

I Give Up

ALSO BY LAURA STORY

*When God Doesn't Fix It: Lessons You Never
Wanted to Learn, Truths You Can't Live Without*

What If Your Blessings Come Through Raindrops?

I Give Up

THE SECRET JOY OF A
SURRENDERED LIFE

LAURA STORY

with Leigh McLeroy



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I Give Up

I belong, I belong
To the maker of earth and seas
Who's as rich as a King
Yet so gentle and kind towards me

I am not cared for by a servant hired
But a Shepherd who would leave the ninety-nine

So when I give up, I gain
When I let go of having my own way
When I learn to see my surrender as a brand-new start
To know the fullness of my Father's heart

I will rest, I will rest
Not in worldly security
Not in what I may try to control that's controlling me
What if faith is simpler than I've made it be
Just a simple trusting in your love for me

So here's my life to take,
Though you've heard this prayer a thousand other days
Make this moment more than just empty words I say
Let it be a start
To know the fullness of my Father's heart¹

Contents

Part One: Surrender . . . Who Me?

ONE: A Life Beyond Control	3
TWO: Dear God: Let's Be Co-Rulers. Love, Me	21

Part Two: Who Do I Surrender To?

THREE: A Great, Good, Trustworthy God	35
FOUR: A God Who Knows	47
FIVE: A God Who Loves Me	63
SIX: A God Who Keeps His Promises	77

Part Three: How Do I Surrender?

SEVEN: Surrender by Letting Go	97
EIGHT: Surrender by Choosing to Believe	109
NINE: Surrender by Acting "As If"	125

Part Four: What Happens When I Surrender?

TEN: My Choices Impact Others	143
ELEVEN: When I Surrender, Relationships Can Heal and Thrive	157

Contents

TWELVE: When I Surrender, Reconciliation Is Possible	175
THIRTEEN: When I Surrender, I Leave a Legacy	191
FOURTEEN: When I Surrender, I Worship	207
Acknowledgments	221
Notes	223
About the Author	227

PART ONE

Surrender... Who Me?

ONE

A Life Beyond Control

A dozen or so years ago, when Martin and I were newlyweds, we survived what we imagined to be the biggest trial we'd ever face. Martin was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

We had just moved to Atlanta from South Carolina and had only been married a short time. I was beginning a job with Perimeter Church as a worship leader, and Martin was enrolled in a great master's program in design.

Looking back, I realize we believed our time in Atlanta would be short. Once Martin graduated with his master's degree, we'd move back to South Carolina to be close to our families, then start a family of our own. Even if we didn't say so or put it down on paper, we had an X-marks-the-spot plan for our lives and believed God would get us there in the not too distant future.

For a while things seemed to be going very well. We

I Give Up

were adjusting to our new city and our new roles, making new friends and learning new skills. Then Martin began to have trouble staying awake. He even fell asleep once while he was driving, and again on a ski lift! His studies became too much for him to keep up with. My husband is smart—a far better student than I *ever* was. He was failing classes he normally would have aced. He could hardly stay awake to study and had little energy for even routine stuff. Other times his behavior just seemed odd. He'd ask me strange questions or forget really ordinary things, like whether or not we'd just unloaded the dishwasher.

We sought—and got—plenty of well-meaning advice: *Your husband needs counseling. He's just distracted—or lazy. Have you considered that it might be depression or some other form of mental illness?* We'd considered a lot of things. But we had zero answers. When we did meet together with a counselor, he told us that he didn't believe Martin's problem was related to any sort of mental illness. He thought it might be something physical instead.

So we made an appointment with a kind general practitioner recommended by a friend. She examined Martin and ran a battery of tests, but those were inconclusive. She recommended more testing and mentioned something about Martin's thyroid or his pituitary gland. We agreed to the procedures—a CT scan and an MRI—to see if those might point to something definitive.

I was out of town attending a worship conference with my Perimeter coworkers when the results came. The news was not good. Hearing your husband has a brain tumor is devastating. Seeing him struggle to do ordinary things is

A Life Beyond Control

terrifying. The diagnosis was not what we had hoped for, but at least we knew for certain what was wrong.

I was frightened; I won't lie. But I pretty quickly transitioned into get-it-done mode. *We'll get through this. Martin will have the surgery he needs to remove the tumor, and then we'll get on with our lives, just like before.*

Nothing could have prepared Martin and me for what was in store for us.

After a successful surgery to remove the tumor pressing on his pituitary, Martin was readmitted to the hospital with complications that led to a second, emergency operation. That one left him in critical condition, heavily sedated for days, and he emerged with some challenging disabilities that we still work around today. It left both of us uncertain about the future we'd imagined and trying like crazy to adjust to a new normal that didn't feel normal *at all*.

My talented, hard-working husband wasn't going to be a full-time graphic designer (the career he was preparing for when the tumor was first discovered). And I wasn't going to be a stay-at-home mom like so many women in my family had been—or even a mom and a part-time songwriter/musician. Our plans changed drastically, almost overnight. We surrendered our vision of what our lives would be like for a version that was often created day by day on the fly.

There was no road map for the journey we were on. No mentor couple who could assure us they'd faced the very same challenges and come through them stronger than before—or at least come through them. This was uncharted territory, and we both knew it.

Before Martin's ordeal we'd always assumed we'd have

I Give Up

kids and looked forward to the day when we would be parents. But suddenly we weren't so sure anymore. How could we have a family when there were times we, ourselves, needed help just to get through an ordinary day?

I know we're not the only ones who've struggled with the decision about whether to have children. But our non-traditional lifestyle and Martin's lingering disability had us seriously questioning whether we were equipped for parenthood. We went back and forth, we prayed, and we spent hours talking it through with our wisest friends and advisors.

When I finally did become pregnant with Josie, our oldest, it seemed like the decision was made for us. We were going to be a family of at least three—and, somehow, we'd figure out the parenting logistics as we went. (Turns out there are no bestselling how-to books for artist-moms with crazy schedules and dads with short-term memory challenges either.)

Thankfully, Josie was the sweetest, most easygoing and resilient baby ever. By the time she turned two, she'd traveled with me to forty-eight states. She could sleep on a tour bus like a champ and buzz through sound checks with me like they were playdates with a handful of grown-ups she'd never met. At home, Martin and I were getting more comfortable with our day-to-day roles as partners and as parents. It didn't always look Pinterest-worthy, but with the help of our community, most days it was working.

I'd almost begun to feel like we had things under control again . . . until we learned I was pregnant with twins! We had hoped Josie would not be an only child. But we might have been thinking two was our limit. At least until an ultrasound

A Life Beyond Control

revealed we would soon be outnumbered, three babies to two adults. With the arrival of Ben and Griffin, our home quickly became decorated with LEGOs, board books, stray socks, and half-eaten snacks. (You know the look, right?)

As crazy as it sounds with all we had going on, I think maybe we were starting to feel “in charge” again—at least a little. I was still working on the church staff at Perimeter, traveling to concerts, and writing and recording with three kids in tow. I even started working part-time on a doctorate in worship. Martin was coaching baseball and was active in our community, and together—with help—we were holding down the fort at home.

The very real threats to life and health that were once so pronounced, so terrifying, seemed to recede in the rearview mirror a bit. I may have even taken a deep breath and felt a sense of relief that it was all getting easier, somehow. (Or at least I was getting used to it!)

The boys were about to turn three when we learned we would be parents again. Just shy of forty, I was pregnant with baby number four—when only a few short years ago we weren’t sure we’d ever be parents at all! I’ll be honest: there were lots of things I’d envisioned doing for my fortieth birthday (a trip to Paris, maybe?), but having a baby was not exactly on our radar. Because of my age (What—you mean forty *isn’t* the new twenty?) this was considered a high-risk pregnancy, and I had all the recommended screenings the doctor ordered. Except for a lot of fatigue, it was a dream pregnancy, and every regularly scheduled ultrasound ended with an enthusiastic thumbs-up and a “see you next time.”

Until one didn’t.

I Give Up



My thirty-seven-week ultrasound changed everything.

As I lay on the table and watched the murky screen, the ultrasound tech moved the wand across my belly to get a clearer picture of the little boy we were expecting soon.

His face came into view. And something was different. I looked more closely.

“What’s that shadow?” I asked. “Do you see that?”

The tech was calm, but she was 100 percent focused on the same thing I was seeing. With a few clicks she captured the image and quickly called in the doctor.

Within minutes, I learned that our little boy would be born with cleft lip and cleft palate. The shadow we saw on his face told the story. In the last trimester of my third pregnancy with our fourth child, everything I knew about birth and caring for a newborn was being challenged. Any skill at mothering I’d managed to achieve up to that point did not include caring for a child with special needs.

I was stunned. I never saw it coming.

I drove to the appointment alone, but I was already thinking of how I would tell Martin and how we would tell our children. No part of me was thinking that I knew how to do this.

After the shock wore off, I felt a sadness begin to swallow up my dreams of the beautiful, flawless baby boy we expected, and I felt responsible too. *What could I have done to prevent this? What could I do now to lessen the impact of it?*

By God’s grace, the ultrasound tech that day was the

A Life Beyond Control

same one I'd seen multiple times when I'd been pregnant with the twins. "Remember those perfectly healthy twin boys you had at thirty-eight weeks—the ones that didn't spend a day in the NICU?" she asked. "You didn't do or not do anything to cause that—and you didn't do or not do anything to make this happen either."

As the team dissipated, it was just the nurse practitioner and myself left in the room. I asked the most logical question, "So now what?"

"You grieve this," she answered simply.

Seriously? I was thinking of something tangible I could do—anything to help the situation. But my job wasn't to *do* anything. Instead, it was to surrender my expectations for the pregnancy and delivery we'd planned and for the perfectly healthy son we'd imagined bringing home. It was to give those up for something I could hardly even begin to wrap my brain around.

My one job now was to surrender. There was nothing else to do.

The homework I received that day was to readjust my expectations and relinquish my idea of a perfect baby—not yet knowing the extent of our son's challenges or how we would cope with what was ahead.

To make it even worse, I felt guilty for my heartbreak over the news. After all, other babies were stillborn, or had cancer, or had deformities that surgery couldn't fix. I would be handed a son with an imperfect face, yes. But he would be otherwise healthy, and the defect could be surgically repaired. Shouldn't I just get over it and deal? Even though it came like a bolt out of the blue, this wasn't the *worst* news

I Give Up

I could have gotten, right? And I'm a Christian. A pretty public one at that. Don't Christians trust God in every situation and give him glory no matter what?

They do. But they hurt too.

There was a lot we couldn't know for certain until our child was born. The doctors couldn't be sure of the extent of the baby's cleft lip and palate. We were told there might even be some involvement with his lungs and heart, as well. Or not. At the very least, we were looking at a more complicated delivery, feeding difficulties, and surgery for our baby at nine to ten weeks old—none of which were on my agenda until that day.

Martin's diagnosis, surgery, and resulting disability had required some serious surrender. An extended period of infertility did too. And when our three children arrived within three years' time, we surrendered any notion we might have had about getting along without the help of our extended community day to day. But this . . . this was a challenge of a different kind.

When I became pregnant with Josie, I waited a long time before decorating her nursery. I was thinking how devastating it would be if something went wrong. Now I *knew* something would be wrong, and I was powerless to change it. What needed to change most was *me*.

When I got home that day and told Martin, we shed some tears together. Then two things happened. First, we changed our son's name. I can't explain it, but my preferred name, Noah, just didn't seem right for him now. Martin had liked Timothy all along, and in that moment, we decided that his name was Timothy William (after our good friend

A Life Beyond Control

and pastor, Bill). The other thing that happened was my husband stepped into the moment and became my comforter. I'm a strong person and don't often come unraveled, so the opportunities for him to do that day to day are kind of limited. But on that day, I was undone, and Martin stepped in to put his hand on me and tell me the truth we both needed to hear and believe: "It's going to be okay. No matter what."

Individually and together, we talked to our pastor friend Bill (who really should be on the payroll—he's helped us so much through the years!), and we both began to feel more hopeful and encouraged. I remembered Bill saying to me about another, earlier challenge, "I think in this season of life you need to wait on the Lord."

"Yes! That's it! I need to wait on God. Great! What steps do I take to do that?"

"You're not getting me, Laura," Bill had said. "Wait is wait. There are no steps. You just surrender. And then you sit tight."

This time, Bill simply loved us and said, "I don't know what to say. I hurt for you both." And that was enough, in the moment. But I also heard God say, *Give me this, Laura. And wait on me. I've got you.*

Ah, that surrender thing again. Hadn't I learned it yet?



I can't say that the weeks between the diagnosis and Timothy's arrival were easy. They weren't. While I made a conscious decision to trust God and surrender my expectations to him, I also did what anyone in similar circumstances

I Give Up

would do: I searched the internet for information about cleft lip and palate and clicked through picture after picture of babies born with it. Let me tell you, friend, my heart sank. That little exercise did nothing to decrease my anxiety.

I don't recommend doing this or the other fruitless thing I did at first: imagining all the picture-perfect new baby photos of friends on social media or the "March babies" bulletin board in our church's nursery. It's just not helpful—at all—to meditate on what we fear or dread.

Instead, God tells us to consider him, to immerse ourselves in his Word, and to meditate on his truth.

I remembered a lesson from Psalm 1 I'd shared not too long ago with some new moms in our church, and now it really seemed perfect for me. It begins like this:

Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers. (Ps. 1:1–3 NIV)

It's not wrong, I had told them, to want to be favored, fortunate, blessed. But it *is* wrong to expect the world to deliver those things to us. Instead, our blessedness or happiness comes from considering what God says about himself

A Life Beyond Control

and this world. Meditating on this makes us strong, like fruit-bearing trees planted by fresh streams.

When we're rooted in God and in his Word, we're positioning ourselves for a blessed life, regardless of our circumstances. And what is it, exactly, that rooted trees "do"? Nothing! They simply stay put, right where they are, their deep roots soaking in all that's needed for a good and fruitful life.

"You and I just need to remain rooted in God," I told them. "None of us is planted here by chance. No matter what, our assignment is to remain in him, to receive what we need from him, to be still and trust him. He's going to do the rest."

The biggest problem with being a teacher is that sometimes you have to swallow your own lessons whole, like I had to swallow that one. I absolutely believed it when I'd said it to them. No doubt about it. How could I believe it any less now, when it applied so specifically to me?

Before this last pregnancy, I'd started the practice of getting up very early each morning and sitting quietly on the sofa with my Bible and a cup of coffee, drinking in the words I knew I needed more than anything—even more than a few minutes of extra sleep.

Honestly, this practice probably began less out of deep, spiritual commitment than from a desperate desire not to do bodily harm to my children before the day was done! My record in keeping this appointment has not been perfect by any means. I miss plenty of mornings. But over time my kids have gotten used to seeing me there, alone and quiet. I figure if they ever ask, I'll just say, "Mommy needs time with Jesus or she will implode." Because Mommy does!

I Give Up

Now, waiting for Timothy's arrival, I needed that time more than ever. Because the challenges don't stop coming, even when you've done this life of faith thing for a long time. They bombard you, like C. S. Lewis said, "the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day."¹

I need that "stronger, quieter life" like I need air. I tend to think of every hardship or challenge as a complication in my "normal," chilled-out state. But these things aren't complications, really. They're just *content*. They're normal life, actually. We live in a world broken by sin. Bad things happen. They even happen to "good" people, and they always will. But for those of us who follow Jesus, our challenges and heartbreaks are not the last word. The world doesn't offer that. Only Jesus does.

Every dark place on the landscape of our lives is a place where we can realistically hope to see God's goodness and glory break through. That's just how he rolls.

In the past, Martin and I have both had a tendency to see his disability as an inconvenience rather than as a tool in God's hand—a way for his glory to be displayed. But God has kept on doing good things we could never have planned or realized through this unique, unwanted circumstance.

We have more compassionate, empathetic children, I'm sure, than we might have otherwise had. We've had to slow down at times and take life at a less accelerated pace, and

A Life Beyond Control

that has allowed us to see and enjoy things we might have otherwise missed. We've had to rely on others to help us through logistical challenges because Martin can't drive. But even that complicating circumstance has allowed us to build true friendships and invest more in the lives of others here in our Atlanta community. We're not waiting to go somewhere else now. We're home.

I'm not really much of a *why* person. I've discovered that knowing why a thing happens or doesn't happen doesn't change much. But since the Monday afternoon of that ultrasound and the hard news about our baby boy, I've become more focused than ever on *what* and *who*.

What do I know is true? I am extravagantly loved. And I am not in control. Not even a little. Who is in control? God is. He has my good in mind, and he is 100 percent ready to display his glory in and through my weakness. My only job is to trust him. To surrender.



When Martin and I told our kids about baby Timothy's face, we were a little apprehensive about how they'd take the news. But we shouldn't have been. The boys are young, sure, but we anticipated at least a few questions.

"We need to tell you something about the new baby," we began. "His face is going to look different than other babies' faces. He's going to have a funny lip, and some people might think it looks strange or scary. You might even think so too."

They thought about this for a second. "Okay," they said. "Can we go play now?" And that, as they say, was that.

I Give Up

Josie understood a little more; she did have a question. “The crack in his lip, is it hurting him?”

I could have died with love for her when she asked that. Her care for her baby brother was that sweet.

“No,” I said. “It doesn’t hurt him. It may make it hard for him to eat, and he’ll have to have an operation to fix it, but he won’t be hurt.” Then I went on, just to be sure she understood: “His face is going to look really different from other babies’ faces. Some people may not understand or might look at him funny, but to us he’ll look normal.”

Then she looked me in the eye and said, “But we’re gonna love him anyway because he’s *family*.”

Oh, yes, baby girl. Yes, we are.



The Sunday before Timothy’s scheduled arrival, our family stopped for lunch at a little Mexican restaurant—one we’d never been to before. We were one of three families there, but the place was so small it seemed full. A woman who’d been to Perimeter that same morning and heard our pastor’s announcement that I was giving birth the next day—as if it wasn’t already obvious I was about to pop!—walked up to me. She asked where I was having the baby, and when I told her, she said she’d just become the head nurse for their labor and delivery unit—I mean the head cheese over all of it. (You just can’t make this stuff up. God knows everybody, right?)

She assured me she would be there the next day and walk me through anything I might need help with (short of having the baby, of course), and she totally did. That little

A Life Beyond Control

“coincidence” was a well-timed and tender reminder that God was already out ahead of me, paving the way and meeting our family’s needs. It’s one thing to believe he has “angels” at their post, ready to work on our behalf. It’s another thing altogether to meet one over a plate of enchiladas.

As great as I felt about that little reminder of God’s love and provision, the next morning did not exactly go as planned. (Welcome to life in the Elvington household!)

Instead of waiting to go into labor, I’d scheduled an induction, mostly so that we’d have childcare nailed down for Josie, Ben, and Griffin. But when we arrived at the hospital at our appointed time of 1:00 p.m. and were admitted into a room, the room’s monitoring system wasn’t working properly and didn’t get fixed until early evening. So the birth we’d planned for that day didn’t actually happen until the next morning.

When I’d been asked to confirm my birth plan, I kept my wishes short, sweet, and very direct: “I’d like this baby out of me, and I’d like to not feel it *at all*.” Well, at least one of those two things happened. The epidural I got apparently didn’t work, and let’s just say I got to feel an enormous amount of the beauty of childbirth.

Then one more thing happened that I didn’t expect: when Timothy was born, I looked down at my precious nine-pound, eight-ounce son with his separated lip, and I saw a perfect, angelic face. I mean, I thought he was just about the sweetest thing I’d ever seen! Any anxiety I’d had about what I would think or feel when I laid eyes on him disappeared in an instant. Any worry over whether or not I would have trouble bonding with him vanished. In that moment I just saw . . . perfection.

I Give Up

Almost as soon as I held him for the first time he was whisked away, while Martin and my parents looked on. After a few seconds I heard my mom say, “Praise God!”

“His chart says cleft lip and cleft palate,” said the nurse, “but there’s no break in his palate.” Everything beyond his lip was intact and as it should be. The complications were far less severe than what we’d been told to expect—a very sweet surprise, indeed.

Even with that great news, we were still on an enormous learning curve with Timothy. Feeding him was a challenge from day one; even though he might be sucking, there was no guarantee he was getting the milk he needed. The first few days of his life he lost weight (thank goodness for those healthy nine pounds and eight ounces he started with!) at a rate that seemed a little alarming, at least to his mom. But pretty quickly we met with a whole fantastic team of craniofacial experts who would become like family over the next few months. A surgeon, nurse, nutritionist, speech pathologist, and occupational therapist described what our son would experience over the next several weeks, and we simply tried to take it all in, moving forward a day at a time.

Through it all, we felt their support and the support of our church and community. Meals appeared miraculously at our door. Errands were run. The kids were bathed and fed, even when my hands were full. The boys quickly invented their own expression of solidarity with their new baby brother: Timothy had a small piece of surgical tape he had to wear over his lip, and for days Griffin and Ben found tape and pressed it over their own top lips too. (Good grief. What’s not great about being three?)

A Life Beyond Control

Once again, our plans were upended for a different kind of “normal”: the peaceful maternity leave I’d first imagined instead became a crazy hopscotch of doctors’ appointments and daily challenges with Timothy’s weight and feeding. But when my plans are blown to pieces, I begin to see *his* plans unfold, and he promises that they are good: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (Jer. 29:11 NIV).

Keep telling me, Lord. I’ll get it eventually. I promise.



I understand that surrender may seem all but forced when the obstacles we face are super-sized. (No doubt our little family has experienced more than a few of those.) For instance, you’d have to be crazy to believe you’re in charge of brain tumors or infertility or a baby born with an obvious birth defect. Most people would say those kinds of things—and plenty more—are simply beyond our control.

But what about when the challenges seem more, I don’t know, ordinary? Is complete, open-handed surrender still the secret to a blessed life? Is it still the door that opens into God’s presence, where the psalmist insisted there is “fullness of joy” and “pleasures forever” (Ps. 16:11 NASB)?

I believe it is.

Not just in the losses but even in the victories, surrender is the secret to a life of joy. Before I knew how true they were (and believe me, I’m still learning!), I wrote and sang these words:

I Give Up

The sweetest sound, the highest praise,
Is the letting go of this life You gave.
Our greatest prayer, an act of faith,
Is an open hand; Lord have Your way . . .
Jesus, I surrender all—every victory and loss
Take it all, take it all, 'till all I have is open hands.²

Being a woman who is absolutely in control of her own life is not a goal I need to aspire to. That kind of woman might look appealing on TV—but I don't believe that's possible. Not really. In my best moments, I want to surrender my life to the one who loves and cares for me. Who knows and does what is best and brings himself glory in the process. Because he deserves it.

And I'm thinking you might want that too.

WHITE FLAG PRAYER #1

God, I give up. I surrender now my need for control and ask you to begin a work in my life.
Amen.