

## Aaron's Tribute

After four and a half years of chronicling Eli's entire journey as he battled cancer, I sit here with a blank Word document and a blinking cursor waiting for me to sum everything up in a few paragraphs. It's simply not possible. If you have been following along for a while, you know all about Eli's journey. There is very little that we held back as we tried to be as open and honest about this entire process as possible. To Lacey and I, it was important that everyone understood the reality of what childhood cancer does to a family. Maybe if more people knew what it was like, they would be more willing to spread the news about the need for research of a cure. Maybe if someone was going through something similar, they would benefit from hearing about our experiences. Maybe people would learn to stop sweating the small stuff. Maybe, just maybe, people would see the faith and strength that our little boy had and would want to pursue having that kind of relationship with God in their own lives. It always makes me smile when someone says, "Thank you for sharing your son with us." Trust me, he was too precious of a gift to keep to ourselves. God entrusted us with Eli for the very purpose of sharing him with others so that their lives might be enriched. Lacey and I both feel completely blessed and honored to be chosen as Eli's parents.

Jeremiah 1:5 says, "'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart...'" God knew exactly how Eli's life was going to unfold from the very beginning of the 'in vitro' process we used to bring him into the world to his last breath on January 18, 2012.

Since our entire journey has been made available to everyone by way of Eli's website, I just wanted to touch briefly on the relationship that Eli had with His Creator. Just the other day, my grandmother showed me a print out of an update I had written on July 22, 2008 (a little over one year after Eli was diagnosed). She had it folded up inside of her Bible. It nearly took my breath away to read it again, three and a half years later. The post was titled "Deep Discussions" and this is what it said:

Eli and I had an interesting conversation tonight. It went something like this:

Eli: "Dad, do souls really live forever?" – Apparently he learned this from the movie Iron Giant.

Aaron: "Yes, that's true. When someone dies, their soul either goes to Heaven or it goes to Hell. Heaven is a beautiful place with God. Hell is a bad place away from God. If you believe that Jesus died for your sins and came to life 3 days later, you will go to Heaven. If you don't, you go to Hell. It's hard for kids to understand, so all kids' souls go to heaven. When you become an adult, you'll have to decide if you believe in Jesus or not."

Eli: "Well, I believe in Jesus. And when I become an adult, I'll believe in Jesus even more than I do right now."

Aaron: "That's great, I'm glad to hear that!"

Eli: "Why don't all adults believe in Jesus?"

Aaron: "Because some adults think they can get to Heaven by being good or that God doesn't even exist."

Eli: "Why did Jesus die on the cross? If I was God, I wouldn't have done that."

Aaron: "Then how would you save people?"

Eli: "I would save them like a superhero. How did Jesus die on the cross if he only had nails in his hands and feet and not his tummy?"

Aaron: "Well, because they beat him and hung him up and he was exhausted and died."

Eli: "What did they pam his back with?" – Pam is Eli's word for beat. Not sure why, it just always has been.

Aaron: "A whip with bones and glass in the end to tear his back."

Eli: "Ouch, that would hurt worse than a T-Rex bite."

Aaron: "Yeah, I think you're right."

Eli: "I'm a smart little kid, huh? Do you think I'm a grown up? Well I'm a kid!"

I'm sure that a lot of you might think that was a pretty detailed and adult like conversation to have with a four year old, but those of you that have had conversations with Eli before understand. He comprehends more than even I expect sometimes. It was a really fun conversation and I look forward to having many more like it down the road.

As Eli got older, the questions seemed to get harder to answer. We always made it very clear to Eli that God didn't give Eli cancer. He didn't cause this to happen to Eli, but He did allow it to happen. Much like the blind man in John 9 where Jesus says, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." God allowed our son to get cancer so that the works of God might be displayed in Eli. In this case, it wasn't through healing Eli and curing him of his cancer, but by touching other people's lives and making them re-evaluate their faith in God and purpose in life. When I prayed for Eli, I knew that I was supposed to ask God for His will to be done. However, as I also knew that God knows the true desires of our heart, I didn't hide the fact that I would like His will to be for complete healing of my son. On multiple occasions, I tried to convince God that Eli would be the next Billy Graham if he was allowed to grow to be that old. Obviously I lost that argument, but I'm in no position to tell God that my plan would have worked out better than His. My other prayer was that God would show Lacey and I examples of where He was using Eli's situation to positively affect the lives of others. By way of emails, comments, letters, and conversations with people, God answered that prayer on many occasions and I believe He will continue to do so for a long time into the future.

A few weeks ago, Eli told me that he wished he didn't have to go through everything that he was going through. When I asked why, he said, "Because it hurts so much. Why do you think God allowed this to

happen to me?" I swallowed hard and looked to the ceiling as I thought to myself, "How exactly am I supposed to answer THAT one, God? I ask myself the same question all of the time!" I gave Eli a squeeze and said, "I think that God allowed this to happen to you because He knew that you were incredibly strong and loved Him so much that thousands of people would be inspired by you and would want to have a relationship with God like you have." Eli simply nodded and accepted that if this was God's calling for him, that he would bravely play his part.

So my challenge to everyone here is to ask yourself if you are allowing God to get through to you. Please don't brush off everything that Eli went through by ignoring God's desire to have a stronger personal relationship with you. 2 Peter 3:9 confirms that God wants us ALL to have the kind of relationship with Him that Eli had. Eli believed that God forgave him of all of his sins and that Jesus loved him. Romans 10:9 says, "because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." While it might seem cliché for someone to say that Eli is "in a better place," I can assure you with all of the confidence in the world that it's true. Not because I want it to be true, but because the Bible says that it is true. Eli loved God and knew that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was done for him. He accepted that God had allowed this to happen for a very good reason and now Eli is reaping his rewards in Heaven for a job well done. We know from the New Testament that Jesus absolutely loved little kids and there is no doubt in my mind that Christ welcomed Eli into Heaven with a huge smile and said, "Well done, Eli. You did exactly what I needed you to do. Now let me show you what I made here just for you to enjoy with Me for eternity."

I enjoyed teasing Eli about who loved him the most. We would often ask Eli, "Do you know how much I love you?" and he would always nod yes with a grin on his face. Lacey would always tell the boys that she loved them to the moon and back. In a feeble attempt to convince Eli that I loved him even more than that, I would say, "Well I love you to the sun and back, and the sun is farther away than the moon, so I guess I must love you more." Without fail, Eli would always shake his head no. Sometimes he would argue that Lacey loved him more so he could get a rise out of me. Sometimes he would be diplomatic and argue that we both loved him the same. But if Eli really wanted to put a stop to the argument, he would simply say, "Well God loves me the most." I could only reply with, "You're absolutely right, buddy. You're absolutely right."

Lacey and I are very thankful that Eli's last words on earth to each of us were "Love you." Before we would walk out of the door or lay down to sleep, we would always tell Eli that we loved him and he would always reply back with "Love you." Eli knew how much he was loved by his family, by his friends, by total strangers that followed his updates, and most importantly by God.

There are literally thousands of people in dozens of different countries around the world that have been impacted by Eli's story. Some in a small way and some in a very big and profound way. As we celebrate Eli's life today, Lacey and I thank God for the role He allowed us to play in his life. Our lives have forever been changed for the better for knowing Eli and we will miss him on earth more than words can even begin to express. However, we have full confidence that we will see Eli again in Heaven because of the sacrifice that Christ made on the cross for our sins so that our debt would be paid in full and we too can spend eternity with our just and loving God. Thank you brave Eli, I love you so much.