

BEHIND THE WORSHIP – Israel Houghton

Israel Houghton: A ‘Friend of God ‘



During an annual retreat with his worship team, Israel Houghton stumbled upon—or was given—one of his best-known worship songs.

“This guy was walking us through a lesson,” Houghton recalls, “and he handed out a sheet with all these promises of God: ‘Nothing will separate us from the love of God,’ ‘We are more than conquerors.’ And then three-quarters down the page it says, ‘I am a friend of God.’ He says, ‘Everyone, circle one promise that stands out to you.’ I circled the phrase, ‘Friend of God.’ When asked why I chose it, I just started crying.”

Houghton said he wasn’t sure why he circled it. “[I thought] maybe it’s just something I want to be but don’t think I am. It led me on this journey to study why Abraham was called a ‘friend of God.’”

It took a while before the phrase showed up in a song, but in 2003, while writing with Michael Gungor, Houghton said the two were singing something standard and repetitious—“a ‘You are holy, You are faithful’ kind of a thing”—when suddenly Houghton started singing the phrase, “I am a friend of God.” When he did, Gungor responded by singing the lyric, “He calls me friend.” In that moment they were both “overcome,” he says. “Something hit us hard.”

Houghton said the song came together fairly quickly, and within a matter of days he decided to try it out in church. His band had never even practiced it: “I just told the band the chords. It was totally impromptu, but when I taught it to

the crowd they just went crazy, and each time I got to the bridge, I just couldn't get through it without crying," Houghton recalls. "It's an up-tempo song, but I looked out across the congregation and saw grown men weeping. I thought, *What is happening?* It was this thing of God not being mad at us but being mad *about* us."