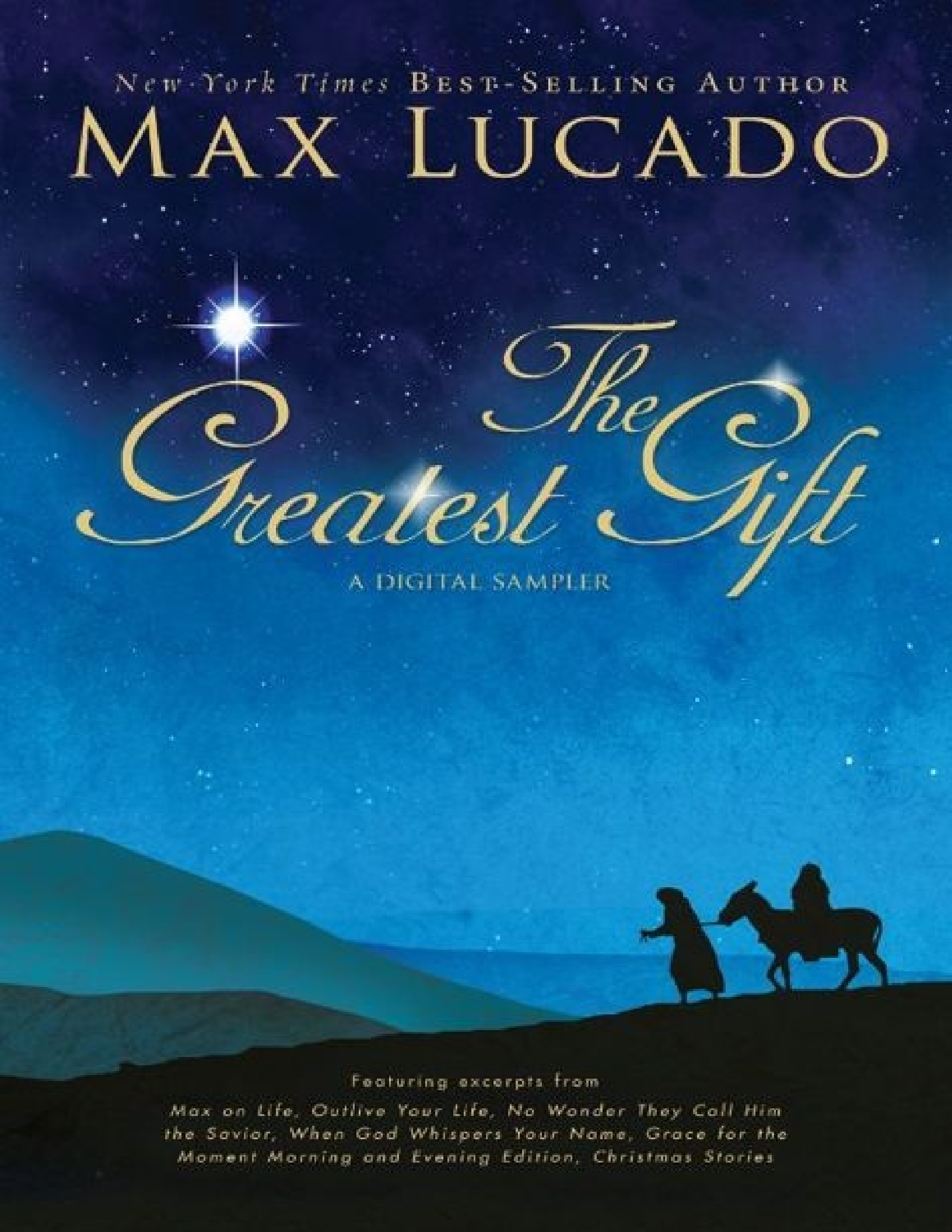
New York Times BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

MAX LUCADO

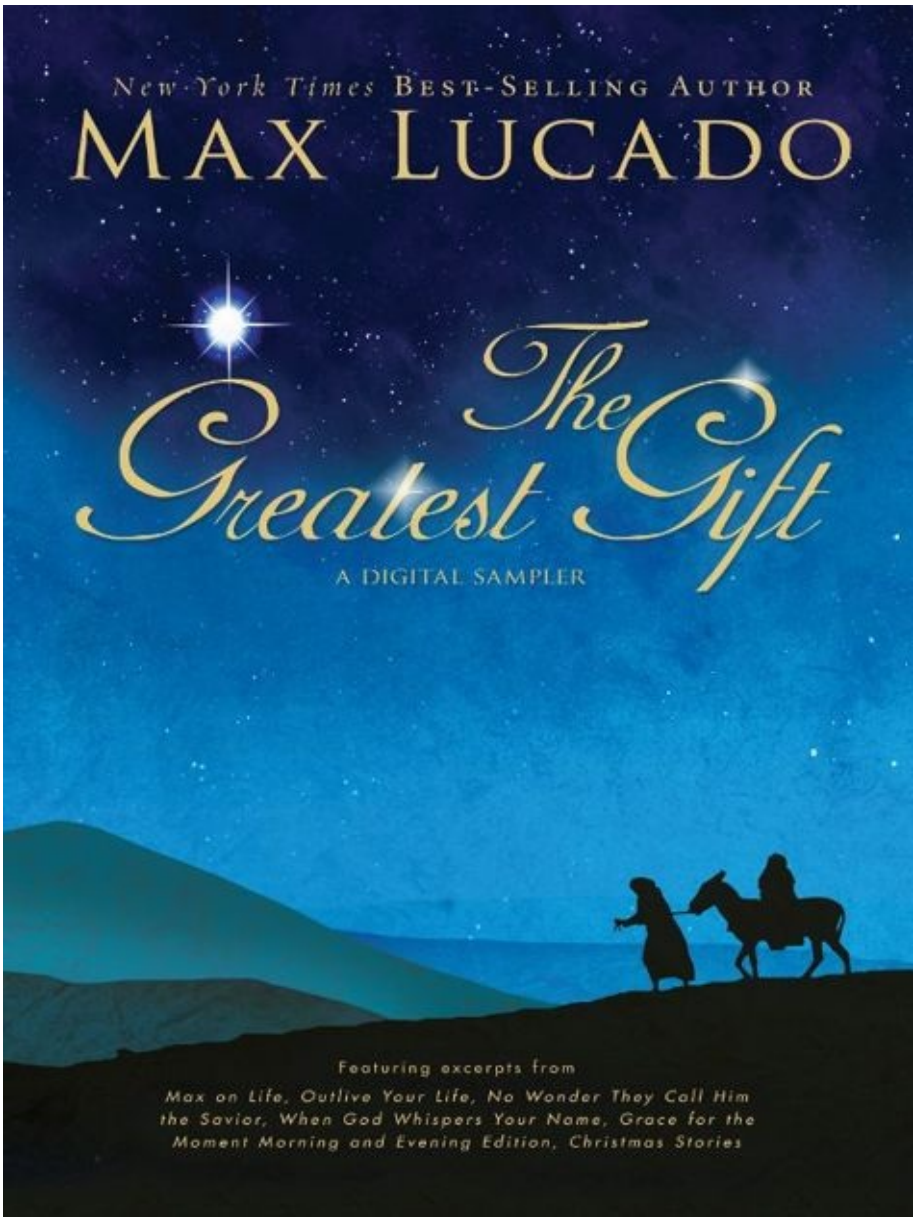
The Greatest Gift

A DIGITAL SAMPLER



Featuring excerpts from

Max on Life, Outlive Your Life, No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, When God Whispers Your Name, Grace for the Moment Morning and Evening Edition, Christmas Stories


New York Times BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
MAX LUCADO
The Greatest Gift
A DIGITAL SAMPLER
Featuring excerpts from
Max on Life, Outlive Your Life, No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, When God Whispers Your Name, Grace for the Moment Morning and Evening Edition, Christmas Stories

The Greatest Gift

A Max Lucado Digital Sampler

Max Lucado



NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

© 2011 Max Lucado

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Thomas Nelson. Thomas Nelson is a registered trademark of Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Thomas Nelson, Inc. titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in *Max on Life* are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in *Outlive Your Life* are taken from the New King James Version®. © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in *When God Whispers Your Name* and *Grace for the Moment Morning & Evening Edition* are taken from the New Century Version®. © 2005 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Other Scripture references are taken from the following sources: New Century Version® (NCV). © 2005 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. *J. B. Phillips: The New Testament in Modern English, Revised Edition* (PHILLIPS). © J. B. Phillips 1958, 1960, 1972. Used by permission of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. Holy Bible, New Living Translation (NLT). © 1996, 2004. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved. New King James Version® (NKJV). © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. *The Message* (MSG) by Eugene H. Peterson. © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved. King James Version (KJV). Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (NIV). © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. New American Standard Bible® (NASB). © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission. *The Living Bible* (TLB) ©1971 by Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

ISBN: 978-0-84999167-7

Contents

1. *Max on Life*
2. *Outlive Your Life*
3. *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*
4. *When God Whispers Your Name*
5. *Grace for the Moment Morning & Evening Edition*
6. *Christmas Stories*
Notes

This digital sampler includes excerpts from selected Max Lucado titles, offering a glimpse into the contents of these six books, all of which reveal the greatest gift of all time. All titles—*Max on Life, Outlive Your Life, No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, When God Whispers Your Name, Grace for the Moment Morning & Evening Edition*, and *Christmas Stories*—are copyrighted by Max Lucado and published by Thomas Nelson.

1.

Max on Life



Help

Prayer, Scripture, and “Why church?”

MAX LUCADO

Kevin,

Knowing God is like mountain-climbing. Some days the path is steep. Others, the trail is easy. Clouds can eclipse the view. The sun might illuminate the peak. Most of all, it just takes time.

Know this: God will help you.

Max

61. Why should we pray for help when God already has a plan? He's going to do his will anyway, so what difference does it make when we ask for healing for a friend, family member, or pet? Does prayer really change anything, or was the outcome already in God's plan?

I have a story that helps answer this question.

When my daughter Sara was in the second grade, we took her desk hunting at a store that specializes in unpainted furniture. She was excited about owning her own desk. When she learned we weren't taking the desk home that day, she was upset. "But, Daddy, I wanted to take it home today."

Much to her credit, she didn't stomp her feet and demand her way. She did, however, set out on an urgent course to change her father's mind. Every time I turned a corner, she was waiting for me.

"Daddy, don't you think we could paint it ourselves?"

"Daddy, I just want to draw some pictures on my new desk."

"Daddy, please let's take it home today."

After a bit she disappeared, only to return, arms open wide, bubbling with a discovery. "Guess what, Daddy. It'll fit in the back of the car!"

You and I know that a seven-year-old has no clue what will or won't fit in a vehicle, but the fact that she had measured the trunk with her arms softened my heart. The clincher, though, was the name she called me: Daddy.

The Lucado family took a desk home that day.

She changed my mind. She altered my schedule. She influenced the details of my actions.

Prayer does the same.

Remember the prayer of Moses on Mount Sinai? He begged God not to destroy the people, and "the Lord changed his mind and did not destroy the people as he had said he might" (Ex. 32:14 NCV).

The prayer of Moses affected the plans of God.

Prayer does not change everything. We cannot convince God to stop loving people, preparing heaven, or saving souls. We cannot change God's character or his eternal plans.

But we can influence the details. "When a believing person prays, great things happen" (James 5:16 NCV). Prayer is not overcoming a reluctant God. Prayer is urging God to do what he wants to do (heal, help, give his daughter a desk) but to do it sooner, stronger, or more clearly.

By the way, I ordered a desk for my office that day too. When Sara learned

that it would take six weeks to be delivered, she told me, “I guess you didn’t beg, did you, Daddy?”

62. I'M A NEW CHRISTIAN WHO IS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO GROW CLOSER TO GOD. FRIENDS TELL ME I NEED TO HAVE A QUIET TIME WITH GOD EACH DAY, BUT I CAN'T FIGURE OUT EXACTLY WHAT TO DO.

Denalyn and I like to go to the same restaurants over and over again. You could call our dates predictable, but for us they are special. We like the food. We like the servers. We like the atmosphere. When we're there, we remember special moments we've shared before. Our hearts open up . . . we lose track of time . . . because we're comfortable in that place. We talk to each other, listen to each other, laugh, and cry. I love those times!

A quiet time with God is very similar to a date. Here are some tools to help you keep your very special date with God.

Decide on *a regular time and place*. Select a slot in your schedule and a corner of your world, and claim it for God. A familiar place will remind you of similar feelings you experienced before with God. You need to get comfortable.

How much time should you take? As much as you need. Value quality over quantity. Your time with God should last long enough for you to say what you want and for God to say what he wants.

You should bring on your date *an open Bible*—God's Word, his love letter to you. You won't necessarily hear God speak out loud, but you can hear what he has to say through his eternal dialogue with humanity.

You also need *a listening heart*. Don't forget the admonition from James: "The man who looks into the perfect mirror of God's law, the law of liberty, and makes a habit of so doing, is not the man who sees and forgets. He puts that law into practice and he wins true happiness" (James 1:25 PHILLIPS). Listen to the lover of your soul. Don't just nod your head, pretending to hear. Your date knows when you're engaged. So does God.

Just as you wouldn't miss your date with a loved one, claiming you were too busy, make sure your date with God is on the calendar, and do everything in your power to keep it special.

63. I'M REALLY STRUGGLING THROUGH SOME TOUGH TIMES RIGHT NOW, BOTH FINANCIALLY AND PERSONALLY. I DON'T SEEM TO HAVE THE ANSWERS OR SOLUTIONS. CAN PRAYER REALLY HELP ME FIND ANSWERS AND GET THROUGH THIS SLUMP?

Prayer reminds you who is in charge. You don't take your requests to someone with less authority. You take them to someone who outranks you in the solutions department. Prayer decreases you and increases God.

Prayer gives permission to God to complete the request according to his will. Hopefully, you don't pray just to let God know what's going on. He's way ahead of you on that one. You are praying to transfer "my will be done" to "God's will be done." Since he is in charge, he knows the best solution. Prayer exercises your willpower and gives God authority to work in your life.

Prayer relieves the stress of perceived inactivity. Now that God has been given the task, you don't have to worry about it any longer. God has his people on it. With less stress comes more strength. Prayer transfers the burden to God and lightens your load.

People struggle with life when they don't have answers. The darkest valleys are blackened by the shadows of question marks. So what do you do? Think harder? Try harder? Hold longer conversations with yourself? Why not pray to the One with all the answers and let him take over?

Prayer pushes us through life's slumps, propels us over the humps, and pulls us out of the dumps. Prayer is the oomph we need to get the answers we seek.

64. I'VE ASKED GOD TO HEAL ME FROM CANCER. HE HEALED MY FRIEND FROM CANCER, BUT SO FAR HE HASN'T HELPED ME. MY FRIEND SAYS I SHOULD PRAY WITH MORE FAITH. IS SHE RIGHT?

Let me share with you two false notions people have about heavenly healing.

First, *death is always bad*. We see a hearse; we think sorrow. We see a grave; we think despair. We hear of a death; we think of a loss. Not so in heaven. When heaven sees the breathless body, it sees the vacated cocoon and the liberated butterfly. Ever since sin entered the world, the body has been doomed to die. Not only is death inevitable; death is necessary for us to inherit the new life we are to enjoy in Christ. "Flesh and blood cannot have a part in the kingdom of God . . . This body that can be destroyed must clothe itself with something that can never be destroyed" (1 Cor. 15:50, 53 NCV).

As long as we see death as a failure, then we will perceive God as being deaf to our prayers. Ask those in heaven if their prayers for healing were answered, and you might get a different perspective.

Second, *prayer heals*. God heals, not prayer. A matter of semantics? No. If you think the power is in the prayer and not the One who hears the prayer, you

fault the pray-er for unanswered prayer. How many people have had to deal with the false guilt of inadequate prayer? “If I had prayed more, if I had prayed better, if I had prayed differently, if I had prayed in the chapel or with a priest or with rosary beads or with different words.” To claim that prayer heals is to place prayer in the realm of magic chants and medicine man dances. Worse still, to place the power in the prayer relegates God to the personality of a computer. If I push the right buttons or type the correct code, he must respond.

No, the power of prayer is in the One who hears it, not the one who makes it.

Don’t assume that the faithful will never suffer. If the faithful never suffer, how do we explain the illness of Paul (Gal. 4:13), the poor health of Paul’s friend Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20), and the near death of his beloved Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:27)?

Hebrews 11 describes the plight of God’s faithful: some defeated kingdoms, stopped fires, and were saved from being killed. Others were put in chains and thrown into prison. They were stoned to death, they were cut in half, and they were killed with swords. Some wore the skin of sheep and goats. They were poor, abused, and treated badly . . . All of these people are known for their faith (Heb. 11:33–39).

If the faithful never suffer, how do we explain the agony of Gethsemane and the death of Christ on the cross? Jesus, himself, prayed to be delivered from earthly pain (Matt. 26:39), and that request was denied. Was that due to a lack of faith? Absolutely not. God said no to the earthly prayer for a heavenly reason. The plan of salvation was worth the pain of the Savior. There are times when God chooses to say no to the earthly request so he can say yes to the heavenly one.

Doesn’t he still do that today? Doesn’t he use the challenge of the body to strengthen the soul? We need to remember that Peter was in a storm before he walked on water, Lazarus was in a grave before he came out of it, the demoniac was possessed before he was a preacher, and the paralytic was on a stretcher before he was in your Bible (Matt. 14:23–29; John 11:1–44; Mark 5:1–20; Luke 5:17–25). We know that in everything God works for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

Please don’t interpret the presence of your disease as the absence of God’s love. I pray he heals you. And he will, ultimately.

65. I’VE READ THE VERSE IN THE BIBLE ABOUT PRAYING WITHOUT CEASING.

DOES ANYONE ACTUALLY DO THIS?

Unceasing prayer may sound complicated, but it needn't be that way.

Do this. Change your definition of prayer. Think of prayers less as an activity for God and more as an awareness of God. Seek to live in uninterrupted awareness. Acknowledge his presence everywhere you go. As you stand in line to register your car, think, *Thank you, Lord, for being here*. In the grocery store as you shop, think, *Your presence, my King, I welcome*. As you wash the dishes, worship your Maker. Brother Lawrence did. This well-known saint called himself the "lord of all pots and pans." In his book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, he wrote:

> The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.[1]

Besides, it makes more sense to talk to God than mumble to yourself.

66. I APPLIED FOR A JOB AND GOT REJECTED. I ASKED MY GRANDMOTHER FOR A LOAN; SHE TURNED ME DOWN. MY BOYFRIEND SAYS WE SHOULD SPLIT UP. I'M HAVING A HARD, HARD WEEK. IS GOD EVEN LISTENING TO ME?

Yes, he is. And here is what you need to know: God knows more about life than we do.

When my oldest daughter was about six years old, she and I were having a discussion about my work. It seems she wasn't too happy with my chosen profession. She wanted me to leave the ministry. "I like you as a preacher," she explained. "I just really wish you sold snow cones."

An honest request from a pure heart. It made sense to her that the happiest people in the world were the men who drove the snow-cone trucks. You play music. You sell goodies. You make kids happy. What more could you want? (Come to think about it, she may have had a point. I could get a loan, buy a truck, and . . . nah, I'd eat too much.)

I heard her request but didn't heed it. Why? Because I knew better. I know what I'm called to do and what I need to do. The fact is, I knew more about life than she did. Same with God.

God hears our requests. But his answer is not always what we'd like it to be. Why? Because God knows more about life than we do.

Next time you're disappointed, don't panic. Don't bail out. Don't give up. Just be patient. Talk to God about your challenges. Then let your heavenly Father remind you he's still in control.

67. In my med-school class we discussed the place of prayer in the hospital. As you can imagine, we heard strong opinions on both sides. What are your thoughts? What is the purpose of healing prayer?

We tend toward one of two extremes on this subject: fanaticism or cynicism. Fanatics see the healing of the body as the aim of God and the measure of faith. Cynics consider any connection between prayer and healing as coincidental at best and misleading at worst. A fanatic might seek prayer at the exclusion of medicine; a cynic might seek medicine at the exclusion of prayer.

A healthy balance can be found. The physician is the friend of God. Prayer is the friend of the physician.

The example of Jesus is important.

> Great crowds came to Jesus, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, those who could not speak, and many others. They put them at Jesus' feet, and he healed them. The crowd was amazed when they saw that people who could not speak before were now able to speak. The crippled were made strong. The lame could walk, and the blind could see. And they praised the God of Israel for this. (Matt. 15:30–31 NCV)

What did the people do with the sick? They put them at Jesus' feet. This is the purpose of praying for the ill. We place the sick at the feet of the Physician and request his touch. This passage also gives us the result of healing prayer. "They praised the God of Israel for this." The ultimate aim of healing is not just a healthy body but a greater kingdom. If God's aim is to grant perfect health to all his children, he has failed, because no one enjoys perfect health, and everyone dies. But if God's aim is to expand the boundaries of his kingdom, then he has succeeded. For every time he heals, a thousand sermons are preached.

Speaking of sermons, did you notice what is missing from this text? Preaching. Jesus stayed with these four thousand people for three days and, as far as we know, never preached a sermon. Not one time did he say, "May I have

your attention?" But thousands of times he asked, "May I help you?" What compassion he had for them. Can you imagine the line of people? On crutches, wearing blindfolds, carried by friends, cradled by parents. For seventy-two hours Jesus stared into face after hurting face, and then he said, "I feel sorry for these people" (v. 32 NCV). The inexhaustible compassion of Jesus. Mark it down. Pain on earth causes pain in heaven. And he will stand and receive the ill as long as the ill come in faith to him.

And he will do what is right every time. "God will always give what is right to his people who cry to him night and day, and he will not be slow to answer them" (Luke 18:7 NCV).

Healing prayer begs God to do what is right. My friend Dennis, a chaplain, offers this prayer over patients: "God, would you put on the surgical gloves first?"

I like that.

68. If God doesn't tempt us, why does he tell us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation"?

Because of the translation, many think this statement is saying, "Don't tempt me, Lord" or "Don't lead me into a sin." That's not the intent. God is not tempting us or leading us into temptation. The phrase translates better as a cry for help: "Keep me from falling into a temptation trap."

We are asking God to steer us away from the bar, to divert our attention when the pretty girl walks by, to give us wisdom when we find that wallet, to walk away when we find ourselves alone with someone else's spouse.

The Father loves to hold the hands of his children. "The Lord directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the Lord holds them by the hand" (Ps. 37:23–24 NLT).

Temptation comes from only one place—hell. Satan has tempted everyone, starting with Adam and including even Jesus. The first with fruit. The second with bread. God does not tempt. He does not set us up to fail.

God does test us. Job was not tempted by God. His faith was tested. Satan (and Job's wife and friends) tempted Job to curse God (Job 1:8–12; 2:9; 42:7). Peter's faith was tested by walking on water (Matt. 14:25–31). Peter was tempted when he told Jesus not to have such morbid thoughts about death. Jesus blasted back, "Get out of here, Satan" (see Matt. 16:21–23).

So our prayers ask God, as the ultimate path guide, to watch the road ahead

and warn us of places where we might stumble.

69. Our son (sixteen years old) was diagnosed with a mental illness three years ago. We have prayed without ceasing for God's healing. But healing has not come, and the atmosphere in our home is becoming increasingly tense. Should we keep praying for his healing or just accept that he will never be healed?

It's always right to pray. Scripture tells us of many parents who pleaded with God for their children. Your son is just as important to God as those children of long ago.

If you will bear with me for a moment, let's come at this from a different perspective. I find it fascinating that the thread count of bed sheets can be anywhere between eighty and fifteen hundred threads per square inch of fabric. The higher the count, the better quality the sheet. Hundreds of threads woven in and out, over and under, to create one fabric.

I think about the nearly seven billion threads of life woven in and out of each other that create this tapestry on earth.[2] All of them placed here by the Creator, holding each other together.

Your son is one of those threads. His life wraps around the lives of others, holding them together as they hold him together, woven there by God himself. We may think it's a weak thread that needs to be fixed, but God may see it as the strongest thread around.

Maybe your son's illness is the thread that keeps you focused on God. Maybe your son's illness is the key to a neighbor coming to accept Christ. Maybe your son's illness becomes a testimony that blesses people for years to come. We have no idea how our lives weave in and out of the work God is doing in others.

So can your son be healed? Yes. Jesus healed mental illness in Bible times (Luke 9:37–42), and since God never changes, he can heal your son today.

Will your son be healed? We cannot say. It's not your decision or mine or even your son's. It's the decision of the Weaver. We see only one thread, but God sees them all.

The real healing that needs to occur, and a major issue that you seem to be facing, is the tension in the house. Relationships are pulling apart. Your family's faith is hanging by a thread.

God can bring that healing to your family now if they will come to him with their tired, worn-out lives and ask for a new wardrobe. Pray for healing, but pray

for more than just physical healing.

70. IT IS EMBARRASSING FOR ME TO ADMIT THIS, BUT IT'S A STRUGGLE FOR ME TO PRAY. I WANT TO PRAY MORE, BUT IT SEEMS AS THOUGH I CAN'T PRAY FOR MORE THAN A FEW MINUTES WITHOUT GETTING DISTRACTED. WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN TO ME? DOES IT MEAN I'M A WEAK CHRISTIAN?

When we pray, Satan plays games with us.

His favorite is spin the mind. Keep the thoughts circling round and round in an unfocused maelstrom of activity so the person praying believes he is too busy to finish.

Then Satan pulls out pin the blame on the donkey. That's when prayer time turns into the blame game. Instead of praying for people, we start accusing them. "If only they would do this . . ." or "God, tell them to do that . . ." Instead of confessing our sin, we load our burdens on the pack mules of our lives.

Usually Satan finishes with a game of lost-and-seek, where we get lost in our thoughts, wandering down empty trails and chasing shadows, then try to find our way back, only to discover the game is over.

Praying isn't a game. In fact, it's serious business—so serious that Satan plays games with our minds to keep us from praying.

Why? Because God tells us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17 NKJV). He sees church as "a house of prayer" (Matt. 21:13). No other activity guarantees such results: "When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action" (Matt. 18:19 MSG). When people pray, things happen. "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16 NKJV).

If Satan can stop prayer, he can make Christians ineffective.

The best way to stay focused is to remember the purpose of praying. Give each of these parts of your prayer outline ample time—five to ten minutes. They spell the acronym ACTS.

Adoration—Give God praise.

Confession—Confess your sins (not other people's sins).

Thanksgiving—Show appreciation for all God has given you.

Supplication—Present prayer requests for yourself and others.

No wonder Satan wants to convince us that we are weak, because once a believer finds strength in prayer, the game is over for Satan.

2.

Outlive Your Life



Open Your Door; Open Your Heart

They ate together in their homes,
happy to share their food with joyful hearts.
—ACTS 2:46 (NCV)



IF A VOICE could be a season, hers was springtime. “Hello,” she sang. “Thank you for calling.” I needed a kind welcome. The sky was pouring buckets of rain. Lightning had caused blackouts, and storms were jamming the traffic. News reports were telling drivers to stay off the roads. But I had a flight to catch.

So I called the airlines. They would know if the flight was late or canceled. They would be the calm within the storm. And for a butterfly’s blink of a moment, she was. “Hello, thank you for calling . . .”

But then it came. Before I could thank her in return, the voice continued, “For quality assurance this call may be monitored . . .”

Not again.

Ancient sailors feared falling off the edge of the earth. Our pioneering forefathers dreaded blinding blizzards. The first missionaries to Africa sliced trails into dense forests. But none of our ancestors faced what you and I face: the Bermuda Triangle called computerized telephone service.

“Press one,” she said, “for domestic flights.”

“Press two for international.”

“Press three if you know your flight number and the name of your congressman.”

“Press four if you are a frequent flier in the central time zone with no children.”

“Press five if the nine digits of your Social Security number total more than sixty . . .”

It was all I could do to keep up! I finally pressed a number, and wouldn’t you know it. I committed the equivalent of telephone hara-kiri. I was put on hold. For the foreseeable future I would be trapped in the underground cable cavern, doomed to spend hours listening to Kenny G and Barry Manilow.

Oh to have heard a human voice. To have spoken to a real person. To have received a human greeting. Is it just me, or is human contact going the way of the snow leopard? There was a time when every activity spurred a conversation. Service your car; greet the attendant. Deposit a check at the bank; chat with the teller about the weather. Buy a gift, and speak with the salesclerk. Not now. You can gas up with a credit card, make deposits online, and order a gift over the Internet. You can cycle through a day of business and never say *hello*.

Call us a fast society, an efficient society, but don’t call us a personal society. Our society is set up for isolation. We wear earbuds when we exercise. We communicate via e-mail and text messages. We enter and exit our houses with gates and garage-door openers. Our mantra: “I leave you alone. You leave me

alone.”

Yet God wants his people to be an exception. Let everyone else go the way of computers and keyboards. God’s children will be people of hospitality.

Long before the church had pulpits and baptisteries, she had kitchens and dinner tables. “The believers met together in the Temple every day. They ate together *in their homes*, happy to share their food with joyful hearts” (Acts 2:46 NCV). “Every day in the Temple and *in people’s homes* they continued teaching the people and telling the Good News—that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:42 NCV).

Even a casual reading of the New Testament unveils the house as the primary tool of the church. “To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer . . . and to the church in your house” (Philem. vv. 1–2). “Greet Priscilla and Aquila . . . the church that is in their house” (Rom. 16:3, 5). “Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house” (Col. 4:15).

It’s no wonder that the elders were to be “given to hospitality” (1 Tim. 3:2 KJV). The primary gathering place of the church was the home.

Consider the genius of God’s plan. The first generation of Christians was a tinderbox of contrasting cultures and backgrounds. At least fifteen different nationalities heard Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Jews stood next to Gentiles. Men worshipped with women. Slaves and masters alike sought after Christ. Can people of such varied backgrounds and cultures get along with each other?

We wonder the same thing today. Can Hispanics live in peace with Anglos? Can Democrats find common ground with Republicans? Can a Christian family carry on a civil friendship with the Muslim couple down the street? Can divergent people get along?

The early church did—without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages (the Cross) and the simplest of tools (the home).

Not everyone can serve in a foreign land, lead a relief effort, or volunteer at the downtown soup kitchen. But who can’t be hospitable? Do you have a front door? A table? Chairs? Bread and meat for sandwiches? Congratulations! You just qualified to serve in the most ancient of ministries: hospitality. You can join the ranks of people such as . . .

Abraham. He fed, not just angels, but the Lord of angels (Gen. 18).

Rahab, the harlot. She received and protected the spies. Thanks to her kindness, her kindred survived, and her name is remembered (Josh. 6:22–23; Matt. 1:5).

Martha and Mary. They opened their home for Jesus. He, in turn, opened the grave of Lazarus for them (John 11:1–45; Luke 10:38–42).

Zacchaeus. He welcomed Jesus to his table. And Jesus left salvation as a thank-you gift (Luke 19:1–10).

And what about the greatest example of all—the "certain man" of Matthew 26:18? On the day before his death, Jesus told his followers, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: "The chosen time is near. I will have the Passover with my followers at your house"'" (NCV).

How would you have liked to be the one who opened his home for Jesus? You can be. "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40 NIV). As you welcome strangers to your table, you are welcoming God himself.

Something holy happens around a dinner table that will never happen in a sanctuary. In a church auditorium you see the backs of heads. Around the table you see the expressions on faces. In the auditorium one person speaks; around the table everyone has a voice. Church services are on the clock. Around the table there is time to talk.

Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community.

It's no accident that *hospitality* and *hospital* come from the same Latin word, for they both lead to the same result: healing. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: "You matter to me and to God." You may think you are saying, "Come over for a visit." But what your guest hears is, "I'm worth the effort."

Do you know people who need this message? Singles who eat alone? Young couples who are far from home? Coworkers who've been transferred, teens who feel left out, and seniors who no longer drive? Some people pass an entire day with no meaningful contact with anyone else. Your hospitality can be their hospital. All you need are a few basic practices.

Issue a genuine invitation. Let your guests know you want them to come. Call them on the phone, or step over to their desks at work. Are they neighbors? Knock on their doors and say, "We'd love for you to join us at our dinner table tonight. Please come." People weather so many daily rejections. The doctor can't see them. The kids didn't call. The airplane is booked. But then you invite them over. *We have room for you!* Life altering.

Make a big deal of their arrival. Gather the entire family at the front door. Swing it open as you see them approach. If you have a driveway, meet them on it. If your apartment has a lobby, be waiting for them. This is a parade-worthy moment. One of God's children is coming to your house!

Address the needs of your guests. First-century hospitality included foot washing. Modern-day hospitality includes the sharing of food and drink. Time to talk and listen. No televisions blaring in the background. No invasive music.

Make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak. Go around the table and share favorite moments of the day or memories of the week. Like the Good Shepherd, we prepare a table and restore the soul.

Send them out with a blessing. Make it clear you are glad your guests came. Offer a prayer for their safety and a word of encouragement for their travel.

The event need not be elaborate to be significant. Don't listen to the Martha Stewart voice, the voice that says everything must be perfect. The house must be perfect. The china must be perfect. Meal. Kids. Husband. Everything must be perfect. Scented guest towels, warm appetizers, after-dinner mints.

If we wait until everything is perfect, we'll never issue an invitation. Remember this: what is common to you is a banquet to someone else. You think your house is small, but to the lonely heart, it is a castle. You think the living room is a mess, but to the person whose life is a mess, your house is a sanctuary. You think the meal is simple, but to those who eat alone every night, pork and beans on paper plates tastes like filet mignon. What is small to you is huge to them.

Open your table.

Even more, open your circle. Be certain to invite not just the affluent and successful, "but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Luke 14:13–14 NIV).

The Greek word for *hospitality* compounds two terms: *love* and *stranger*. The word literally means to love a stranger. All of us can welcome a guest we know and love. But can we welcome a stranger? Every morning in America more than 39 million people wake up in poverty.[1] In 2008, 17 million households had difficulty providing food for their families.[2] An estimated 1.1 million children lived in households experiencing hunger multiple times throughout the year.[3] And this is in America, the wealthiest nation in the history of the world.

When we provide food stamps, we stave off hunger. But when we invite the hungry to our tables, we address the deeper issues of value and self-worth. Who would have thought? God's secret weapons in the war on poverty include your kitchen table and mine.

A few months ago I was sitting at the red light of a busy intersection when I noticed a man walking toward my car. He stepped off the curb, bypassed several vehicles, and started waving at me. He carried a cardboard sign under his arm, a jammed pack on his back. His jeans were baggy, his beard was scraggly, and he was calling my name. "Max! Max! Remember me?"

I lowered my window. He smiled a toothless grin. "I still remember that burger you bought me." Then I remembered. Months, maybe a year earlier at

this very intersection, I had taken him to a corner hamburger stand where we enjoyed a meal together. He was California bound on that day. “I’m passing through Texas again,” he told me. The light changed, and cars began to honk. I pulled away, leaving him waving and shouting, “Thanks for the burger, Max.”

I’d long since forgotten that meal. Not him. We never know what one meal will do.

In one of Jesus’ resurrection appearances, he accompanies two disciples as they walk from Jerusalem to their village of Emmaus. The trail is a seven-mile journey, the better part of a day’s walk for grown, healthy men. They converse the entire trip. Jesus gives them an overview of the Bible, beginning with the teachings of Moses right up to the events of their day. Still, they don’t recognize him.

As they near their village, Jesus acts as if he is going to continue on his journey. We aren’t told how he sent this message. Maybe he pulled out his pocket calendar and mumbled something about an evening appointment in the next town. We don’t know how he left the impression, but he did.

The Emmaus-bound disciples had another idea. “But they urged him strongly, ‘Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over’” (Luke 24:29 NIV).

It had been a long day. The two pilgrims had much on their minds. Certainly they had obligations and people in their lives. But their fellow traveler stirred a fire in their hearts. So they welcomed him in. Still not knowing that their guest was Jesus, they pulled out an extra chair, poured some water in the soup, and offered bread. Jesus blessed the bread, and when he did, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (v. 31 NIV).

We still encounter people on the road. And sometimes we sense a peculiar warmth, an affection. We detect an urge to open our doors to them. In these moments let’s heed the inner voice. We never know whom we may be hosting for dinner.

Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay. God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.

(1 Peter 4:9–10 NLT)

Heavenly Father, every breath is a gift from your hand. Even so, I confess that sometimes my own hand remains tightly closed when I encounter the needs of others. Please open both my hand and my heart that I might learn to open my

door to others. As you help me open my heart and hand, O Lord, I ask that you also prompt me to open my life to those who need a taste of your love and bounty. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

3.

No Wonder They Call Him the Savior



The Gospel of the Second Chance

IT WAS LIKE discovering the prize in a box of Crackerjacks or spotting a little pearl in a box of buttons or stumbling across a ten dollar bill in a drawer full of envelopes.

It was small enough to overlook. Only two words. I know I'd read that passage a hundred times. But I'd never seen it. Maybe I'd passed over it in the excitement of the resurrection. Or, since Mark's account of the resurrection is by far the briefest of the four, maybe I'd just not paid too much attention. Or, maybe since it's in the last chapter of the gospel, my weary eyes had always read too quickly to note this little phrase.

But I won't miss it again. It's highlighted in yellow and underlined in red. You might want to do the same. Look in Mark, chapter 16. Read the first five verses about the women's surprise when they find the stone moved to the side. Then feast on that beautiful phrase spoken by the angel, "He is not here, he is risen," but don't pause for too long. Go a bit further. Get your pencil ready and enjoy this jewel in the seventh verse (here it comes). The verse reads like this: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee."

Did you see it? Read it again. (This time I italicized the words.)

"But go, tell his disciples *and Peter* that he is going before you to Galilee."

Now tell me if that's not a hidden treasure.

If I might paraphrase the words, "Don't stay here, go tell the disciples," a pause, then a smile, "and especially tell Peter, that he is going before you to Galilee."

What a line. It's as if all of heaven had watched Peter fall—and it's as if all of heaven wanted to help him back up again. "Be sure and tell Peter that he's not left out. Tell him that one failure doesn't make a flop."

Whew!

No wonder they call it the gospel of the second chance.

Not many second chances exist in the world today. Just ask the kid who didn't make the little league team or the fellow who got the pink slip or the mother of three who got dumped for a "pretty little thing."

Not many second chances. Nowadays it's more like, "It's now or never." "Around here we don't tolerate incompetence." "Gotta get tough to get along." "Not much room at the top." "Three strikes and you're out." "It's a dog-eat-dog world!"

Jesus has a simple answer to our masochistic mania. "It's a dog-eat-dog world?" he would say. "Then don't live with the dogs." That makes sense doesn't it? Why let a bunch of other failures tell you how much of a failure you are?

Sure you can have a second chance.

Just ask Peter. One minute he felt lower than a snake's belly and the next minute he was the high hog at the trough. Even the angels wanted this distraught netcaster to know that it wasn't over. The message came loud and clear from the celestial Throne Room through the divine courier. "Be sure and tell Peter that he gets to bat again."

Those who know these types of things say that the Gospel of Mark is really the transcribed notes and dictated thoughts of Peter. If this is true, then it was Peter himself who included these two words! And if these really are his words, I can't help but imagine that the old fisherman had to brush away a tear and swallow a lump when he got to this point in the story.

It's not every day that you get a second chance. Peter must have known that. The next time he saw Jesus, he got so excited that he barely got his britches on before he jumped into the cold water of the Sea of Galilee. It was also enough, so they say, to cause this backwoods Galilean to carry the gospel of the second chance all the way to Rome where they killed him. If you've ever wondered what would cause a man to be willing to be crucified upside down, maybe now you know.

It's not every day that you find someone who will give you a second chance—much less someone who will give you a second chance every day.

But in Jesus, Peter found both.

4.

When God Whispers Your Name



Late-Night Good News

LATE-NIGHT NEWS is a poor sedative.

Last night it was for me. All I wanted was the allergen count and the basketball scores. But to get them, I had to endure the usual monologue of global misery. And last night the world seemed worse than usual.

Watching the news doesn't usually disturb me so. I'm not a gloom-and-doom sort of fellow. I feel I'm as good as the next guy in taking human tragedy with a spoon of faith. But last night . . . well, the world seemed dark.

Perhaps it was the two youngsters shot in a drive-by shooting— one was six, the other ten.

Perhaps it was the reassuring announcement that twenty-six thousand highway bridges in America are near collapse.

Our surgeon general, who is opposed to tobacco, wants to legalize drugs.

A billionaire rock star is accused of molesting children. One senator is accused of seducing associates, another of tampering with election procedures.

A rising political figure in Russia has earned the nickname of Hitler.

Pistol-packing drivers give rise to a new bumper sticker: "Keep honking. I'm reloading."

The national debt is deeper. Our taxes are higher, the pollen count is up, and the Dallas Mavericks lost their fifteenth game in a row.

"And that's the world tonight!" the well-dressed man announces. I wonder why he's smiling.

On the way to bed, I step into the rooms of my three sleeping daughters. At the bedside of each I pause and ponder the plight of their future. "What in the world awaits you?" I whisper as I brush back hair and straighten blankets.

Their greatest concerns today are math tests, presents, and birthday parties. Would that their world would always be so innocent. It won't. Forests shadow every trail, and cliffs edge every turn. Every life has its share of fear. My children are no exception.

Nor are yours. And as appealing as a desert island or a monastery might be, seclusion is simply not the answer for facing a scary tomorrow.

Then what is? Does someone have a hand on the throttle of this train, or has the engineer bailed out just as we come in sight of dead-man's curve?

I may have found part of the answer in, of all places, the first chapter of the New Testament. I've often thought it strange that Matthew would begin his book with a genealogy. Certainly not good journalism. A list of who-sired-whom wouldn't get past most editors.

But then again, Matthew wasn't a journalist, and the Holy Spirit wasn't trying to get our attention. He was making a point. God had promised he would give a

Messiah through the bloodline of Abraham (Gen. 12:3), and he did.

"Having doubts about the future?" Matthew asks. "Just take a look at the past." And with that he opens the cedar chest of Jesus' lineage and begins pulling out the dirty laundry.

Believe me, you and I would have kept some of these stories in the closet. Jesus' lineage is anything but a roll call at the Institute for Halos and Harps. Reads more like the Sunday morning occupancy at the county jail.

It begins with Abraham, the father of the nation, who more than once lied like Pinocchio just to save his neck (Gen. 12:10–20).

Abraham's grandson Jacob was slicker than a Las Vegas card shark. He cheated his brother, lied to his father, got swindled, and then swindled his uncle (Gen. 27, 29).

Jacob's son Judah was so blinded by testosterone that he engaged the services of a streetwalker, not knowing she was his daughter-in-law! When he learned her identity, he threatened to have her burned to death for solicitation (Gen. 38).

Special mention is made of Solomon's mother, Bathsheba (who bathed in questionable places), and Solomon's father, David, who watched the bath of Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:2–3).

Rahab was a harlot (Josh. 2:1). Ruth was a foreigner (Ruth 1:4).

Manasseh made the list, even though he forced his children to walk through fire (2 Kings 21:6). His son Amon is on the list, even though he rejected God (2 Kings 21:22).

Seems that almost half the kings were crooks, half were embezzlers, and all but a handful worshiped an idol or two for good measure.

And so reads the list of Jesus' not-so-great grandparents. Seems like the only common bond between this lot was a promise. A promise from heaven that God would use them to send his son.

Why did God use these people? Didn't have to. Could have just laid the Savior on a doorstep. Would have been simpler that way. And why does God tell us their stories? Why does God give us an entire testament of blunders and stumbles of his people?

Simple. He knew what you and I watched on the news last night. He knew you would fret. He knew I would worry. And he wants us to know that when the world goes wild, he stays calm.

Want proof? Read the last name on the list. In spite of all the crooked halos and tasteless gambols of his people, the last name on the list is the first one promised—Jesus.

“Joseph was the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus. Jesus is called the Christ” (Matt. 1:16).

Period. No more names are listed. No more are needed. As if God is announcing to a doubting world, “See, I did it. Just like I said I would. The plan succeeded.”

The famine couldn’t starve it.

Four hundred years of Egyptian slavery couldn’t oppress it.

Wilderness wanderings couldn’t lose it.

Babylonian captivity couldn’t stop it.

Clay-footed pilgrims couldn’t spoil it.

The promise of the Messiah threads its way through forty-two generations of rough-cut stones, forming a necklace fit for the King who came. Just as promised.

And the promise remains.

Those people who keep their faith until the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13), Joseph’s child assures.

In this world you will have trouble, but be brave! I have defeated the world (John 16:33).

The engineer has not abandoned the train. Nuclear war is no threat to God. Yo-yo economies don’t intimidate the heavens. Immoral leaders have never derailed the plan.

God keeps his promise.

See for yourself. In the manger. He’s there.

See for yourself. In the tomb. He’s gone.

5.

Grace for the Moment Morning & Evening Edition



Living Loved

God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world. . . . This is real love.
1 JOHN 4:9 NLT

APART FROM GOD, "the heart is deceitful above all things" (Jer. 17:9 NIV). A marriage-saving love is not within us. A friendship-preserving devotion cannot be found in our hearts. We need help from an outside source. A transfusion. Would we love as God loves? Then we start by receiving God's love.

We preachers have been guilty of skipping the first step. "Love each other!" we tell our churches. "Be patient, kind, forgiving," we urge. But instructing people to love without telling them they are loved is like telling them to write a check without our making a deposit in their accounts. No wonder so many relationships are overdrawn. Hearts have insufficient love.

The secret to loving is living loved.

A LOVE WORTH GIVING

List some things that remind you of God's great love.

Wisdom in Warnings

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked.
A man reaps what he sows.
GALATIANS 6:7 NIV

WE'RE OFTEN SURPRISED at life's mishaps, but when pressed against the wall of honesty we have to admit that if we had just fired that silly receptionist and done something about those calls, we could have avoided many problems. We usually knew that trouble was just around the bend. Christians who have fallen away felt the fire waning long before it went out. Unwanted pregnancies or explosions of anger may appear to be the fruit of a moment's waywardness, but in reality, they're usually the result of a history of ignoring warnings about an impending fire.

Are you close to the falls? Are your senses numb? Are your eyes trained to turn and roll when they should pause and observe?

Then maybe you need to repair your warning detector.

GOD CAME NEAR

Have you developed a habit of ignoring God's warnings? What can you do to keep your "warning detector" in good working order?

What Love Does

Christ Jesus . . . made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant.
PHILIPPIANS 2:5–7 NIV

WOULD YOU DO what Jesus did? He swapped a spotless castle for a grimy stable. He exchanged the worship of angels for the company of killers. He could hold the universe in his palm but gave it up to float in the womb of a maiden.

If you were God, would you sleep on straw, nurse from a breast, and be clothed in a diaper? I wouldn't, but Christ did.

If you knew that only a few would care that you came, would you still come? If you knew that those you loved would laugh in your face, would you still care? . . . Christ did.

He humbled himself. He went from commanding angels to sleeping in the straw. From holding stars to clutching Mary's finger. The palm that held the universe took the nail of a soldier.

Why? Because that's what love does. It puts the beloved before itself.

A LOVE WORTH GIVING

Love puts others before itself. Describe some practical ways you can apply this to your life.

Abounding Grace

The more we see our sinfulness,
the more we see God's abounding grace.
ROMANS 5:20 TLB

TO ABOUND IS to have a surplus, an abundance, an extravagant portion. Should the fish in the Pacific worry that it will run out of ocean? No. Why? The ocean abounds with water. Need the lark be anxious about finding room in the sky to fly? No. The sky abounds with space.

Should the Christian worry that the cup of mercy will run empty? He may. For he may not be aware of God's abounding grace. Are you? Are you aware that the cup God gives you overflows with mercy? Or are you afraid your cup will run dry? Your warranty will expire? Are you afraid your mistakes are too great for God's grace? . . .

God is not a miser with his grace. Your cup may be low on cash or clout, but it is overflowing with mercy.

TRAVELING LIGHT

Do you ever worry that you will use up all of God's grace? Why is this foolish?

Why Deny?

If we say we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.
1 JOHN 1:8

WE DO OURSELVES no favors in justifying our deeds or glossing over our sins. Some time ago my daughter Andrea got a splinter in her finger. I took her to the restroom and set out some tweezers, ointment, and a Band-Aid.

She didn't like what she saw. "I just want the Band-Aid, Daddy."

Sometimes we are just like Andrea. We come to Christ with our sin, but all we want is a covering. We want to skip the treatment. We want to hide our sin. And one wonders if God, even in his great mercy, will heal what we conceal.

How can God heal what we deny? How can God touch what we cover up?

A GENTLE THUNDER

Explain why God cannot heal what we deny or cover up.

Infinite Patience

Patience produces character, and character produces hope. And this hope will never disappoint us.
ROMANS 5:4–5

GOD IS OFTEN more patient with us than we are with ourselves. We assume that if we fall, we aren't born again. If we stumble, then we aren't truly converted. If we have the old desires, then we must not be a new creation.

If you are anxious about this, please remember, "God began doing a good work in you, and I am sure he will continue it until it is finished when Jesus Christ comes again" (Phil. 1:6).

A GENTLE THUNDER

When you stumble in your walk with Christ do you question your relationship with him? What promises from God's Word can give you assurance of your salvation?

Known for Humility

Don't cherish exaggerated ideas of
yourself or your importance.
ROMANS 12:3 PHILLIPS

THE MIGHTIEST OF the saints were known for their humility. Though Moses had served as prince of Egypt and emancipator of the slaves, the Bible says, "Moses was . . . more humble than anyone else" (Num. 12:3 NIV).

The apostle Paul was saved through a personal visit from Jesus. He was carried into the heavens and had the ability to raise the dead. But when he introduced himself, he mentioned none of these. He simply said, "I, Paul, am God's slave" (Titus 1:1 MSG).

John the Baptist was a blood relative of Jesus and the first evangelist in history, but he is remembered in Scripture as the one who resolved, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30 NKJV).

TRAVELING LIGHT

Can you name other saints of God who could have boasted of themselves but instead chose to boast of God? How can these people serve as examples for us?

The Wages of Deceit

No one who is dishonest will live in my house;
no liars will stay around me.
PSALM 101:7

MORE THAN ONCE I've heard people refer to the story [of Ananias and Sapphira] with a nervous chuckle and say, "I'm glad God doesn't still strike people dead for lying." I'm not so sure he doesn't. It seems to me that the wages of deceit is still death. Not death of the body, perhaps, but the death of:

a marriage—Falsehoods are termites in the trunk of the family tree.

a conscience—The tragedy of the second lie is that it is always easier to tell than the first.

a career—Just ask the student who got booted out for cheating or the employee who got fired for embezzlement if the lie wasn't fatal. . . .

We could also list the deaths of intimacy, trust, peace, credibility, and self-respect. But perhaps the most tragic death that occurs from deceit is our [Christian] witness. The court won't listen to the testimony of a perjured witness. Neither will the world.

JUST LIKE JESUS

Explain the importance of living without deceit before the world.

Our Courteous Christ

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.
MARK 10:45 NKJV

I HAD NEVER thought much about the courtesy of Christ before, but as I began looking, I realized that Jesus makes Emily Post look like Archie Bunker.

He always knocks before entering. He doesn't have to. He owns your heart. If anyone has the right to barge in, Christ does. But he doesn't. That gentle tap you hear? It's Christ. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:20 NASB). And when you answer, he awaits your invitation to cross the threshold. . . .

And when he enters, he always brings a gift. Some bring Chianti and daisies. Christ brings "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). And, as he stays, he serves. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45 NIV). If you're missing your apron, you'll find it on him. He's serving the guests as they sit (John 13:4–5). He won't eat until he's offered thanks, and he won't leave until the leftovers are put away (Matt. 14:19–20).

A LOVE WORTH GIVING

Christ served and gave and waited on others.
How does this affect the way you treat others?

6.

Christmas Stories



The Christmas Candle

FROM THE DESK OF MAX LUCADO

Christmas celebrates a coming. An arrival. An advent. Christmas remembers God showing up. Not showing off with angel-driven chariots or Magic Kingdom fireworks. But showing up on a donkey, with a carpenter in the belly of a peasant girl. Christmas commemorates God's most uncommon decision: to come commonly.

And Christmas wonders if he still does. If he shows up amidst the regular folk in the sleepy moments of life. This story, "The Christmas Candle," welcomes such wonderings. If he came to Bethlehem, might he not come to Gladstone, England? And, if he touched the world of a carpenter, wouldn't he touch the world of a candle maker? I think so.

Even more, he would touch our world too.

Prologue

December 1664

Light exploded in the small house, making midnight seem as daylight. The bearded candle maker and his wife popped up in bed.

“Wh-wh-what is it?” she asked, trembling.

“Don’t move!”

“But the children?”

“They’re sleeping. Stay where you are!”

The wife pulled the blanket up to her chin and took a quick look around the shadowless room: children asleep on the floor, the table and chairs resting near the hearth, tools piled in the corner.

The candle maker never shifted his wide-eyed gaze. The figure wore a singular flame: a heatless tongue stretching from ceiling to floor. His form moved within the blaze: a torso, head, and two arms. He reached out of the radiance and extended a finger toward a rack of hanging candles. When he did, the couple squeezed together and slid farther back in the bed.

The husband mustered a question: “Are you going to hurt us?”

The visitor gave no reply. He waited, as if to ensure the couple was watching, touched one of the candles, and then vanished.

The room darkened, and the just-touched candle glowed. The man instinctively reached for it, stepping quickly out of bed and across the room, grabbing the candle just as the light diminished.

He looked at his wife. She gulped.

“What just happened?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

He moved to the table and sat. She hurried to do the same.

“An angel?” she wondered aloud.

“Must be.”

He placed the candle on the table, and both stared at it. Neither knew what to say or to think.

The next morning found them still sitting. Still staring.

Their children awoke, so they ate breakfast, dressed warmly, and walked the

half mile up Bristol Lane to St. Mark's Church for the celebration of the final Sunday of Advent. The candle maker gave the rector extra candles for the Advent service but kept the angel-touched candle in his coat pocket. He started to mention the visitation to the reverend but stopped short. *He won't believe me*.

The couple tried to concentrate on the sermon but couldn't. Their minds kept reliving the light, the angel, and the glowing candle.

They shared a pew with a young mother and her two children, all three disheveled and dirty. The couple knew her, knew how her husband, a servant to a baron, had died a month before in a hunt.

After the service, the widow described her plight to them. "We have little food left. Enough for a few days."

The chandler's wife reached into her husband's coat pocket for a coin. When she did, she felt the candle. She handed both to the young mother, inviting, "Light this and pray." As the young mother turned to leave, the wife looked at her husband and shrugged as if to say, "What harm?"

He nodded.

They spoke some about the candle over the next few days but not much. Both were willing to dismiss it as a dream, perhaps a vision.

The Christmas Eve service changed that. It began with a time of blessing-sharing. Anyone in the congregation who wanted to give public thanks to God could do so. When the rector asked for volunteers, the young mother stood up. The same woman who, days earlier, had appeared unkempt and hungry. This night she beamed. She told the congregation how a wealthy uncle in a nearby county had given her a farm as a gift. The farm was a godsend. She could live in the house and lease the land and support her family. She looked straight at the candle maker and his wife as she said, "I prayed. I lit the candle and prayed."

The couple looked at each other. They suspected a connection between the candle and the answered prayer, but who knew for sure?

GABRIEL'S QUESTIONS

GABRIEL MUST HAVE scratched his head at this one.

He wasn't one to question his God-given missions. Sending fire and dividing seas were all in an eternity's work for this angel. When God sent, Gabriel went.

And when word got out that God was to become man, Gabriel was enthused. He could envision the moment:

The Messiah in a blazing chariot.

The King descending on a fiery cloud.

An explosion of light from which the Messiah would emerge.

That's what he expected. What he never expected, however, was what he got: a slip of paper with a Nazarene address. "God will become a baby," it read. "Tell the mother to name the child Jesus. And tell her not to be afraid."

Gabriel was never one to question, but this time he had to wonder.

God will become a baby? Gabriel had seen babies before. He had been platoon leader on the bulrush operation. He remembered what little Moses looked like.

That's okay for humans, he thought to himself. But God?

The heavens can't contain him; how could a body? Besides, have you seen what comes out of those babies? Hardly befitting for the Creator of the universe. Babies must be carried and fed, bounced and bathed. To imagine some mother burping God on her shoulder— why, that was beyond what even an angel could imagine.

And what of this name—what was it—Jesus? Such a common name. There's a Jesus in every cul-de-sac. Come on, even Gabriel has more punch to it than Jesus. Call the baby Eminence or Majesty or Heavensent. Anything but Jesus.

So Gabriel scratched his head. What happened to the good ol' days? The Sodom and Gomorrah stuff. Flooding the globe. Flaming swords. That's the action he liked.

But Gabriel had his orders. Take the message to Mary. Must be a special girl, he assumed as he traveled. But Gabriel was in for another shock. One peek told him Mary was no queen. The mother-to-be of God was not regal. She was a Jewish peasant who'd barely outgrown her acne and had a crush on a guy named Joe.

And speaking of Joe—what does this fellow know? Might as well be a weaver in Spain or a cobbler in Greece. He's a carpenter. Look at him over there, sawdust in his beard and nail apron around his waist. You're telling me God is going to have dinner every night with him? You're telling me the source of wisdom is going to call this guy "Dad"? You're telling me a common laborer is going to be charged with giving food to God?

What if he gets laid off?

What if he gets cranky?

What if he decides to run off with a pretty young girl from down the street? Then where will we be?

It was all Gabriel could do to keep from turning back. “This is a peculiar idea you have, God,” he must have muttered to himself.

Are God’s guardians given to such musings?

Are we?

Notes

Max on Life

1. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1958), 9.

2. "U.S. & World Population Clocks," U.S. Census Bureau, www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html (accessed July 28, 2010).

Outlive Your Life

1. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Poverty: 2007 and 2008; American Community Surveys*, 2, www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/acsbr08-1.pdf.

2. Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2008*, United States Department of Agriculture, iii, www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR83/ERR83.pdf.

3. National and Community Service, "White House, USDA, National Service Agency, Launch Targeted Initiative to Address Hunger," www.nationalservice.gov/about/newsroom/releases_detail.asp?tbl_pr_id=1579.