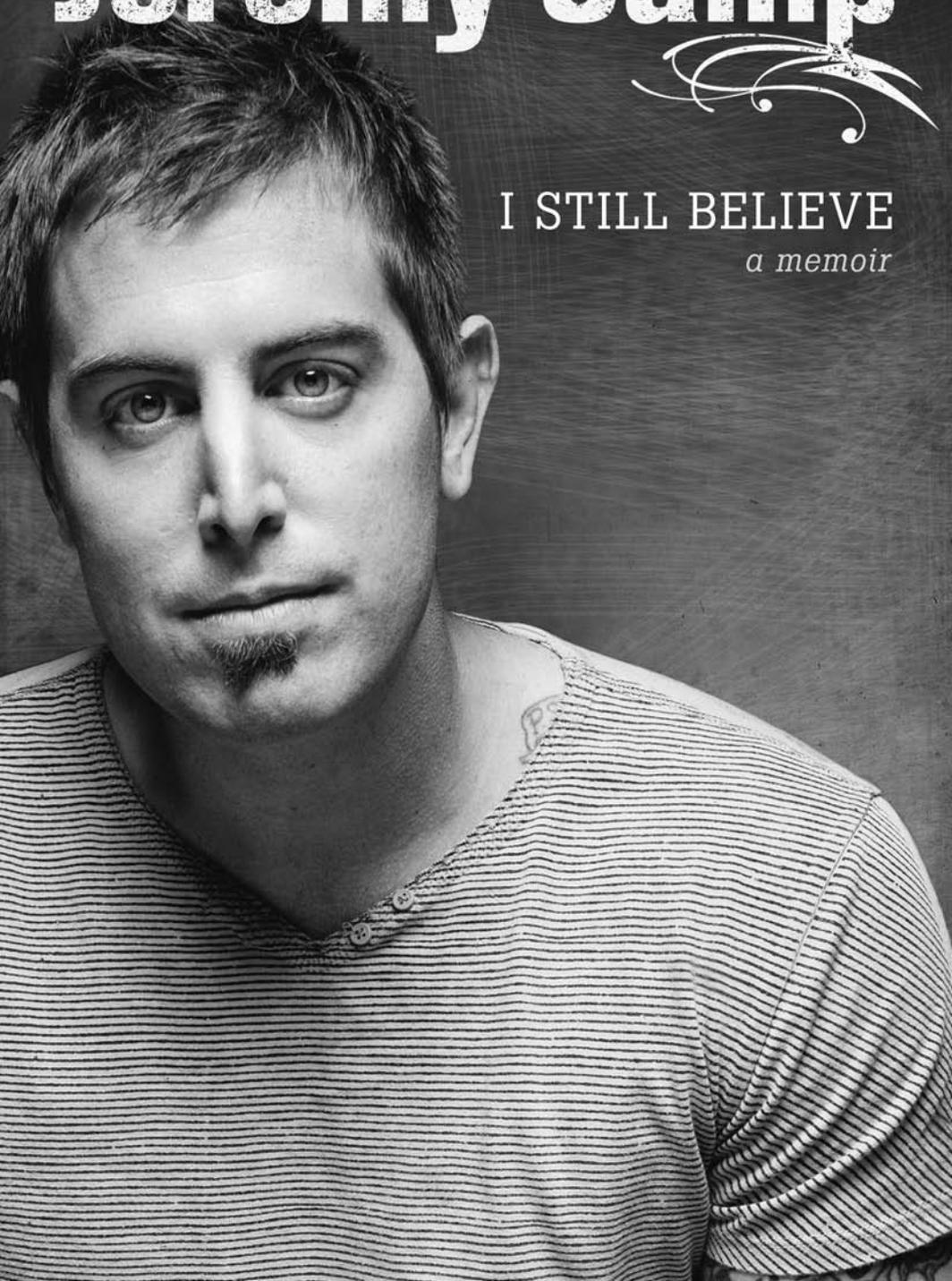


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*This book is dedicated to my family and friends who have helped me walk through this season of my life and who have held on to the Lord's faithfulness with me.*

## Contents

Prologue *vii*

**CHAPTER 1:** It Starts at Home *1*

**CHAPTER 2:** Tug-of-War *11*

**CHAPTER 3:** Set Free *23*

**CHAPTER 4:** The Call *31*

**CHAPTER 5:** Heading West *43*

**CHAPTER 6:** The Gift *55*

**CHAPTER 7:** Broken Up and Broken *67*

**CHAPTER 8:** "Just One Person" *77*

**CHAPTER 9:** Walking by Faith *85*

**CHAPTER 10:** Seeking Hope *99*

**CHAPTER 11:** "It's Time" *107*

**CHAPTER 12:** Why? *119*

**CHAPTER 13:** Breaking Through *133*

**CHAPTER 14:** Falling in Love Again *147*

**CHAPTER 15:** All about God *161*

**CHAPTER 16:** Reaching the Roots *173*

**CHAPTER 17:** All That Truly Matters *181*

**CHAPTER 18:** There Will Be a Day *191*

**CHAPTER 19:** I Still Believe *203*

Notes *213*

# PROLOGUE

## **“Pick up your guitar.”**

I didn't want to. I didn't want *anything* to do with music. It had been two weeks since Melissa had gone to heaven. My wife was only twenty-one, and we had been married just three and a half months when she passed away from ovarian cancer.

I sat on the couch in my parents' living room alone—alone in many ways.

For two weeks, my life had been in a fog that wouldn't lift. Once everything had seemed to make so much sense; now nothing made sense. Doctors had told us Melissa's cancer was gone. We had married with the dream of having kids and working together in ministry—I through music, she through women's ministries and Bible studies. But then we barely had the chance to begin living out our dream.

My Melissa was gone, and I wondered where God was too. I wanted to pray, but in my despair, I wasn't sure what even my own thoughts were. I tried to pray, but I didn't know where to begin. Whatever weak words I did manage to send God's way seemed to be getting lost in the fog engulfing me.

*Do you really hear me, God?*

*Do you really care about every situation?*

*God? Are you near?*

“Pick up your guitar.”

For the first time since Melissa’s death, I felt that God was answering me. His words came crystal clear into my heart.

But I didn’t want to pick up my guitar. I didn’t want to go back to music or to anything I had done before. When I had written songs in the past, I wrote what my heart felt. Now I felt nothing. I was numb. I was physically and emotionally drained. I had nothing to offer.

*No, Lord—no. The last thing I want to do is play my guitar.*

“Pick up your guitar. I have something for you to write.”

I relented and mindlessly strummed some chords. I didn’t understand why I was playing, but I kept going. Then emotions welled up within me. Tears formed in my eyes. Words—actual thoughts—came to me, and I spoke them as I played.

*Scattered words and empty thoughts seem to pour from my heart.*

For the first time in two weeks, I was able to express how I felt.

*I’ve never felt so torn before, seems I don’t know where to start.*

I quickly found a pen and notebook and returned to the couch.

*But it’s now that I feel Your grace fall like rain from every fingertip, washing away my pain.*

I jotted down the words as they continued to come to me.

*I still believe in Your faithfulness. I still believe in Your truth. I still believe in Your holy Word.*

The words were pouring out, not from my mind, but from deep within my soul.

*Even when I don’t see, I still believe.*

I alternated between playing the tune and writing in the notebook until I softly sang and penned the final words: *In brokenness I can see that this was Your will for me. Help me to know You are near.*

I leaned back, struck by the words that had come to me and

completely unaware of how God would use those words to speak to others who, like me, felt abandoned in life's deepest valley. Who needed hope. Who needed encouragement to allow God to dig into the depths of their souls, down to the very foundation of their faith, and then to discover the resolve to declare, "I still believe!"

I wrote "I Still Believe" in ten minutes.

But, in essence, I had been writing the song all my life.



## CHAPTER 1

# IT STARTS AT HOME

**Faith and family.** Looking back, it is fitting that my healing in the aftermath of Melissa's passing began to take place back in my parents' home in Lafayette, Indiana.

I had left home for California to attend Bible college. It was in California that I found my path in ministry. It was there that my music career began to develop. It was there that I met God's partner for me in ministry. But after Melissa's memorial service, when the path I thought had been laid out for me suddenly disappeared, when my faith had been shaken in a way I had never imagined possible, all I knew to do was to go home.

Faith and family are seamlessly knit together in my life's story.

My parents provided me with what they did not have growing up: a Christian home. That in itself was a miracle.

Imagine a drunk man, with his equally loaded friend, staggering into a church on a Sunday evening and then answering an altar

call to accept Jesus as his Savior, and you have my dad's remarkable conversion story.

My dad, Tom—or “Bear,” as his friends called him—dropped out of school at age sixteen because he had gotten heavily into alcohol and drugs. (He later earned his GED and attended college.) My dad has a life-of-the-party, let's-have-some-fun-here personality, and when he was growing up, he didn't have any trouble finding the parties or convincing others to join in his type of fun.

My mom, Teri, was the classic good girl in school. She grew up in a stable home environment. A good student, she had plans and goals. She had been accepted to Purdue University when she met and began dating my dad during her senior year of high school.

Their relationship was the talk of the hallways—but not in the head-cheerleader-dates-the-quarterback kind of way. The comments were more like “What is *she* doing going out with *him*?”

She had fallen for my dad's likable personality and found him easy to talk to. But because of his heavy drinking and marijuana use, my dad had trouble landing steady work. So my mom scrapped her plans to study interior design in college and started working instead. My parents became popular party hosts. My dad was selling pot by then, so you can imagine their types of parties and the partygoers they entertained.

After learning my mom was pregnant, my parents moved in together, and my sister, April, was born out of wedlock in 1975. Having a newborn cut back on the parties in the home, but my dad's lifestyle continued further down the wrong path. His drinking increased, and he began to use and sell cocaine. The more he drank, the more violent he became.

About a year and a half after April was born, my dad was battling depression and realized his life was spiraling out of control.

“I don't know what's wrong with me,” he told my mom. “I feel

so empty inside. It's not you. It's not April. The drugs aren't making me happy. I don't know what's wrong."

"Do you need to see a psychiatrist?" my mom asked him.

"No," my dad replied. "I need to talk to a minister."

On Christmas Day 1976, my dad was noticeably depressed. My mom thought he might harm himself, but when she tried to console him, my dad said, "I have to go to church, and I have to go now."

They drove from church to church that evening, looking for one that was open. Finally, they found one where a couple of people were inside practicing music. My parents walked in and quietly sat in a pew, but the musicians never spoke to them, probably because they looked more like hippies than regular churchgoers. They remained in the pew for a while until my mom asked my dad if he felt better.

"Yes," he said, and they left.

Four days later, on a Wednesday evening, my parents again decided to look for a church.

When my dad was young, a sweet neighbor lady named Meb had taken him to church with her from time to time. One of those times, when my dad was eleven, he had gone forward to accept Christ. Without a family to keep him spiritually connected, though, he eventually got away from church. He had brought up spiritual topics with my mom early in their relationship, but Christianity stayed something he thought about and questioned in his heart, and it never became more than that. But at least he had that church background when he analyzed his own life and reached the conclusion that he needed to make a serious change. He had tried just about everything else, but deep in his heart he knew what the truth was and that the Holy Spirit was drawing him.

My mom had attended church in spurts when she was growing up, with her mom taking her and her dad staying home except on Easter and a few other special occasions. Her mother had bought a book of Bible stories that my mom had enjoyed reading as a child.

But while she knew about Jesus, there was never a time when my mom had developed a relationship with Him. With my dad showing a trend toward dangerous behavior, she was open to a church providing the change he needed.

A few days after Christmas, my dad said again, “I have to talk to a minister. I know where we can go—Meb will be at church.”

My dad knew where his former neighbor would be on a Wednesday night. When they arrived at the church, the service had just ended and people were on their way out. As expected, Meb was there. A big smile crossed her face when she saw my dad. When my dad said he needed to talk to a minister, she introduced my parents to her pastor. The four of them sat down, and my dad explained his problems and described how he felt a void in his life.

The pastor identified the problem as unconfessed sin and explained that the void in his life was one only Christ could fill. My dad agreed. The pastor then led my parents through a prayer asking for forgiveness, although my mom prayed more out of embarrassment and the potential awkwardness of *not* praying in that small of a group.

After the prayer, the pastor gave my parents a short and direct list of changes they needed to make: “You need to get married, change the way you dress, cut your hair, and get new friends.”

My parents understood the need to give up the drugs and alcohol. But they were confused about how they could come up with a completely new set of friends overnight. And as for the way they dressed, they could barely afford the clothes they had. How were they supposed to afford an all-new wardrobe?

My dad initially had a problem with marriage. He had been briefly married when he was sixteen. His girlfriend got pregnant, so they married. But when she had a miscarriage, they decided they didn’t want to be together and divorced after less than six months together. There had been a few times in the past when

my dad had asked my mom if she would marry him if he asked. She kept saying she would, but my dad never asked. He told my mom he had no interest in marrying because he had never seen a good marriage—not when he was growing up and not for the few months he was married. But as he considered what the pastor had said about needing to marry, he agreed.

The pastor gave my parents a Bible, but he didn't give them any practical help for how to make the changes he told them they must make.

As a result, they left the church asking themselves, *How can we do all that?*

## **CHANGED FOR GOOD**

The Bible the pastor had given my parents was a King James Version. Reading was difficult for my dad, and the King James was even more of a challenge, so my mom read to him from the Bible. They continued to talk about church, and my mom mentioned that coworkers had been talking to her about Jesus and had said my parents would be welcome at their church regardless of how they looked or dressed. My dad agreed to try it.

They planned to attend the Assemblies of God church on the first Sunday evening of the new year—January 2, 1977. My dad helped a friend move that morning, then went out with his friend that afternoon.

As my mom was getting ready for church, he called.

“Where are you?” she asked him.

“I’m at a Mexican restaurant.”

She knew he was at the only local restaurant that served beer on Sundays. “Have you been drinking?”

“Oh, just a little.”

When my dad came home to pick her up for church, he and his

friend were laughing about how they had been busting out lights at the restaurant. They had been drinking more than “just a little.”

My mom started crying. From the night they had prayed at Meb’s church, neither of them had used drugs or alcohol—not even on New Year’s Eve. “There’s no way I’m going to church with you guys,” she told him.

My mom’s mother was watching April that evening, so when my mom saw how drunk my dad and his friend were, she immediately left for church alone.

Because it was a Sunday evening, the crowd of about three hundred wasn’t as large as for a morning service. About eight rows of folding chairs at the back of the sanctuary had been roped off so the people would sit closer to the front. My mom took a seat by herself in the middle of the last available row. Shortly after the service began, she heard a commotion behind her. She looked over her shoulder to see my dad and his friend stumbling through the doors in the back.

My mom’s first reaction was to hide. She turned back toward the front, slumped in her seat, and tried to blend in with the others in front of her. It didn’t work. My dad and his friend spotted her and made their way toward her. But not by walking down the aisle and quietly slipping into the row where my mom was sitting. My dad started off on the most direct route from point A to point B—by stepping over the roped-off rows of chairs!

My mom continued to look forward while everyone else turned their attention to the two drunken chair-jumpers. My dad and his friend plopped down right next to my embarrassed mom, and the friend chattered away.

An usher seeking to calm the ruckus came over and asked my dad’s friend if he would like to sit next to him, and my dad’s drinking buddy obliged.

Up front, the pastor talked about being delivered from the bondage of drugs and alcohol. A couple of times during the

message, my dad's friend left his seat, ran over to my dad, said, "Man, Bear, this guy knows what he's talking about!" and then ran back to his seat next to the usher.

As the pastor preached, my mom noticed tears rolling down my dad's cheeks. The pastor's words really struck home with my dad, who cried throughout the message.

When the pastor concluded and asked if there were those present who would like to come to the altar to ask Jesus into their hearts, my dad's friend ran forward while my parents hesitated, both thinking, *Haven't we done this already?* When a youth pastor approached and offered to take them to the front if they wanted to answer the pastor's call, they stood and made their way down the aisle too. The congregation gathered around the three of them at the altar and prayed for them. With all of them crying, my mom was just relieved that the guys were going to change. My dad was immediately delivered from drugs and alcohol and walked out of that church sober.

My parents later learned that alcoholics and hippies were the pastor's least favorite types of people, but he had still welcomed my dad and his friend into the church that night. The church members had been praying for a revival to break out in their church, and one began that night when, of all people, two drunk hippies answered the altar call. God does work in mysterious ways!

The pastor wound up having many opportunities to share what he called the "whosoever ministry," exhorting the body of Christ to minister to whomever God brought into their paths.

Instead of focusing on outward things, the members of that church encouraged my parents to get into the Word and into fellowship with other believers. They gave my parents a copy of *The Living Bible* to take home and suggested they begin reading the Gospel of John. John's manner of expressing the love Jesus had demonstrated for all mankind through His death and resurrection deeply impacted my mom. She had a revelation that, like my dad had been, she also was

a sinner in need of salvation. One night, in her favorite living room chair, she said, “Lord, I am sorry.” That became her life-changing moment. She asked Jesus to come into her heart and prayed, “I will go anywhere, do anything. Whatever you ask, I’m yours.”

That was quite fitting, considering their contrasting personalities: my dad came to Christ in a public, very emotional setting; my mom did so in a private, quiet moment. Yet the immediate impact of their decisions was the same: their lives were completely changed.

On January 22, 1977, in that same Assemblies of God church, they were married. From that day forward, they modeled the type of relationship that God prescribed in Scripture and poured the foundation of faith on which I would be raised.

I was born almost a year later, on January 12, 1978. Eight years later, April and I were joined by our brother Jared. Two years after that, Joshua came along. Josh was born with Down syndrome, and he is a blessing who completed our family in more ways than one.

Our parents’ decisions to become Christians certainly didn’t lead to a life of smooth sailing for them and our family. It was just the opposite, in fact, because we encountered our share of struggles. And not all of us kids always walked the path our parents wanted us to follow.

But all along our journey together, we always knew where to turn for answers to life’s questions: to God’s Word and to each other. And that pattern has remained unchanged as we Camp kids have progressed into adulthood and started our own families. Our family has incredible stories of God’s loving mercy.

## **LEARNING AT HOME**

Before my dad dropped out of high school, he had a difficult time focusing while reading—probably from his abuse of drugs and alcohol. As I grew up, however, my dad was constantly reading the

Bible. He said because of his struggles in school, he had hated to read books before becoming a Christian. But he certainly loved to spend time studying God's Word. In fact, for a short time we lived in Springfield, Missouri, so my dad could attend Central Bible College and prepare for entering full-time ministry.

My family was always heavily involved in church. We were one of those families who were in church practically every time the doors were unlocked. My parents attended and led Bible studies. We would have friends over to our house, and my dad would play his guitar and lead worship right there in our living room. My mom and dad shared their faith with anyone they met, telling them about the complete transformation God had made in their lives.

The impression I have of my parents from when I was younger is how real they were. They were the same at home as they were in church. They wouldn't go to church and worship with raised hands, talk like a Christian should, and then return home and act or speak differently. They didn't compartmentalize their lives. They were who they were because that *was* who they were; the changes God made in their hearts were complete and were reflected in every area of their lives. I credit my parents' consistency in living the Christian lifestyle as the reason I never became jaded toward Christianity growing up, not even during the years when I wandered from the straight and narrow path.

The phrase "he has a shepherd's heart" perfectly describes my dad. He is a great listener who truly cares about people. I remember people sitting in our living room pouring out their hearts, and he would not just listen, but intently listen. He is such a people person, and people obviously love being around him.

My dad is hilarious, too. After becoming a Christian, he remained the life of the party—just different types of parties. We would go camping—yes, the Camps went camping—and my dad would

make up hilarious songs around the campfire. To get the whole family involved, he'd pester us to echo the silly lyrics he improvised.

One time we all went roller-skating, and he dressed in overalls with shorts over them just to be goofy and see if he could embarrass us.

My mom is more prim and proper. She isn't outwardly emotional (except when she sees the Lord at work), and she is meticulous. I used to think it took her forever to put her makeup on. It seemed like she wrote slowly too, but when she finished, her handwriting was flawless.

She kept the house clean and organized when I was growing up because, like my dad, she enjoyed having friends over and hosting Bible studies and prayer groups. And my mom was dedicated to praying. I remember many, many times walking into a room and seeing her facedown on the floor, praying and interceding.

My parents are opposites who attracted, but through Christ, their opposite ways complement each other. My dad has a go-for-it attitude. If he feels God wants him to do something, he's ready to go. My mom will say, "We need to make sure, so let's pray about it a little more." My personality is closer to my dad's, but from my mom I learned the importance of discipline and steadiness in the Christian lifestyle.

When we kids encountered problems, our parents encouraged us with words and wisdom from Scripture—not just with their own words and advice. Prayer time was prioritized because our home was one of prayer. We often prayed together as a family. When we had needs, whether as individuals or as a group, we prayed about them. And we definitely had needs.