

WHEN GOD  
DOESN'T FIX IT

# WHEN GOD DOESN'T FIX IT

*LESSONS YOU NEVER WANTED TO LEARN,  
TRUTHS YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT*

LAURA STORY

WITH JENNIFER SCHUCHMANN



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*To Martin*  
*You are still my dream come true*

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..... ONE .....

## UNEXPECTED CALLS

THE CALL THAT CHANGED MY LIFE HAPPENED AROUND noon in February 2006. I was in St. Louis attending a conference with two of my coworkers. They sat in the front seat of the rental car with the radio on; I was in the backseat checking my phone messages. As we headed to Panera Bread for lunch, I noticed a voice mail from my husband, Martin, and I called him back. That's when he gave me the news that dramatically changed the course of our lives and the lives of those closest to us.

We're all just one phone call away from learning the results of a test or the news of an affair, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or a thousand other ways our hope can be shattered.

In that moment, we think life as we know it is over.

The truth is, life, as we've yet to know it, has just begun.



In the summer of 2005, Martin and I had been married a year. We lived rent free in Greenville, South Carolina, near a church where we were working for the summer. We'd just packed up our belongings and sold our house, intending to move to Savannah, Georgia, in the fall so Martin could attend Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). For years, Martin had been the campus director of a college

ministry where he led a Bible study and also did graphic design and web development work for Wofford College. I'd graduated from Bible college and had dabbled in music, ministry, and helping Martin with the Bible study—none of which paid well. We planned to get jobs in Savannah, and then once Martin was finished with school, we'd move back to Spartanburg, South Carolina, to be near our parents. The SCAD degree would help Martin get a well-paying job in the graphic design field, which would allow me to stay home and raise the kids we both wanted to have someday.

That was our plan for a perfect life.

The first detour came when Martin's friend John Roland called us from Atlanta. "Hey, I know this is crazy," John said to Martin, "but I have a job for Laura at my church if you guys are interested in moving to Atlanta."

John worked at Perimeter Church, located in the northern suburbs of Atlanta. The church was seeking a worship leader. In addition, John told us that SCAD had just opened an Atlanta campus. If we moved to Atlanta, Martin could continue school and I would have a job. My last job had been playing bass in a bluegrass band in a Mexican restaurant. In other words, I had no marketable skills, so a position at a church in Atlanta sounded much better than a waitressing job in Savannah.

Martin handed me the phone. "Tell me about the job," I said.

John described the duties, which included choosing music for the congregation, leading volunteers, and developing worshippers. But I had never done any of those things. Sure, I'd majored in music and played bass in a touring band that had performed at retreats and youth groups, but the only time I ever sang was under duress when our female singer was gone or ill. I didn't know a thing about leading worship.

"And the church is looking for somebody who can write worship songs," John continued.

*That's why John is calling me!*

In an effort to avoid paying performance fees for the music our touring band covered, everyone in the band was asked to write songs. I'd written a few, including one called "Indescribable." A year earlier, an executive from a record company called to ask if they could use my song on the CD of a worship leader from Texas—a guy named Chris Tomlin. I'd agreed, and Tomlin's label released "Indescribable" as a single. The song had just started getting a lot of radio play.

Other than my friends and family (and John), no one knew that the song had been written by the blonde girl who played bass at the Mexican restaurant on Thursdays. Until someone else called it a *worship* song, I didn't even think of it that way because of all of the five-syllable words in the chorus. Regardless of how the song was doing, neither songwriting nor playing bass in a bluegrass band qualified me to lead a congregation in singing.

"John, I've written a few songs, but when it comes to leading worship . . ." I said as I prepared to decline his offer.

"We offer a steady salary and health insurance," he added.

"Wait, you said health insurance?" I asked.

"Yes, and retirement benefits."

I wasn't a math major, but it didn't take me long to calculate the salary, benefits, and retirement numbers, and compare the total to what I was making at the Mexican restaurant—free burritos and all the chips and salsa I could eat.

"Like I was saying, when it comes to leading worship, I'm so glad you asked me. I'd love to be your church's worship leader," I said.

After praying about it with Martin, that's how the detour began. Martin would go to school in Atlanta, and I would start at Perimeter Church in the fall.



During June and July, Martin and I made several trips to Atlanta to look for a condo. My boss-to-be, Randy Schlichting, one of the

pastors at Perimeter, along with the other staff members, did everything they could to reach out and make us feel welcome. Though I didn't know what I was doing, I couldn't wait to get started.

But something else was going on, and I wasn't sure if I should mention it to anyone. As July turned to August and my September first start date loomed nearer, I realized I couldn't go through with the move. I closed the door to the church office where I was working and called Randy. Like every other time I called, he seemed delighted to hear from me.

"Are you excited about coming?" he asked.

"Um, I need to talk to you about something," I stammered, unsure of how much to say. "I don't know if it's the best thing for Martin and me to move to Atlanta and for me to take this job."

For several months, Martin had been experiencing some unusual symptoms. He'd been more forgetful than usual. Some days he wanted to do nothing but sleep followed by days where he wouldn't sleep at all. His heart would race, and he'd get sweaty and nauseous as if he was having a panic attack, but none of the doctors we saw could determine what was wrong with him. The symptoms had started in March and then subsided; but by August, they had returned. Though he'd seen four different doctors, we still hadn't discovered the cause of his symptoms.

I paused, searching for the right words. "There's something wrong with my husband. We don't know whether it is physical, emotional, or psychiatric. We just know that something is wrong with him—" That's all Randy let me get out before he interrupted me.

"Well, here's what I think you need to do. You need to get your belongings into a U-Haul and come straight to Atlanta. We'll take care of whatever is wrong with your husband once you get here. We're not having you move to Atlanta just so you can be a worship leader; we're having you move to Atlanta because you are part of Perimeter Church now. You and Martin come down, and we'll take care of your family."

“Okay, we’ll come,” I said, choking back my tears. I hung up and let them stream down my face as I slumped my head into the back of the chair. *It’s going to be okay.*

And it was.

For a while.



We moved to Atlanta in August so I could start my job and Martin could start school. Everything was great in our marriage, and Martin’s symptoms seemed to disappear with the move. I fell in love with my job, my coworkers, and the people of Perimeter Church. I started reading books on how to be a worship leader and spent a lot of time learning from the pastors at Perimeter, but there was still a lot I didn’t know. Perimeter was generous with their training and encouraged me to attend a couple of upcoming conferences in February.

That holiday season was the first Martin and I had spent away from our parents, but they came to Atlanta and we traveled to South Carolina as much as our schedules allowed. Once the holidays were over, Martin seemed to be perpetually exhausted. At first I thought he was just working too much. Not only was he going to school, but he also had a job in a coffee shop. *He’s just tired*, I thought.

But soon he started falling asleep during Bible study or, worse, during the worship services. I was embarrassed, and when we got home on Sunday afternoons, I’d let him know.

“I know you’re tired, but you can’t sleep while I’m leading the music, and especially not when my boss is preaching!”

He’d apologize and promise to do better.

Then it started happening at social events. We’d be at someone’s house, and he’d fall asleep while the host was telling a story. A few weeks later, he failed to show up for a party because he fell asleep. One night, we’d planned to meet for dinner, and he didn’t show. I tried

calling his cell phone. When he finally answered, he said, "I sat down on the couch for ten minutes, but I fell asleep."

I was frustrated. "It's been two hours. If you were going to take a nap, why didn't you set an alarm?"

"I wasn't planning to take a nap. I just fell asleep."

After that night, I turned down invitations because I got tired of making excuses for him.

When we first got married, we used to lay awake in bed at night, talk about our days, and pray for each other. Now, though, it seemed as soon as Martin was horizontal, he was out. I'd be telling him about my day, and next thing I knew, I would hear him snoring.

"Martin! You're not even listening to me!" I'd say, poking him.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Go ahead, tell me one more time."

Before I could get another word out, he'd be snoring again.

Martin had been a real go-getter with tons of energy. He'd been an athlete, an honor student, and had gone to college on an academic scholarship. I couldn't remember a time when he didn't work hard. But now he'd become someone I didn't recognize.

Occasionally, I'd tell a close friend or family member that Martin wasn't at all who he was before we got married. "He sleeps constantly," I'd complain. "I ask him to do one little thing, like unload the dishwasher, and the next morning he tells me he forgot. Last Sunday he fell asleep watching football!"

They'd laugh and say something like, "All men are like that."

But Martin never had been like other men.

His first semester at SCAD he'd made As in all of his classes. But now, he was struggling. After getting home from his coffee shop job around eight o'clock, he'd start his homework and then he'd fall asleep at the table. Soon I was staying up at night force-feeding him cup after cup of coffee as I helped him study for tests. But nothing I did could keep him awake. He started getting Fs on his quizzes and then on his tests. He wasn't only failing in his classes; he was also failing at life.

My dad and brother took him skiing. When they got back my dad said, “Martin fell asleep on the ski lift.”

Other weird things were happening. Martin was twenty-four years old, but he was going through another growth spurt. He grew an inch and a half in nine months.

We’d been to four physicians in South Carolina, and my dad was a doctor. None of them could find anything wrong. Where Martin had once been sharp and quick, now he was lethargic.

Some of our closest friends began noticing and offered their own opinions.

“He’s just lazy,” one man said.

“He needs some counseling,” one of the wives said.

One day, a church member sat me down and said, “I know you’ve only been married a short time, and no newlywed wants to hear this, but I think your husband might have a mental illness.”

Before we moved to Atlanta, I’d told a close friend or two about some of Martin’s earlier symptoms. They’d try to comfort me with stories of their own. “That sounds like my sister’s husband. He has schizophrenia!” Or, “I have a friend whose dad has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder!” I began to think perhaps Martin had a mental problem, and the thought scared me.

Perimeter Church is a large church with an amazing counseling department, so whether Martin needed help with his laziness, counseling, or something more serious, we agreed we needed to talk to someone. Martin knew things weren’t right, and he wasn’t happy about it. Both he and I became concerned that he may be depressed.

Psychologist Clay Coffee spent an hour and a half asking Martin questions while I readied myself for the worst. But Clay didn’t think Martin suffered from a mental illness.

“I think it’s simple,” Clay said. “You’re depressed because you can’t stay awake and you’re having trouble remembering things. I know you’re expecting me to tell you it’s something mental, but it

sounds like something physical. I think you need to see a medical doctor.”

On one hand, we were relieved Clay didn't think it was something worse. On the other hand, we had both hoped antidepressants would fix whatever needed fixing with Martin.

He'd already seen four doctors and now a counselor, and none of them could find anything wrong. Could it be this was just who Martin was?

Before Martin and I got engaged, a spiritual mentor wisely told me, “If you tell Martin you love him and that you want to spend the rest of your life with him, you have to be prepared to see it through even if the fluffy feelings disappear, because marriage isn't just about fluffy feelings.” Somehow I thought it would take three to five years for that to happen, not twelve to eighteen months, but I'd made a commitment. I would still love and serve my husband even if the fluffy feelings were gone.

I began praying more and having conversations with God. *I get it, God. He's the man I married, and I'm in it for the long haul. But boy, is he different than I thought he was when we first married. I can still see glimpses of the man I loved back then, and I am hanging on to those. We're going to press on through this, but God, you've got to help me. Something has to change!*



Martin's sleepiness continued into February 2006. He started missing classes because he overslept. I grew concerned because I was scheduled to attend two worship conferences that month. The first was in North Carolina, where I was asked to lead worship. The second was in St. Louis, where I would learn how to lead worship. (The irony of the conference order wasn't lost on me.)

I wasn't sure if I should attend either conference. I was worried about leaving Martin home alone. *How will he get up in time for class*

*by himself? How will he get his homework done?* I couldn't imagine what would happen when I wasn't there.

But Martin encouraged me to go. "I'll be fine."

While in North Carolina at the first conference, I called him between sessions. He sounded like he'd just woken up. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm just resting."

In the background, I could hear *ding, ding, ding*. It didn't take a professional musician to know that was the sound the car made when someone opened the door and left the key in the ignition.

"Were you sleeping in the car?" I asked.

"Yeah, I had some trouble staying awake on my way home."

"What do you mean you had trouble staying awake?"

"I fell asleep and hit a guardrail. I'm okay, but the car is a little scratched. So when I got home, I parked the car and took a nap."

I couldn't believe what he was telling me. As soon as we hung up, I called his friend John Roland, who was now my coworker and our next-door neighbor. I told John what Martin had done. "You've got to take the keys away from him," I said. "He can't drive anymore, and I think he should stay home from class until I get back to Atlanta."

When I got home, I could see how tired Martin was. I was also convinced I finally knew what his problem was—narcolepsy. I made a mental note to schedule an appointment with a doctor when I got home from my upcoming trip to St. Louis.

The next morning when the alarm went off, Martin rolled over and asked me a really odd question. "Are we going to the airport today?"

"No. Why would we go to the airport?"

"Okay."

It was such a strange question that alarm bells went off in my head.

"Why don't you go fix us some coffee, Martin? I'll be down in a second," I said.

As soon as Martin left our bedroom, I reached for the phone and then slithered down my side of the bed until I was sitting on the floor. I called my boss.

“Martin just asked if we were going to the airport today. Something is really wrong,” I whispered. “I’m going to take the day off and take him to the doctor.”

That afternoon, Martin and I met with a general practitioner who was highly recommended by a friend. The doctor ran a lot of tests that day and then had us come back for the results later.

On the second visit she said, “For the most part everything looks good, but your hormone levels are low.” She mentioned a number of potential causes, including Martin’s thyroid and something to do with a testicle.

“It’s not that!” Martin said defensively.

“I’m not saying it is,” she chuckled. “In fact, I think everything points to the pituitary gland. I’d like to get a CT scan and an MRI of your pituitary to see if there is anything going on there.”

Relieved they weren’t investigating more private parts, we scheduled the tests for the following Tuesday. I would be in St. Louis at the conference, but John agreed that Martin could stay with him and he would drive Martin to get his scans.

I attended the conference with Jeff Wreyford and Eric Gilbert, two of my coworkers. I’d looked forward to this conference since I’d first signed up. I’d only been at the church for six months, and I still had a lot to learn about leading worship.

The first presenter was Pastor Scotty Smith from Nashville. He promised the entire first session would be on worship—not picking songs, not choosing music styles, not leading or directing. We’d focus solely on what it meant for us to worship, and to worship regardless of our circumstances.

During the session, he reminded us that our first ministry was not to our churches but to our families. “Don’t let the job fool you. Your number one ministry will always be your family. These

churches will take your life if you let them, but your greatest serving opportunity isn't in the church; it's in your home."

*That's great, I thought, but it really doesn't apply to me. Martin and I don't have kids, and once we do, I'll stay at home with them.* I was hopeful the afternoon sessions would contain more practical teaching.

My coworkers and I headed to the parking lot to get lunch. I got into the backseat of the rental car, and that's when I noticed there was a voice mail on my phone from Martin, asking me to call him as soon as possible. I called his cell. "What's going on?"

"Hey, I've got some news. I have a brain tumor."

"What?"

"Yeah, the doctor said the scans show I have a brain tumor. It's pressing against my pituitary gland, which is why my hormones have been messed up. That's why I've been so sleepy. I have no adrenaline being released."

He sounded nonchalant, almost as if it was a relief to know it was a brain tumor. I was shaken. I couldn't concentrate on what he was saying. I just kept hearing *brain tumor* over and over in my head. I need to process what was happening, but my mind was racing.

"Hey, can you guys turn down the radio?" I asked Jeff and Eric. We were pulling into the parking lot and I needed a moment to get hold of my thoughts.

"Um, Martin, let me call you back in a second. We just pulled into Panera."

"What's up?" Jeff asked, concerned.

"Martin has a brain tumor." My voice shook as I spoke. "You guys go in. I'll call him back and then I'll come in when I'm done."

"Are you okay?" Eric asked.

I started to cry.

"What can we do?" Jeff wanted to know.

"I'm not sure yet. Let me just call him back."

"We'll wait for you," Jeff said as he opened his door.

“And we’ll be praying,” Eric added.

The numbers on my phone were blurred as I called Martin again. “Are you okay?” I asked him, trying to control the shakiness in my voice.

“Yeah. They said I needed to set up an appointment with a neurosurgeon to talk about having it removed. I wanted to wait until you got back. I thought you might want to go with me.”

Finding out that Martin had a brain tumor flooded my heart with compassion and love for him. I felt stupid for being angry and embarrassed by his behavior when the whole time he had been suffering from a brain tumor.

“Martin, I am so sorry,” I said, letting the tears flow.

Although it was a scary, huge diagnosis and I was very worried, I also felt a sense of relief. I’d been praying for something to change. Martin had been praying to figure out what was wrong; he thought he was losing his mind. Finally we had an answer. Though it wasn’t a *good* answer, at least it gave us hope that it could be fixed. I could hear the relief and hope in Martin’s voice as we cried together on the phone.

“When will you be home?” Martin asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ll call Randy and then I’ll call you back.”

I hung up and slumped back into the seat, trying to breathe deeply. I wanted to slow down my tears and racing heart before I called my boss. After a good cry and a few deep breaths, I called Randy—my boss and the pastor who had encouraged us to move to Atlanta and had promised the church would take care of us. He had no idea what he was getting into when he made that promise.

“Martin has a brain tumor—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Randy took charge. “Okay, we’ll get you home on the first flight we can and have someone meet you at the airport.”

I called Martin back and we talked briefly. His calm acceptance of the diagnosis encouraged me. He was determined to take that sucker out so we could get on with our lives. We’d already wasted a year not

knowing what was wrong, and now it was time for action. Our plan was to fix it and move on.

Eric and Jeff drove me to the hotel where the three of us threw my things into a suitcase and raced to the airport. I was in a daze as I made it through security and walked to my gate. I arrived with ninety minutes to spare.

*I should call Mom and Dad, I thought, reaching for my phone. But it wasn't in my pocket. In my purse? I swallowed hard, realizing I'd left it in the rental car. It was the worst time ever for me to be left alone without my phone. My mind was spinning. There were so many people to tell, and I wanted to talk to Martin. But in that moment, there was someone even more important I needed to talk to. God, where are you in all of this? Couldn't you have helped the doctors find the tumor earlier? Why did Martin and I have to go through all this before finally getting a diagnosis?*

Mixed in with the sadness, relief, and fear, I felt angry that it had taken a year for the doctors to find the tumor. And I was tempted to be angry with God, who could have directed them to the proper diagnosis. But then I had another thought.

*Am I going to let my circumstances determine my view of God, or am I going to let God determine how I view my circumstances?*

It was a bigger question than I realized at the time. But I answered it in prayer. *God, I want you.* Though I had accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior years earlier, as I sat in the faux leather seats in the busy airport and looked out at the tarmac, I knew Martin and I were about to embark on a new journey. As soon as the plane landed in Atlanta, everything would be different. I would hit the ground running—searching for answers, the best doctor, and the cure to whatever had caused the tumor in the first place. But in that airport, at that moment, I wanted God to know once again that he came first and that I was grateful for so many things.

*Thank you for hearing my prayer. I prayed for a change, and you have given it to us. Thank you, God, for a diagnosis. For this diagnosis.*

An operable brain tumor seemed much better than having to endure a lifetime of the unknowns of a mental illness.

*Thank you that there is a tumor the doctors can go in and remove.*

Yes, it was scary, and it was certainly a detour on the life plan we had laid out, but I was confident we quickly would return to our normal life. Martin would be a semester or two behind in school, but he'd still graduate and get a job in graphic design. In a few years, we'd move closer to my parents' home in Spartanburg. I'd quit my job and be a stay-at-home mom just like my mom. In the future, the brain tumor would be a great story to tell of how God brought us through it all, and we would all live happily ever after.

I couldn't have been more naive.