

# Praise Him in the Storm

Israel Houghton was facing an identity crisis. He'd known a few of them, growing up bi-racial in a white family. This one wasn't about race, though. This was about who God wanted him to become.

It was the 1990s, and he was a brand-new worship leader, not yet the nationally recognized music artist and Grammy winner he is today. For six weeks he had repetitiously sung the same handful of songs at every meeting—and his congregation was bored. “Every service ended in a train crash,” he said.

Finally, after one such derailment, an outspoken woman in his church known as “Sister Sandpaper” challenged him to get his ministry on track. She flatly told him that he didn't know what he was doing. He knew she was right.

“The problem,” she said to him in her familiar blunt manner, “is that you're working out worship on our time. This is the first time all week you've been in worship. You need to figure out who you are.”

She had thrown down a self-identity challenge that Houghton knew he had to pick up. So for several weeks he tried new things.

He moved his piano into his kitchen. “I liked the acoustics in there,” he says. He read Psalms randomly and used his resulting prayers in times of musical improvisation.

“There was a whole lot of tears ... God revealing Himself to me in a way I'd never known,” Houghton says. “It had nothing to do with performance. ... It had to do with the repositioning of my heart. There were a lot of songs that were written that will never be heard.”

As for his songs that *have* been heard since then, they're the

reason Houghton is today one of the most influential voices in modern worship. He figured out who God wanted him to be.

He is now a co-senior worship director on staff at Joel Osteen's 43,000-member Lakewood Church in Houston. As a music artist, he has a new CD, *The Power of One*—his first solo work since 1997—that showed instant appeal by jumping quickly atop the Christian/Gospel music Christian retail chart after its March 24 release, indicating it could draw the same critical acclaim that some of his previous works have.

*A Deeper Level*—one of many he's recorded with his group New Breed—won a Grammy in 2007 for Best Pop/Contemporary Gospel Album. His *Live From Another Level* won two Stellar awards in 2005 and had already spawned two Dove Awards in 2004.

With *The Power of One*, Houghton is after more than popular appeal. He is pressing forward into a new season of ministry and creative artistry.

And just as his previous projects contained prophetic messages for that time, he believes the same holds true for this effort. Many of the songs came to him while he was—again—spiritually challenged and restless for more purpose, asking, "What now?"

"I love the local church ... but I feel like we're sort of country-clubbing our ways through this thing called life and Christianity," he says. "What does a Christian really look like and what are we truly called to do?"

"What is the cause? What are we all getting behind? What did we just come and do for two hours? It really started irritating me," Houghton explains.

Those provoking questions led him to some fellow worship leaders who had already been down that road and back. A conversation with Hillsong staple Darlene Zschech was especially revealing.

“She just said, ‘Read Amos 5, darling, and call me back.’” Houghton recalls. When he read it in *The Message*, it was “like a shot to the heart.”

Says Houghton: “It basically says, ‘I can’t stand your ego music. When was the last time you just sang for Me? ...You know what I’m interested in? It’s justice. What I want you to do is look out for widows and orphans.

“Spend yourself for them. Then you have My attention in worship.’”

To that end, Houghton wanted the songs of *The Power of One* to challenge and convict, but equally to empower the church.

“I want to see the American church break down the last of the walls that divide us culturally and racially,” he says. “The color barrier that still exists is just bewildering to me. ... You’re just going, ‘Why?’”

Houghton knows more than a little something about that color barrier. He has hurdled it all his life—beginning in his own family, where he grew up the only biracial kid among white siblings.

In the 1970s, Houghton’s mother, Margaret, was an aspiring concert pianist living in Waterloo, Iowa, and growing up in a white, Midwestern home. At age 17, she turned the family upside with the revelation that she was pregnant by a black man. Houghton would be her first child.

“My biological father also lived in Iowa, and he was a black guy,” Houghton says. “Waterloo was very, very separate [racially]. When she got pregnant, it was highly advised for her to have an abortion. She chose not to, and I’m certainly grateful for that.”

Margaret’s father, especially, was opposed to her pregnancy.

“He basically said [to her], ‘You’re out.’ He couldn’t deal

with the shame," Houghton says.

For the eight months' pregnant teen, the rejection prompted a cross-country move to California, where Margaret soon became a Christian. Reading her Bible one day, she came across Genesis 32. It resonated with the mother-to-be for its description of a dramatic struggle and subsequent peace between Jacob and God that led to a new identity for Jacob.

"When Jacob's name was changed to Israel, she said, 'OK, that's my son.'" Houghton relates. "That's how I got my name. She saw the imagery of that story and how it related to her whole life."

After Houghton was born, his mother moved to Phoenix with a relative. Margaret soon met a new Christian there, Henry Houghton—the man Israel says gave him his personality and "a lot of the moxie."

Margaret and Henry married and were eventually called into a pastoral ministry, moving to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where they've led the same independent charismatic church for 25 years.

Growing up, Houghton knew he was different but didn't understand why. "I was one of the only black people I knew," he quips. His siblings explained their brother's darker skin tone to friends by saying, "It's because he's the oldest."

His self-awareness took a dramatic turn at age 7, however, when he went to Waterloo for the first time and met his grandfather.

"All my cousins and my little brother were jumping up on his lap," he recalled. "So I just did that because I figured that's what you do. I ended up being pushed to the ground [by him] and realizing there was something so wrong with that picture.

“He was so terrified and so racist ... that he couldn’t imagine this black kid on his lap,” Houghton adds. “That sort of began a lot of questions and an identity crisis for me.”

While growing up in Santa Fe, Houghton dove headfirst into the music of artists such as Journey, Chicago, Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, Keith Green, Billy Joel, Andraé Crouch and the L.A. Mass Choir.

But what really pushed him over the musical edge were funk-driven artists such as Earth, Wind & Fire. He was especially influenced by Stevie Wonder’s *Songs in the Key of Life* and Michael Jackson’s *Off the Wall*.

“My mom always encouraged and fostered the musical scene in our house and in our church,” Houghton explains. “I was the kid that always jumped up on the drums at the end of service and annoyed everybody until I was removed. But I was always around it so when the need arose—the drummer was sick or whatever—I was the guy.”

One providential night in Arizona, where he’d returned to attend college, he was “the guy”—the stand-in. It led to a major turning point in Houghton’s near-lifelong struggle with his self-identity.

He was visiting a friend’s church and was asked to play drums for the worship band. When the pastor met him and heard his name, he told Houghton: “Even in your name, you have favor with God, but you’ve also struggled with men and God. But ... you have prevailed, and you will prevail.”

“He basically spelled out the last six months of my life in pretty strong detail and rocked my world,” Houghton says. “It was just this flash of what God had for me ... this world-changing kind of thing.”

With Houghton’s transformation now in full swing, he was able to believe that God loved him unconditionally, which changed

the way he viewed himself.

“That’s when I began to celebrate [my background],” he says. “Encouraging words from people, or even prophetic words from people, all had something to do with the message that I was distinctly different by God’s intention. When I said yes to that, I really feel like purpose began ... in my life.”

Houghton still had some lessons to learn about leading worship, though.

Not long after that life-changing night in Arizona, he accepted his first opportunity to lead worship, which led to his ministry-altering encounter with Sister Sandpaper.

Almost 20 years later, Houghton has become, in addition to a major figure worldwide in worship music, a husband and a father too. He and his wife, Meleasa, have three young children: Mariah, Israel Duncan and Lillie Milan.

He’s also gained a clearer view of his purpose, thanks to witnessing God’s providence in his life. He believes that, due in part to his upbringing, God allows him to be a strong advocate for what he thinks are highly undervalued biblical principles and commands.

“I want to see an attitude of generosity and graciousness and justice kicking into high gear, especially in the Western church,” Houghton says. “I feel like there’s so much we can do if we came together and figured out what we agree on and then get on that.

“Jesus called us to take care of the poor. ... Let’s do that. Let’s find causes to get behind and truly make a difference.”

Houghton hopes his latest batch of songs from *The Power of One* will encourage the church to that end. In particular, his title track is a call to action: “What if it all depended on me / To change the world? / What if my only responsibility was

/ To change the world?”

“I believe it’s the church’s privilege to be the hands and feet of Jesus and make measurable change in the earth,” he says.

Houghton is living those words and setting an example for those who are willing to go beyond just making inspiring music. With New Breed, he has lent his name to several socially transformative ministries, including World Vision and Lakewood Medical Missions—a ministry of Joel Osteen’s brother, Dr. Paul Osteen.

He recently participated in the ongoing *CompassionArt* project, as well, with other high-profile worship leaders and music artists, such as Michael W. Smith, Martin Smith, Tobymac, Chris Tomlin and Zschech. All proceeds from the effort are being applied to humanitarian-based charities and ministries.

Houghton believes those kinds of opportunities are miraculous for a guy once deemed disposable by societal standards. He’s come a long way since the days when “every service ended in a train crash.” Along the way he found a life that’s headed in the right direction.

**Chad Bonham** is a freelance writer in Broken Arrow, Okla., and producer of the sports TV program *The ProFILES*.

---

## **Jeremy Camp**

On February 5, 2001, my first wife, Melissa, went to be with the Lord after struggling with ovarian cancer. When she took her last breath, I felt God urging me to raise my hands and worship Him. As God taught me an important lesson about obeying Him, I sang. Somehow, the Holy Spirit carries us

through pain and suffering, with such tenderness, when we submit to Him. At the heart of true worship and praise to God, my mind, heart and will must submit before Him. This authentic worship prepares my heart to be molded and used as He sees fit.

### **Marvin Sapp**

Within 90 days, I lost three important men in my life: my musical mentor, my natural father and my spiritual father. For days before my father's funeral I was not emotionally engaged. The day after the funeral, Sunday, I took my place in the pulpit. I stood there ... silent. Everyone was waiting on me. I asked God quietly if anyone out there knew how much pain I was in. From deep inside, the silence was broken with my testimony in song, "Never Would Have Made It Without You." Soon the presence of God was overwhelming; we all experienced heaven on earth. I was in my most vulnerable place but safer than I'd ever felt.

### **Tammy Trent**

My whole world shifted in a moment's time eight years ago in Jamaica. My husband of 11 years, Trent Lenderink, was gone forever, and I didn't even get to say goodbye. I'll never forget the moments that followed. Being all alone in a faraway place, my heart took over. It was like a reflex. I began to worship God with my prayers and songs. At that moment I couldn't praise Him in the same way I had the week before, but I did choose to praise Him for what He meant to me, even in that dark place in my life. I felt His presence as I sang. I thank God for the gift of praise and worship that brings me closer to His heart. It's everything I sing about today.

### **Dorinda Clark Cole**

Once, I was being sued by a fellow believer. Never in my life had I considered suicide, but I had grown distraught. It felt like the devil had me in a headlock. One day I was driving 90

mph in my car, planning to go over a bridge. God spoke to me: "After everything: the many people you've healed, touched and delivered, are you going to let the enemy take you out?" I grabbed the steering wheel, and God saved my life. From that, I wrote "I'm Still Here." It has had great meaning for every person who has an "I'm still here" situation. You can't listen to the enemy—God won't forsake us. But we have to choose whether we want to live or die.

## **Mandisa**

When I was a final contestant on *American Idol* three years ago, I was judged by my last audition. As I started to sing, my mind went blank. I tried to improvise the lyrics, but Simon Cowell lifted his hand and stopped me. I slumped off stage, knowing I was headed home. Awaiting the judges' final decision, I worshiped God and told Him no matter what happened, He was all I needed. I teared up, but then smiled, knowing God was with me. He taught me how to worship Him even in sorrow and fear, and I felt peace about the outcome. That lesson even inspired a song on my album *Freedom*, titled "Broken Hallelujah." Truly, when God is magnified, our problems are minimized.