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Thomas Epting: A Perfect Faith



Thomas Epting

I Peter 4:16: Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

James 4:14: Whereas you know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

"That God be glorified and His will be done in my life."

That was ever the prayer of Thomas Epting, who passed away November 24, 2006 at the age of 16.

From the age of four, Thomas twice battled leukemia and then five brain tumors, but he never lost faith or doubted God, instead trusting in his heavenly Father's will for his life.

First diagnosed May 13, 1995, two months shy of his fifth birthday, Thomas dealt with chemotherapy continuously for two and a half years. "On the very last appointment, January 8, 1998, they found that the leukemia had relapsed and was coming back in the spinal fluid," explained his mother, Amy. "They call that a central nervous system relapse. On the day he thought it was all over, we literally started over, on an even harder course of chemotherapy and radiation, for another two and a half years."

In May, 2000, after having fought against leukemia for half of his 10 years, Thomas and his family thought that the battle was over.

But in May, 2006, he was diagnosed with brain tumors.

“We were living one day at a time, but, about the time we were kind of ‘coming up for air’, thinking that, medically, it looked good, that was when the brain tumors came,” said Amy.

“When he started having problems, his left arm was very weak. He noticed it in biology class. He could barely get half a page written. They checked him but didn’t see anything. Over a period of days, it was getting weaker, so he had a cat scan, which showed two lesions. The next day, they did an MRI, which showed five. They sent us to Duke for a biopsy to see exactly what it was.

The first report, from the neurosurgeon right after the surgery, said that they thought it was a leukemia lymphoma type tumor, which, although would not be good, would medically be a much better prognosis than what it turned out to be.

The next day, the oncology doctor told Thomas that he did not think it was a leukemia lymphoma type tumor, but the most highly aggressive malignant brain tumor anyone can have. It stunned all of us, because we went from a ray of medical hope to basically no hope. I know there is hope in all things with God, but, just purely from a medical standpoint, it went from some hope to zero.

“When the oncologist walked out of the room, I didn’t know what Thomas was thinking. He was so smart, and I knew that he knew, medically, what it meant. I didn’t want to ask, ‘Are you scared?’ I knew he would protect me, and probably not answer anyway. I said, ‘How are you going to pray?’ He looked at me, and, without hesitation, he said, ‘That God be glorified, Mom. That’s all that matters.’ That was his reaction the whole way through. It was just incredible.”

Thomas’ mother described his faith as perfect. “From the first diagnosis of leukemia at the age of four, he never one time complained,” she said. “He never questioned. He had a perfect faith and submission that God had a plan.

“He couldn’t wait to drive. The night before his driving test was when his arm really weakened. He never did get his license. His left side was basically paralyzed. His passion in life was reading, but the medicine made it next to impossible for him to read. It was constantly over and over again things being taken away. He never questioned. He never complained—never one time. That, to me, is a perfect faith.

“I’m not saying he was a perfect person, even though, to me, he basically was. He didn’t put himself on any kind of pedestal. But, watching him all of those years of suffering—never complaining, never questioning, always trusting—to me, that’s what I would think a perfect faith is. I’m totally in awe of his faith.”

Throughout Thomas’ battles, the Epting family’s church, Calvary Chapel in Pickens, South Carolina, dedicated part of their website (www.ccpickens.org) to Thomas, with the Epting family posting updates on Thomas’ progress.

More than 50,000 cards with Thomas’ photograph and information were printed and sent around the world by caring and praying people. The Epting family heard from people in South America, Spain, France, and Africa, as well as from those close to their Greenville,

South Carolina home. So many expressed that they were keeping Thomas and his family in their prayers.

One day, while reading through e-mails sent to them, Thomas' father, Tommy, looked at him and said, "I didn't know there were this many praying people in the world." Thomas smiled. Tommy told his son, "A lot of people are going to come to Christ, I think, because of your faith and your testimony." Thomas answered, 'Then, it's worth it.'

"That was the way he went about the whole thing, like it was God's plan," said Amy. "I asked him, 'Don't you boldly pray for God to heal you?' He said, 'I tell Him, if it's His will, I'd like to be healed. But Mom, if His will isn't for me to be healed, then why would I want that? He is going to know what's best for me. So why would I not want His plan?' That's amazing to me, because, as a Mom, I just wanted him well. Thomas had this faith that, to me, is just unbelievable. He loved living. He fought like crazy. But the bottom line was, 'not my will but thine.' He was willing and submitted 100% to whatever God's plan was. He did not want to disappoint Him or do anything to embarrass Him, and he didn't."



Thomas Epting with his younger brothers, Josh and Zack, in Washington, D.C.

Amy plans to compile scrapbooks for Thomas' younger brothers, Josh, age 13, and Zack, age nine. "Different people had written e-mails about things they remembered about Thomas or about the way his faith impacted them," said Amy. "Some are people we know. Some are people that found out about him through the prayer cards or e-mail chains. I know that my sons are very aware of all that's gone on, but I know that they will have a different take on everything at age 20 or 25."



Thomas, Zack, and Josh Epting at the Atlanta Zoo

Thomas, himself, was an avid reader and writer. In one essay entitled, 'What is Happiness?', Thomas wrote, "As Christians, we can find happiness from knowing that there is a God who loves us and will never forsake us, but also in knowing that He is coming back for us. We are crooked beings in a twisted world, and, until Jesus returns, the world will remain twisted. We are made straight by Him, and in only Him is where we can find our happiness, not in virtue, not in earthly possessions, not in anything found on this earth."

Thomas homeschooled, and his favorite subjects were history and reading.

The Bible was his favorite to read. Among his favorite verses from scripture were:

1 Peter 4:16: Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

James 4:14: Whereas you know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

1 John 2:17: And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.

Ephesians 2:8-10: For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Philippians 2:6-8: *Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*

Philippians 3:7-8: *But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.*

Philippians 4:13: *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*

Romans 5:1-6: *Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed: because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.*

Thomas, his mother said, identified with the suffering of Christ and still submitted and trusted and believed God.

He told his mother not to worry. "Quit being scared," he said. "God has a plan. Don't be stressed out. God is in control." Once, on the way to the hospital for a chemotherapy treatment, Thomas told his mother, "God sent His Son to die for me. If God never did anything else for me ever, His sending Jesus for me is enough for me to praise Him continually."

He told his father, "It's a win-win situation for me, Dad. If He heals me, I stay with you, with my family. If He takes me, I win again."

On his 16th birthday, July 14, 2006, Thomas was overwhelmed by the number of well-wishers who sent him birthday cards and called him. He told his mother, "All of this is so unreal. I have done nothing to deserve so much from so many nice people."

Amy recalled that, a couple of weeks before Thomas' death, men from the church laid hands on him and prayed for his healing. Before their pastor, Rev. Scott Hunt, began praying, he asked Thomas if there were any special needs for which he wanted them to pray. "He had suffered unspeakably," Amy said, "and his prayer was for me. 'Pray for my Mom, that she'll have the strength that she needs.' He was always thinking about anybody but himself.

When we would do family devotions at our house, he would pray, when he was strong enough. Some nights, he didn't really have the strength to pray aloud. But when he prayed, he would never pray for himself. The last time he prayed, he said, 'Lord, please, if it's your will, can I have a little use of my arm and leg back?' I looked at my husband, stunned, because Thomas would never ask for anything. But then, he went on to pray, 'So that I can help Mom with my moving around and I can help Mom with my showers.' Even then, it wasn't, 'Help me to walk so I can hang out with my friends and drive my car.' It was so that he could help me move him. That was him."

The Epting family has begun The Thomas Epting Faith Fund, which they plan to use as a faith-based ministry for children with cancer. "We're thinking of making a tract similar to the prayer card that told his story and asked for prayer," said Amy. "These cards would be similar, but would tell his story and give the plan of salvation." Memorials may be sent to The Thomas Epting Faith Fund, Community Foundation of Greenville, 27 Cleveland Street, Suite 101, Greenville, SC 29601.

The Epting family also plans to create a website with Thomas' story and the plan of salvation. "I think it would be a good way to witness to people, because it is a very strong statement of faith," said Amy. "And a lot of people are more open because it is a child. People have shared that it has opened doors to share Christ with co-workers that they've never been able to before, because it's real life and a story of faith." Once the website is created, it will be announced on their church's website at www.ccpickens.org.

"We want as much good to come from this as possible," said Amy. "Our prayer has been for God to open the doors and show us His plan. Thomas' goal was that God be glorified and for others to be saved, so anything to that end would be our goal."

"Not only will people be saved, but many of us have been revived," said Thomas' Pastor. "We've been blessed through the ministry of Thomas Epting."

"When he was in third grade, Thomas wrote, 'When I grow up, I would like to be a missionary. I would have the opportunity to see many places. I would be able to help people by witnessing to them about God's Word. Being a missionary would be a great way to serve God with people who need to know Jesus.' Thomas was a missionary. He was a native missionary. He was a missionary to all of us. Those were prophetic words from a wonderful young man."

"What a masterpiece, what a workmanship our Lord and Savior turned Thomas into. If there is ever a man who will hear those words – 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant' – it will be Thomas Epting."

Hunt pointed to scripture, John 11, the story of Lazarus' death and Jesus raising him from the dead. "The whole story is about belief, about faith. I do not know of a young man who had a more unwavering faith than Thomas. God let that situation with Lazarus go from bad to worse to impossible. He did the same with Thomas. Thomas is with the Lord. As in that passage of scripture, Jesus knew what was best."

"Thomas embraced God's will for his life. And the greatest gift is God being glorified through many coming to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the days to come, someone will be saved, which will bring glory to our Lord and Savior. That's what Thomas' calling was in this life. He wanted to live. We prayed for him to live. But he knew life is short. I think he understood what his calling was in this life, as hard as it was for us to accept."

Referring to Thomas' father, Hunt said, "Tommy Epting has become a great friend to me, and I've watched him through this situation, through this testing, through this wilderness experience, watching his son relapse, with brain tumors. And I've seen the Lord drive Tommy into the Word, like he's never gone before, just falling in love with God's Word. Is God glorified in that? I look forward to seeing how Thomas' prayer request will be answered in years to come."



The Epting family: Tommy, Amy, Thomas, Josh, Zack

"The bond that Amy and Thomas had was hard to describe—finishing each other's thoughts, finishing each other's sentences, they knew each other. Thomas' suffering was physical. As the mother, Amy's suffering was emotional. And hand in hand, day in and day out, with iv's, chemo, radiation, that bond grew deeper and stronger. His greatest prayer request, besides the Lord being glorified, was, 'Pray for my mother.'

"The unsung heroes behind the scene were Josh and Zack—always there, living in the shadows, having to rush off to a hospital to get iv's or more chemotherapy, Josh holding Thomas' hand while he received the iv's. They loved Thomas, and they ministered to Thomas. He loved them."

Indeed, "I love you" were Thomas' last words to his family.

Amy expressed gratefulness to everyone who prayed for Thomas and their family, called, sent cards, letters, gifts, and meals, and showed an outpouring of love and support. Anyone wishing to keep in touch with the Epting family may reach them at 18 West Hillcrest Drive, Greenville, SC 29609, by telephone at 864-235-7068, or by e-mail at mousesmail@bellsouth.net.

She requested continued prayer, for strength for the Epting family as they face life without Thomas. "We dearly love him and miss him," she said. "We know that we were not worthy of him, but we thank God that He gave Thomas to us anyway."

Recalling Thomas' main request, she added, "Please pray that God will continue to be glorified through Thomas' faith and life."

MKB, Publisher, The Christian View