

**Testimony of Brenda Lurtey, as recorded for Heritage Bible Church**

**Mother's Day service, May 10, 2009**

**[www.heritagebiblechurch.org](http://www.heritagebiblechurch.org)**

**Psalm 139 is one of my favorite passages of scripture because it reminds me that God knows all about me and understands my every thought. One verse in particular that has meant a lot to me over the past few years is Psalm 139:14 "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."**

**The real story that I would like to share is what the Lord recently did for our daughter, Lauren, but to understand the significance of her story, I have to start at the beginning of this particular journey...**

When our second son, Todd, was just about two weeks old, I took him to the doctor for a normal checkup and at that check up, believe it or not, was the first time I noticed a very faint looking "birthmark" that covered most of his chest, back and one arm. The doctor looked Todd over and told me that this huge mark was not a birthmark but was actually called a Nevis. He had only seen two or three in his practice. Over time, the Nevis continued to darken and to become more noticeable. One day when he was about four or five years old I felt several lumps in the arm that had the Nevis on it. I took him to the doctor the next day. Because of my great concern and sense of panic, the doctor sent us to a specialist who then ordered a biopsy of the lumps. I cannot tell you the torture that I felt in the days between the ordering of the biopsy and the actual date of the biopsy.

Satan tormented me with the thought of the lumps being cancerous and the possibility of

losing Todd. Satan told me continually that I could plan his funeral. After the biopsy was over the surgeon came into the waiting room and told David and I that it was a fibroma—which is a benign tumor. The doctor told us that the next step for us was to take Todd to North Carolina to see a specialist. The specialist told us that Todd had neurofibromatosis and then asked me if anyone else in the family was a carrier of this disease. I told him no, that I had never even heard of this term. He then asked me a few medical questions about myself and I showed him some physical signs of what I always thought were just birthmarks on me. Without hesitation he looked me in the eyes and said—“Its YOU, you’re the carrier, you have neurofibromatosis! Here I was in my adult years and I was just learning what I had had all my life. He told me about the classic signs of neurofibromatosis, and then I told him that if Todd and I had it, I knew that Brandon and Lauren had it too—I knew that we all shared the same physical characteristics of this disease.

Neurofibromatosis is a genetically inherited disease in which nerve tissue can grow tumors. These tumors can be harmless or they may cause other serious neurological problems. No one in my family history has this disease, however, since I was born with it, my children had a 50/50 chance of being born with this disease. I did not know about this fact until after all four of my children had been born. Jeffrey is the only one who did not inherit this disease.

When Lauren was an infant we noticed that her sternum didn’t look exactly right. The doctor later confirmed that she had a sunken chest, but there was nothing that could be done about it while she was so young. When Lauren was about three, our primary care doctor felt it was time for her to see a specialist because the sternum seemed to be getting

worse. The specialist told me that she would eventually need surgery. She continued to see the specialist for regular checkups and it was not too long until he realized that the surgery to fix her chest could not wait. Her sternum was almost touching her spine and her heart was being pushed out of the way. A few days after Lauren turned 5, she had surgery to fix her sternum. The surgeon made an incision under Lauren's arms, inserted a bar under her sternum concave, and then flipped the bar over and it popped the sternum out. Sounds easy, but in reality it was a horrific surgery and the recovery was extremely painful for Lauren. The bar did bring out the sternum some and allowed her heart to move back into the proper position, however, the surgery was not completely successful. The surgeon noticed right away that the cartilage at the end of her ribs buckled and I noticed that as well. All of the doctors involved with Lauren's care, at this point, do not know what to do to fix it. She has had some other skeletal issues—all of these issues seem to be related to the disease. I have also noticed in recent months that her face seemed to be growing asymmetrically and her permanent teeth are growing in way out of alignment.

I took Lauren to the dentist for the first time this past year and he noticed a lot of problems and referred her to an orthodontist. The orthodontist confirmed my suspicions that her face was growing asymmetrically. He, through the doctor, referred her for a CAT scan and that CAT scan. I picked up the CAT scan report and took a copy to the doctor's office. I read the report and saw that at the bottom it said there was a mass at the base of her skull, but that since she had neurofibromatosis, it could just be a fibroma. I remember feeling a sense of panic at seeing the word "mass", but I quickly thought, well, I'll just let the doctor interpret the report because maybe I'm reading it wrong. I kind of

put my feelings in a book, closed it, and put it on a shelf. I didn't want to deal with it. However, early the next morning, the doctor called me and told me what I already knew—that the CAT scan had revealed a mass at the base of her skull. I asked him if he was concerned and he said, “Yes, I am”. It was at this point that I had to take the imaginary “book off the shelf” and deal with what was ahead. He told me that he was ordering an MRI to see a clearer image of the mass. What's neat to me is that although he just called it a mass, God instantly brought the words of the report to my mind—it could just be a fibroma. I received this phone call the second week in January and after I hung up the phone, I remembered that Pastor Hoskinson had just given an evening sermon on accepting from the Lord whatever the New Year might hold. I thought, wow, Lord, that was fast! I could not believe that such an awful trial was happening so soon after his message.

For me, with this news, I began to revisit the agony I had gone through when we were wondering if Todd was going to be ok. Even though in the days following Todd's biopsy I was very relieved that he did not have cancer, I still felt very sad. I believe that I failed the test the Lord had asked me to go through with Todd. Instead of trusting Him with the results of Todd's biopsy, I totally gave in to despair. I didn't want to fail this time of testing with Lauren. We didn't tell many people about Todd's biopsy, but this time I knew that we needed prayer support and immediately called upon our family, friends, coworkers and Sunday School class to pray with us on Lauren's behalf. The support we received was amazing. The notes, phone calls, hugs and assurances of prayer were a tremendous source of comfort for us. It was still hard to wait for the results of the MRI. Satan definitely tried to drag me into that place of despair, and there were times of great

fear. However, instead of allowing myself to wallow in fear and listen to Satan's taunts, I tried to go quickly to the Lord and when I did, He brought me much comfort. The verse that meant a lot to me during the waiting period was Psalm 139:16 "Your eyes saw my unformed substance; ..." I read those first three words over and over again—**Your eyes saw**. Its funny that I have read over this particular verse many times, but at this point I really noticed it and it meant something to me. God saw everything about the way Lauren was being formed before her birth (and the rest of our family for that matter). He is the one who formed her just like she is. He knows all and sees all. He sees the mass. He knows exactly what it is. Even though our disease baffles many doctors, God know all about it and its complications are no surprise to Him. Another thing that the Lord brought to mind was the fact that David and I had publicly dedicated each of our children to the Lord. The Lord, in a still small voice, asked me if I meant it. Had I really given my children to the Him with my whole heart? Boy, was that hard to answer. I really wanted to mean it, but there was a lot at stake. To me, their dedication meant I had to be willing to let God do whatever He wanted to do with their lives—allow them to suffer without being bitter, even allow God to take their lives if He chose to do that—without being bitter. I know God understands the love of a mother and how hard this was for me. Again, Psalm 139 speaks of this "O Lord, you have searched ME and known ME". He knows ME like no one else does. I **wanted** to have the right spirit no matter what the results of Lauren's MRI would be, but it was just so hard to actually **have** the right spirit and mean it. God knew my heart—there was no fooling Him.

Prior to the MRI, we had a few tense days as the procedure was on, then off, then back on, etc. Lauren still has her pectus bar in her chest from her previous chest surgery and

David wondered how safe it would be for her to go through an MRI machine since—its a huge magnet (which in his mind meant that the pectus bar would be a problem. I hadn't given that a thought, but I was glad that he had thought of it. I called the surgeon's office and was told by a nurse that she would find out about the safety of the procedure and call me back. At the end of the day when I still hadn't heard back from her, I called the radiology department at Greenville Memorial Hospital. I was told that they would "Google it" and find out whether or not the procedure would be safe. Maybe that's how they find out information, but that wasn't a very comforting statement to me! While I was still on the phone, the radiology department told me that the result of the Google search showed that it would be fine for Lauren to have the surgery even with the pectus bar in. So, the procedure was on. The next morning the surgeon's nurse called me back and firmly told me that Lauren could DIE if she went through the MRI machine. She said the MRI machine could literally rip the bar out of her chest. Of course, I told that nurse to cancel the procedure. I hung up the phone and told David about the phone call. We tried to catch our breath with thoughts of what could have happened if the procedure had gone on without David inquiring about this danger. Literally, within minutes, the surgeon's office called me back and the same nurse that had frantically called me just minutes earlier now calmly told me Lauren could have the MRI—that it was ok after all. As you can imagine, our confidence level was next to nil. The nurse told me that the MRI would be safe because only her head would be in the machine. She told me to make sure that the radiologist did not let her whole body go in the machine. Meanwhile, our primary care doctor's office was calling us and between that office and the surgeon's office and the radiology department, the procedure was on, then off, then on, etc.

On the day of the MRI, I had given Lauren some medication from the doctor to help calm her a bit. We were on the way to the hospital and Lauren was quietly playing with her game boy. I was driving and trying desperately not to cry. I began to very quietly sing the song that the choir had just sung in church “Be Not Afraid”. I know that was the song because I remember trying to pronounce the word “consumed” like Dr. Cook had taught us when I was in choir. When we arrived at the hospital and tried to check in, I was told that her procedure had been canceled. I told the hospital personnel all that had taken place earlier. The hospital made phone calls to the doctors involved and I was finally told that they would work her in. I told the hospital personnel that she had a pectus bar in her chest and could not go in the MRI machine all the way. One of the nurses said to me “Honey, its fine, we do this all the time and her whole body can go in the machine”. Of course, I panicked and told them that her entire body could NOT go through the machine, that it would be potentially fatal. I was trying to word things carefully because Lauren was standing right beside me. After more phone calls and a face-to-face conversation with radiologist, I was told that I received wrong information and was shown in writing from two different medical sources that the procedure was safe—her whole body could go through the machine even with the pectus bar in place. It was a scary and very trying situation at first, but then the Lord provided me with peace that what the radiologist was telling me was true. I could not have gone through with the procedure if the Lord had not given me peace at that moment. I tried to speak candidly to the doctors but I had to get my concerns across and unfortunately, Lauren got the gist of my concerns. She later asked me with tears in her eyes if she was going to die. I assured her that I was confident

that she would be safe and that I would not let her go through the procedure if I thought she would die.

She had big crocodile tears in her eyes as we waited right outside the MRI room. I was trying very hard to be brave and not cry myself, but it was very hard to see her so fearful. I reminded her that God would be with her and that there were a lot of people praying for her. We prayed together and then it was time to go into the room. Although she began weeping, she wasn't resisting walking into the room and that in itself was comforting to me. The radiologist told me that if she did not lie perfectly still, they would have to call in an anesthesiologist. I begged him to just go ahead and do that because I didn't want her to be awake and afraid. The radiologist said "Ma'am, that's really a big deal and I would rather that be a last resort." He then told Lauren that it was very important that she lie perfectly still. I knew at that point that we just had to rely on the Lord to keep her still. It was very hard seeing the radiologist strap her on the table and place the headpiece on her. It was even harder watching her little body enter that machine knowing why she was going in there and knowing how afraid she was. I really broke down after she entered the machine—I didn't feel like being brave anymore. Within a minute or two, the Lord drew my attention to her feet and I noticed how still she was lying. I didn't see her toes move a muscle—not even once. I thought she had fallen asleep and that made me feel at ease. I began to pray for Lauren and I felt what I can only describe as a blanket of peace come over me—it felt like someone had literally placed a comforting blanket on my back and around my shoulders and I knew people were praying on Lauren's behalf. I, too, kept praying over and over that Lauren would sense that the Lord was right beside her.



After about 25 minutes the radiologist came in and pulled the table out of the machine. To my great surprise Lauren was awake and had not been to sleep at all. God had kept her perfectly still just like I prayed. I was AMAZED! The radiologist told her that she was doing a great job, but that he had to give her a needle with a syringe of dye for a portion of the test. I thought that was really going to upset her, but she didn't cry when he gave her the needle nor did she cry about having to go back in the machine for another eight minutes. The last portion of the MRI was finished and the radiologist came in and told us that they had gotten clear pictures and we could leave. All we could do now was wait for the results.

At supper that evening different ones were talking and Lauren said to me out of the blue "Mommy, when I was in that machine I felt like God had His arms wrapped around me really tight". At first, I was shocked, and then I thought ..."Oh, that must have just been the..." and my thoughts quickly trailed off, because in the instant of that sinful thought came the loudest, inaudible words that I have ever heard..."**HOW DARE YOU TRY TO REASON THIS AWAY!**" I was startled and realized what an ungodly thought was entering my head. Of course, God could be with her in an MRI machine, why wouldn't He be with His child when she needed Him and when we had specifically asked Him to be with her? I felt very ashamed and rebuked. I then asked Lauren to demonstrate what God's arms felt like. She came up **behind me** and wrapped her arms **very** tightly around me. I realized what an answer to prayer God had really given me. The whole time that Lauren was in the MRI machine, I kept praying that she would know God's presence—that she would know He was right beside her—but He was doing better than that, He was holding her!!!

After I had put Lauren to bed that night she got back up and said she wasn't feeling well and wanted to sit with me for a while. We started talking about the procedure and I said, "Lauren, was it very loud in that machine?" I asked her that because I had earplugs in and the sound from the machine was still loud to me. She looked at me a little surprised at my question and said, "Not really, I heard music". Surprised, I said, "You heard music?" She said, "Yes, didn't you"? I said "No, I didn't, what did you hear? She said, "You know that song 'Be Not Afraid', I heard that song." I instantly felt chilled and thought that must have been an amazing experience for her. This time, I had no intention of questioning her statement! I knew the Lord had placed that music in the MRI machine to comfort His scared little girl. I told her that was a precious gift from God to her because I didn't hear that music. She just shrugged her shoulders and said, "Well, I did". It was days later that I realized that God had given us comfort in the exact same song, but for each of us, it was at the time when we needed it most. In recent days Lauren told me that when she was in the MRI machine it felt like God was rocking her, not back and forth like she was on a swing, but like she was in a cradle. Those were her very words.

I cannot imagine what Lauren experienced in the MRI machine, but to me, it must have been something Divine and I will always be thankful for what the Lord did for her.

When I review the emotions that I experienced throughout the day of the MRI, from just watching her still feet when she was in the machine to listening to her as she recalled her account of actually being in the machine, its like reading about when the Angel and angelic hosts appeared to tell the shepherds that Christ had been born. It must have been amazing for the lowly shepherds to see glorious angels and to hear such privileged and

wonderful news. I am blessed to read about this event in the Bible and I can wonder how the shepherds felt and what it all looked like, but the shepherds were the ones who actually experienced the visit from the angels. Lauren got to experience a really precious time with the Lord and I was just privileged to hear her account of her time with the Lord.

The results of the MRI were termed “uneventful” (I thought it was all plenty eventful). The doctors really couldn’t identify what the mass was. They believe that it is probably just a fibroma. Lauren will have another MRI this summer to see if anything in the mass has changed.

God is teaching me that it is important not to hold on to my children too tightly. They really belong to God and He just allows me the privilege of taking care of them for His glory. That’s a really sobering thought because I feel like they are MINE. But, truly, they are HIS. I cannot control what He wants to do in their lives. I have to entrust my children to Him knowing that He has their best interest at heart—even if He would choose to let them suffer or even take their life. Humanly speaking, its very hard to entrust my children to the Lord, yet He loves my children more than I love them. I am also learning that when we ask God for the desires of our heart, we should wait expectantly for Him to answer our requests. Why are we so surprised when He actually answers our requests? We have no way of knowing what the future holds for our family in regard to this disease, but God has it all planned out. We can choose to live in fear, or we can choose to trust our future to Him. I think that one reason that the Lord has allowed us to experience what we did with Todd and then with Lauren, is to show us His faithfulness. If and when a new trial comes up for our family, we can look to these past

experiences and remember how the Lord was present with our family during our time of need and that He faithfully carried us through these times. As He has been with us in the past, so will He be with us in the future. It is my prayer that God will give each of us the grace and strength we need to trust Him with our future and not be afraid.

**“Be not afraid, for I have redeemed you. Be not afraid, I have called you by name. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you pass through floods, they will not sweep o’er you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be consumed. You are mine, you are precious in my sight.”**

(Words and music by Craig Courtney, Beckenhorst Press, Columbus, OH, based on Isaiah 43:1-4)