

LAURA STORY *OPEN HANDS*

Throughout the Bible, there are countless stories of ordinary people whole-heartedly attempting to live a life fully surrendered to God's unique calling on their lives. More than once, God asks people of faith to relinquish control and simply trust Him. These days, singer/songwriter Laura Story is discovering the beauty found in letting go. It's this posture of surrender that she's striving for on her fifth studio album, *Open Hands* (Fair Trade Services).

"We have this picture all the way through the Scriptures of all these great leaders in this process of surrendering everything. What the Lord is asking them is not, 'You need to hold on tighter. You need to manage this better.' What the Lord asks us is to surrender," she offers, "It's about learning to live with open hands, learning to live life in this constant state of saying, 'Lord, my life is Yours. My time is Yours. My resources are Yours. All of this is Yours. Do what You will.'"

Story has built a life—and a career—around submission to her calling. She's led worship at Atlanta's Perimeter Church for the past 12 years. In addition to penning songs recorded by artists like Chris Tomlin, Story has found success as a recording artist in her own right. Since the release of her solo debut in 2008, Story has amassed a GRAMMY® Award, a Billboard Music Award, multiple GMA Dove Awards and an RIAA Gold certification for her massive No. 1 hit "Blessings." In addition, she's also the author of two books, including the latest "When God Doesn't Fix It - Lessons You Never Wanted to Learn, Truths You Can't Live Without."

Open Hands is the follow-up to 2013's critically-acclaimed *God of Every Story*, and in the years that have passed since her last release, Story has given birth to twins, making their brood a family of five. Now, as a mom to three kids—Josie, Benjamin and Griffin—the posture of "open hands" feels more necessary than ever before as she juggles ministry and motherhood.

"We never get to a point where we can do life apart from complete and total daily dependence on Jesus," Story admits. "The irony is the less control we have, the more peace we have and the more, I would even say, success and joy we find. It's a contrary picture to what the world tells us, but it's gaining through letting go."

Open Hands' fresh collection of originals blends Story's signature congregational worship with intimate moments. "I wanted to make an album so that each song I write would be just that seed of hope or that lifeline that someone listens to during that tough moment and thinks, 'I'm going to choose to trust God, even during this,'" Story shares. "I pray that God would speak through me in the midst of the music."

A parade of A-list songwriters, including Matt Redman, Matt Maher, Mia Fieldes, Hank Bentley, Sarah Hart and Seth Mosley, among others, pepper the album's 11 tracks. Through writing sessions both alone and with others, Story began to gradually see this common thread of surrender emerge.

"Rather than picking a theme and writing around it, a lot of times, it takes me writing to be able to step back and see what the themes are, not just of the record but of my life," she says of her creative process. "It was neat to step back and see that 'open hands' is a theme that ended up presenting itself rather than me choosing it."

The title track—already a chart-topper prior to the album's release—features guest vocals from Third Day's Mac Powell, a fellow Atlanta-native and Story's longtime friend. "You Came Running" borrows imagery from the biblical narrative of the Prodigal Son. In true Story fashion, several selections ("Awake

My Soul (1000 Tongues),” “For The Love of My King”) reimagine timeless hymns, which she refreshes with an original chorus.

“I’m pretty sure that the theology that I learned as a kid was from old hymns. It’s amazing, even now as an adult, how those hymns come back and really provide that sturdy foundation for life. It reminds me of how important it is for me to teach my kids those old hymns,” Story reflects, adding, “As long as I am singing, I will be singing hymns.”

Poignant piano ballad “Give You Faith” finds the singer pondering the legacy she wants to leave her children. “The song is about releasing your kids into the hands of God,” she explains. “The most important thing that we could possibly give our children is to not just tell them about the faith that we have but to live out that faith as a family. Sometimes that means not giving them everything they want but showing them that the most important thing in my life isn’t even them—it’s actually my faith in Jesus Christ—and just point them to Jesus.”

To that end, Story readily admits motherhood has impacted her songwriting on all levels. Thinking specifically about her daughter, she says, “I’ve realized that these songs form people’s theology, and they affect how this little girl is going to think about herself in the future. They might affect decisions that she makes in the future because of what she believes about God and what she believes about His Word. I’ve changed as a songwriter with kids.”

Reflecting on the world her kids are growing up in, Story wrote the album’s sparse closer, “Grace Abounds,” after weeks of turning on the television only to continue to watch stories of terror attacks, extreme injustice and racial tension make headlines day after day. “It’s easy to lose heart, and the song is about just acknowledging the brokenness. First of all, we can’t just pretend like it doesn’t exist,” she advises. “When it seemingly doesn’t make sense, I’m choosing to believe that God’s grace is enough. God’s grace is enough for any social injustice. God’s grace is enough for any loss that we go through. God’s grace is enough for any loneliness that we experience, for any relational strain and for any relational rejection.

“When it feels like hope can’t be found, when we don’t even know how we’re going to put one foot in front of the other,” she continues, “Scripture teaches us that’s when grace abounds.”

Story isn’t afraid to write about grace at work in the middle of unexpected, unexplainable situations. She can only write from experience and how she’s seen God redeem the darkest chapters of her own life. “My greatest goal is always for my story to encourage listeners to believe that they, too, can live out their faith in the midst of hard circumstances,” she says. “I truly believe that the songs we sing and the songs we write act as the soundtrack for people’s faith. So I want to give people the most substantial tools that give them the clearest picture of who God is and who they are in Christ.”

The life of a songwriter is a sacred calling and one Story doesn’t take lightly whether she’s writing songs for her church, for a new record or simply for herself as a cathartic release. “It’s not about my songs or my story or even my artistry,” she asserts. “It really is about Him getting the glory for the work that I believe He has chosen to do through songwriters and through songs. It’s a unique work that He’s chosen to do there.”

She may lead others in worship through song on stages both big and small, but on a daily basis, Story is intent on loosening her grip and choosing to live with open hands as an ultimate act of praise.

“Worship at the very core of what it is is ‘worth-ship.’ It’s the easiest definition I’ve ever heard of worship. It’s giving God worth, and sometimes that means verbal adoration and praise. Sometimes

that's showing Him worth with our calendars and our checking accounts. No matter what it is, it always begins with open hands. It always begins with a willingness to say, 'You are worth whatever cost you call me to give,'" she maintains. "Worship in its very core begins with surrender. That's how we really show God that He's worth it all."