

Worship Through Tragedy

One day can change everything for a local church.

On Feb. 24, 2018, Tom and Sarah Eccleshall drove to Heathrow International Airport to pick up Jeremy Edwardson and Andrew Jackson. Tom was the worship leader at King's Cross Church (KXC), a charismatic church in London, England, and though Sarah, his wife, does not work at the church—she works for a humanitarian network—she frequently helps Tom with songwriting and worship.

KXC was about to produce its first-ever live worship album, and the church had recruited two of the top Christian worship producers to help them. Jeremy Edwardson—former lead singer for the Christian rock band The Myriad—had now shifted to working behind the scenes as an engineer and producer—and he stayed busy. Anyone who has ever listened to Bethel Music, Hillsong, Michael W. Smith, Switchfoot's Jon Foreman or Brian & Jenn Johnson has probably heard Edwardson's work. His friend and fellow passenger, Andrew Jackson, handled sound engineering and contributed music for artists like Matt Redman, John Mark McMillan, Jesus Culture, Kari Jobe, Kim Walker Smith, and Bryan and Katie Torwalt. Together, they were flying from Redding, California to London to help KXC record the album *All Things New*.

Up until the last minute before he had to catch his flight, Jackson was working on one of the songs for the album. He laid down a bass track, saved the finished demo, sent it in an email and then raced out the door to catch his flight on time.

Over 5,000 miles away, Tom and Sarah were waiting to pick them up after their flight.

"I remember Tom and I went to the airport, to meet Jeremy and Andrew in person," Sarah Eccleshall says. "Of course, we were really excited to finally meet them. We were standing in the

arrivals, just waiting for them to come out. They never arrived. We got this phone call from John, who was their friend traveling with them, that Andrew had gone into cardiac arrest, and he was rushed off to hospital.”

Jackson died within hours. He was 29 years old.

Sarah Eccleshall and KXC Pastor Pete Hughes spoke to *Charisma* about Jackson’s story, shared how it changed their faith and their church’s faith, and tackled one of the hardest questions facing charismatic Christians: If God can and does do miracles today, how should believers respond when He doesn’t?

The Silence of the Night

Hughes and his wife, Bee, planted KXC in February 2010, in a part of London which Hughes describes as being “historically ... known for deprivation—the red-light district of London, if you like.” Around 2008, the area was redeveloped, and major technology companies like Google and Facebook moved in.

“So you’ve got this interesting context where you’ve got historic deprivation as well as an influx of wealth and business and retail,” Hughes says. “We’re ministering in an urban context where these different worlds are colliding, and we’re seeking to see God’s kingdom established right in the heart of that context.”

That fusion of worlds has led to an artistic spirit developing within the church. KXC has become a place of creative flourishing—and the talented musicians who call it home began to produce a number of original worship songs.

“We had all of these songs coming out of the church, and we really wanted to record them,” Eccleshall says. “We always say that the songs are the story and the soundtrack of the church. So we really wanted to get them out and hope that they will be a blessing beyond KXC.

“... There’s this really prominent building in Kings Cross, Scala, [which] has a very interesting history. It used to be a porn cinema at one point. It was this weird kind of ‘gorilla zoo’ at one point. A lot of really interesting things had happened in this building, and now it’s one of the most prominent gig venues in the area. When I first met Tom, now my husband, who is the worship leader at KXC, he said to me he always had this dream of playing worship music in Scala. At the time, we almost laughed it off just because it seemed so impossible. Again, it was this really popular gig venue in central London. The idea of having a worship event in there seemed almost impossible. But as these songs were coming together, a door actually opened up where Scala was willing to host this worship night, which felt like a miracle in itself.”

Hughes believed the idea of bringing 500 people together to proclaim the name of Jesus in a place like Scala was something worth recording. They began to work out the logistics, and Tom invited Edwardson and Jackson to record the album—though he didn’t think they would say yes.

“Tom had been a big fan of Jeremy’s and Andrew Jackson’s work,” Eccleshall says. “So he had heard some of the albums they had produced in the past. We sent them an email explaining what KXC was, sent them some of the music and asked if they would be interested in producing the album. Again, it felt like an impossible request. These guys are based in the States and obviously seemed really busy. So when they wrote back and said, ‘Yes, we’re interested in producing the album,’ we were so excited.”

Five days before the live recording was scheduled to take place, Edwardson and Jackson—accompanied by a friend—flew from Redding, California, to London, England. A few hours later, Tom called Hughes to relay the bad news: Andrew had gone into cardiac arrest on the plane. Hughes remembers the call vividly.

"I was ice skating with my kid at a church social," Hughes says. "But none of us knew quite what was happening or the extent of it, so I rushed across London and spent the next few hours in the hospital—just praying for a miracle that Andrew's life would be spared. We'd never met Jeremy or Andrew ... in person. So I guess the first time we met Jeremy was in this hospital, gathering outside an operating theater, praying for a miracle."

Eccleshall says the experience was—understandably—extremely painful for Edwardson. When the Eccleshalls eventually met up with him at the hospital, the meeting was far different than what they'd imagined.

"These guys were understandably completely in pieces," Eccleshall says. "Andrew's 29 and really healthy, so something like this seems crazy. Cardiac arrest at that age for a healthy guy? So we were waiting. We met them in the waiting room. And I remember just thinking, *The only thing we can do is pray*. And so that's what we did. I remember praying, 'We choose, God, in this moment, to have faith.' When you're in a situation with something potentially so horrible, you almost have to make a choice right away: How are you going to approach this? What are you going to do? We tried to just choose faith and press into that. We were there for a while. And eventually, the doctors came out."

Hughes remembers where he was when doctors delivered the news to Edwardson.

"I remember being with Jeremy, one of the moments the surgeon came out, and I sort of moved back just to give Jeremy some space," Hughes says. "So I was standing at maybe 5 to 10 meters' distance. And I could see that this final update was essentially the surgeon saying, 'We've done everything possible. You need to say goodbye.'"

Eccleshall says the group was in shock, but she thought of

what she would want if she were in Jackson's position.

"I travel quite a bit for work," she says. "So I've spent quite a bit of time away from family in different countries. I remember thinking, *If this was someone in my family, [if] I were an American based in the U.K., and I was experiencing this and my family wasn't there with me, what I would really want is a family of faith to gather around me.* And I remember just thinking, *We have to go for it. We have to pray and have faith and try and, you know, do everything that we can, because his family isn't here with him.*

"So that's what we did."

Hughes told the surgeon that their group was from a local church and that—before saying goodbye—they wanted one final chance to gather around Jackson's body and pray for a miracle. The surgeon allowed them to do so, and 10 people gathered in the operating room. The group was not only composed of KXC members; Hughes says a couple originally from Bethel Church had heard about what happened and came to join them, as well as another couple from Catch the Fire.

"[We] laid hands on him, praying in tongues, singing worship music—music that we found out later that he had produced himself—and singing over him," Eccleshall says. "I remember looking over at the four heart surgeons in the room, who looked really uncomfortable with what was happening. But we didn't care. We needed to go for it in that moment."

As time passed and no miracle came, Hughes says the atmosphere of the room changed.

"You're aware that you're caught up in something tragic, but equally, as we're praying, we became fully aware of the nearness of the presence of God," Hughes says. "After like 10 to 15 minutes of praying for a miracle, I think we just knew that Andrew was actually departing to be with Jesus. And therefore, our prayers transitioned from, 'Lord, bring Andrew

back,' to 'Lord, we ask that you'd embrace Andrew now, and we commend his body into the hands of the Savior.' ... The only experience I've had that's almost close to that was when our first child was born. You were just aware that, 'Wow, this is like life coming into the world. This is a meeting point of heaven and earth. This feels like a holy and precious moment.' And despite the tragedy of Andrew's death, I think there's something of that—this is a holy moment, because someone's going to be with their Savior. There's a deep sense of grief and shock and tragedy, but equally, I've not really known the nearness of God quite like it."

At this point, Edwardson put the phone to Jackson's ear and called Jackson's parents to let them say goodbye to their son. (Eccleshall says the call was "one of the most difficult conversations I've ever overheard.") After Jackson died, the group stopped at a café to get a drink and collect their thoughts. Hughes remembers that everyone sat in silence.

"I think there [are] moments where you can't find the right words, and silence is a beautiful thing," Hughes says. "So we just sat with each other, with God, knowing that God was with us. And every so often, someone would say something, and there'd be moments of laughter. And then there'd be tears, and then a bit more silence."

At this point, Eccleshall says, the decision was made to cancel the worship night and let the American visitors travel back home to be with their family. Besides, the KXC group felt grieved and deflated; they were not exactly in the mood to worship. But when Hughes told Edwardson he could return to the U.S., Edwardson said he wanted to sleep on the decision. The next morning, at breakfast, he announced that he had "met with God that evening" and wanted to carry on with the live recording.

"He wanted to finish this for Andrew," Eccleshall says. "We learned that he had had a friend pass away 10 years earlier,

and he said he learned a lot from that experience. He didn't grieve his friend properly. 'And so,' he said, 'I really want to grieve Andrew properly. I want to do this right. I want to finish what Andrew had started.' That was what was motivating him to finish this album. So we went back into planning mode, getting ready for this worship night."

The Land of the Living

Hughes says many churches struggle to be places where people can authentically grieve, instead of feeling pressured to get over it or to repress their negative emotions.

"Often in the church, we're not as good at actually acknowledging moments of pain and deep disappointment," Hughes says. "But I think we need to develop a spirituality and a breadth of worship that enables us to celebrate all that's good, but also all the brokenness that we experience in day-to-day life. ... The church more recently has written songs that fall in a fairly narrow bandwidth, where we talk about the character and nature of God, which is amazing. But there aren't as many songs of confession or songs of lament, of intercession, of the moments where life is really hard and we're holding on to God but it's difficult. So I think one of the things we need to do is develop songs that enable people to actually worship in those moments.

"I think it means as pastors, developing environments where we can name moments that are hard in life. Vulnerability in our teaching is a great example—we don't constantly present strength, but we recognize that there's a beauty about celebrating weakness and recognizing that God's power is made perfect in weakness. The more that pastors model that, the more those in the congregation realize, 'It's OK for me to be weak.' ... The more honesty there is, the more that a culture celebrates authenticity, I think the better we equip people to follow Jesus in the highs and lows of everyday life."

As Hughes himself discovered only two months later—when his father-in-law died suddenly—grief is a slow journey that cannot be rushed. But God will patiently walk alongside you through the entire ordeal. And he says reality is more important than any theological questions about why God heals some people but does not heal others.

“I think [grieving] people do raise big theological questions,” Hughes says. “But often behind the big theological questions isn’t ‘Please give me a simple answer.’ The real question underneath the theological question is ‘Can you be with me? Because I’m really hurting right now, and I need to know that God’s with me, and your presence often signifies the presence of God in this moment.’ I think there is a moment to speak in with theological truth about the now and the not yet of the kingdom of God. But we need to be with people when life hurts, and journey with them slowly.”

It’s a reality Eccleshall has also observed firsthand.

“My grandma was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis,” Eccleshall says. “So my early understanding of faith and prayer was praying for her healing. She was completely paralyzed from the neck down and lived a really painful, uncomfortable life. She was also an amazing woman of faith. As a child, my prayer every single day was, ‘God, heal Grandma.’ And He never did. Amazingly, though, I saw God step into her life in different ways. Because she was paralyzed, she had caregivers coming and taking care of her every day, and they saw her faith and her joy, and every single one of her caregivers actually ended up meeting Jesus through her, and so did their families. In some sense, I found it really frustrating and really heartbreaking that my grandma was never healed, because I believe the Lord could do that. But at the same time, I saw that the Lord was present.”

Eccleshall says embracing the messiness and uncertainty of faith is just part of following God on this side of eternity.

“For me, I guess faith is being able to hold on to these tensions,” she says. “Like, ‘Yes, I believe that God heals,’ and ‘Yes, I see that that doesn’t always happen.’ But I’m willing to hold on to both of those things. And it is a tension, and it’s messy, but that’s what faith is to me. It’s choosing to believe that God will heal, even though we haven’t always seen that. I think faith is a choice. There are good days and bad days, though. I have moments where I do feel really discouraged and ask God questions. ... [When people] don’t see that healing, we need to give them the space to ask those questions and to struggle through those things. I think those pat answers of ‘Pray harder next time’ or ‘God can heal’ are not good enough. As a church, we really need to provide people with the space to wrestle with those things. Faith is filled for me with so many different tensions, and that’s OK. I don’t have a faith that’s particularly black-and-white. It’s gray, and it’s sometimes complicated. And that’s all right, because life is, right?”

As the worship event drew closer, Hughes received news that Jackson’s parents had made a last-minute decision to fly to London and attend the event.

“Andrew had given himself to worshipping Jesus, but also recording songs that enable people—whether in congregational settings or in their car—to encounter Jesus,” Hughes says. “And essentially, they thought, *Well, we want to be at the last project. This is what Andrew was giving himself to.*”

At Scala that night, Hughes addressed the crowd honestly from the beginning, telling them: “A lot of these songs are just celebrating the goodness of God, and we want to do that because His character remains the same yesterday, today and forevermore. But equally, we want to recognize that we’re carrying a lot of disappointment. And what we really need to do in this moment is to bring that pain and disappointment to God as a gift, as an act of worship.”

“Worship is a choice,” Eccleshall says. “You don’t often get to choose what happens to you. You know, grief happens, and we don’t choose that. But we do have a choice when it comes to what we do with that grief. Do we curl up into a ball and hide away, or do we worship? One song became a bit of an anthem of the week for us. ‘With Me’—written by Rich and Lydia Dicas, who are part of our church—wrote it after their brother passed away.”

In fact, Hughes says, “With Me (David’s Song)” was the song Jackson recorded a bass track for immediately before his flight to London—making it the last song he ever worked on. The song’s lyrics declare the choice to worship in the middle of grief: “When sorrow has surrounded and I cannot understand, I reach out in the doubting and hold onto Your hand/ ... I will dance in the land of the living/ I will shout and I’ll never stop singing/ You are good and Your love endures forever.”

“As we sang that song out in Scala, our hands in the air, I really felt like a sense of victory in that moment,” Eccleshall says. “It felt like the worst of the world had come at us. And you know, the worst of the world came against Jesus, but He rose again. And it felt like we were kind of able to tap into that and declare, ‘Death is not the end.’”

Hughes remembers during the final refrain of this song, he looked around the room and saw something incredible.

“I looked up onto the balcony, and Andrew’s mom and dad had been up there,” Hughes says. “Andrew’s mom had been lying down for most of the time. She was feeling exhausted from the flight. You know, she was still in shock and trauma. But for that final refrain, she stood to her feet, and with her hands in the air, she was singing and declaring the goodness of God in a moment of turmoil.

“And I just remember thinking, *That’s a picture of true worship. Because whatever we’re going through, whatever our*

circumstances, she knows that God's character is constant. That His love endures forever. And she's celebrating the character and goodness of God right now. The circumstances didn't change. She was still hurting and in deep, deep grief. But for me, it was a picture of beautiful worship. And I'll honestly never ever forget it."

Hughes challenges all believers to embody that spirit of true worship—in the midst of unimaginable hardship—in their everyday relationship with God and others.

"As a community, we've been learning what it looks like to celebrate life, but also just to slow down and to support one another when life is tough," he says. "Because those moments of pain? They're defining moments. They're formative moments. And if we turn to Jesus in those moments, there's an unbelievable opportunity to become like Him, as He begins to redeem our pain and use that pain for His glory." {eoa}

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