

PRAISE FOR *YOU WERE MADE* *FOR THIS MOMENT*

“The last few years have seemed like a never-ending bitter winter. We’ve experienced a global pandemic, political chaos, riots, economic recession, and much more. In times like these, we need an experienced guide to help us. I can think of no one better than my friend Max to lead us to springtime. The words that flow from his pen are good medicine for our souls. Lean into this book and let God’s grace lean into you.”

—Dr. Derwin L. Gray, cofounder and lead pastor of
Transformation Church; author of *God, Do You Hear
Me? Discovering the Prayer God Always Answers*

“In *You Were Made for This Moment*, Max masterfully brings to life the power of the book of Esther and its relevance to our lives today. This profound message of hope and courage is one we urgently need as we navigate the challenges of living in this chaotic world. We are reminded that impossible is where God starts, and miracles are what God does. I didn’t want this book to end and neither will you.”

—Christine Caine, cofounder of A21 and Propel Women

“Max Lucado is one of the best authors alive at bringing the Bible to life. By effortlessly weaving practical teaching and modern-day experiences into the ancient text of the Bible, Max places you in the middle of biblical times as if you were living alongside the characters themselves. The story of Esther has always been intriguing and compelling to me. A true underdog, Esther believed God for the impossible and changed history with her faith. Get ready for an inspiring, uplifting, and faith-building experience in Max Lucado’s new book, *You Were Made for This Moment*.”

—Craig Groeschel, pastor of Life.Church and
New York Times bestselling author

“This book hit me to the core as a Christian and a Black woman. I’ve read the book of Esther so many times, I’ve even had people use Esther 4:14 to describe my career, but Max took us on a journey that only he could by providing a fresh new lens to this ancient story. Max weaves in and out of the story of Esther with modern-day stories that remind the reader of God’s presence when we feel forgotten; our habit of focusing on what we can lose instead of what we can gain by standing up for what is right; and the importance of not running away from ‘Mordecai moments.’ Thank you, Max!”

—Maggie John, TV anchor/ producer of *Context Beyond the Headlines* and former host of *100 Huntley Street*

“I have long admired Max Lucado as an author whose writings are full of encouragement, hope, and love—with stories that touch the hearts of all ages.”

—Nicky Gumbel, vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton
and pioneer of Alpha

“For those of us who have ever believed the lie that God can no longer use us to make a difference, Max proclaims: ‘You were made for this moment. You. Me. Us. We.’ Through rich biblical insights and compelling storytelling, discover how God invites us to participate in his holy work and uses our experiences and circumstances to bless more people than we can imagine. That’s an adventure I want to be a part of. Join me.”

—Amy Grant, Grammy Award–winning recording artist

“*You Were Made for This Moment* was written at the right place and the right time. I have struggled with the lows that Max writes about and experienced firsthand that ‘today’s confusion and crisis will be tomorrow’s conquest.’ Max’s theme for this book reminds me of the first song I wrote after becoming a Christian titled, ‘The Struggle.’ His call to recast *your* struggle as an opportunity for God to resurrect life out of death is just what our brothers and sisters need right now. Thank you, Max, for once again reminding us that no struggle is too hard for God.”

—Zach Williams, multiple Grammy and
Dove Award–winning recording artist

“We will all face seasons that seem overwhelming, times of unexpected and undeserved troubles that give rise to fear and intimidate us. In his powerful new book, *You Were Made for This Moment*, my dear friend Max Lucado uses the courageous story of Esther to not only encourage each of us as we face these ‘Arctic winters’ but to show us that God has placed inside of us the will and determination to achieve our divine destiny when we trust in him.”

—Victoria Osteen, copastor Lakewood Church

“Even the strongest of leaders have seasons of winter that can break us: the world is dark, the day is lonely, and God is silent. And yet, as Max Lucado explains with such empathy and encouragement, they are also the moments that can make us. *You Were Made for This Moment* will change the way you look at the challenges in your life—there is purpose in the pain and opportunity in the opposition.”

—Kadi Cole, leadership consultant, executive coach, and author of *Developing Female Leaders*, www.kadicole.com

“If you’ve ever felt like God has vacated the world, your life, or both, you’ll love *You Were Made for This Moment*. In a way only Max Lucado can, Max makes a biblical story jump off the page and speak freshly directly into the bleakness that too often feels like today. Just when you were about to give up, you’ll not only find God, you’ll also find your role in the story.”

—Carey Nieuwhof, author of *At Your Best*,
podcaster and speaker

“Boldly confronting the reality of crises in our world today, and the challenge of living out faith in a faithless society, *You Were Made for This Moment* is a gift to all of us still finding our way. Well-researched, refreshing, witty, and full of personal, thoughtful insights, Max weaves an old story into a fresh narrative, perfectly matching the book of Esther with our current struggles.”

—Bruxy Cavey, teaching pastor at the Meeting House
and author of *The End of Religion*

“Max continues in his tradition of brilliant storytelling as he captures the story of Esther. This is a story for now and for such a time as this, in our present day. This book demonstrates the relevance of the story of Esther and how our struggle is often our strength. Our challenges can be used to shape a generation if our view of God remains larger than ourselves.”

—Latasha Morrison, founder and president of Be the Bridge

“You were made for this moment! You are God’s person! Regardless of where you’ve been and what you’ve done, Max Lucado invites us on a courageous journey to follow God’s call even when we feel unqualified and especially when we deem ourselves unready.”

—Paula Faris, host of *The Paula Faris Faith and Calling Podcast*, author, speaker

You Were
MADE *FOR*
THIS
MOMENT

ALSO BY MAX LUCADO

INSPIRATIONAL

3:16
A Gentle Thunder
A Love Worth Giving
And the Angels Were Silent
Anxious for Nothing
Because of Bethlehem
Before Amen
Come Thirsty
Cure for the Common Life
Facing Your Giants
Fearless
Glory Days
God Came Near
Grace
Great Day Every Day
He Chose the Nails
He Still Moves Stones
How Happiness Happens
In the Eye of the Storm
In the Grip of Grace
It's Not About Me
Just Like Jesus
Max on Life
More to Your Story
Next Door Savior
No Wonder They Call Him the Savior
On the Anvil
Outlive Your Life
Six Hours One Friday
The Applause of Heaven
The Great House of God
Traveling Light
Unshakable Hope
When Christ Comes
When God Whispers Your Name
You Are Never Alone
You'll Get Through This

COMPILATIONS

Begin Again
Jesus

FICTION

Christmas Stories
Miracle at the Higher Grounds Café
The Christmas Candle

BIBLES (GENERAL EDITOR)

The Lucado Encouraging Word Bible
Children's Daily Devotional Bible
Grace for the Moment Daily Bible
The Lucado Life Lessons Study Bible

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A Max Lucado Children's Treasury
Do You Know I Love You, God?
God Always Keeps His Promises
God Forgives Me, and I Forgive You
God Listens When I Pray
Grace for the Moment: 365 Devotions for Kids
Hermie, a Common Caterpillar
I'm Not a Scaredy Cat
Itsy Bitsy Christmas
Just in Case You Ever Wonder

Lucado Treasury of Bedtime Prayers
One Hand, Two Hands
Thank You, God, for Blessing Me
Thank You, God, for Loving Me
The Boy and the Ocean
The Crippled Lamb
The Oak Inside the Acorn
The Tallest of Smalls
You Are Mine
You Are Special
Where'd My Giggle Go?

YOUNG ADULT BOOKS

3:16
It's Not About Me
Make Every Day Count
Wild Grace
You Were Made to Make a Difference

GIFT BOOKS

Fear Not Promise Book
For the Tough Times
God Thinks You're Wonderful
Grace for the Moment
Grace Happens Here
Happy Today
His Name Is Jesus
Let the Journey Begin
Live Loved
Mocha with Max
Safe in the Shepherd's Arms
This Is Love
You Changed My Life

You Were
**MADE FOR
THIS
MOMENT**

COURAGE FOR TODAY AND HOPE FOR TOMORROW

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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*To our precious friend, Margaret Bishop.
An Esther of your generation, you model courage,
faith, and beauty. Denalyn and I are honored to know
you and thrilled to grandparent alongside you.*



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Once upon a time, in a moment before moments existed, two angels were reviewing the job description of a yet-to-be-born fellow named Max. The assignment said: *writer of Christian books*. Yet, when the angels saw the skill set of Max and the responsibility of an author, one angel said, “We need to take this up the chain of command. Lucado ain’t got what it takes to do this job.” The other angel replied, “I don’t like your grammar, but agree with your concern.”

So, they sought an explanation. Here is what they were told. “You are correct. Lucado is going to need all the help heaven can muster. As a result, the following team members are assigned to keep him afloat:

- Liz Heaney and Karen Hill—editors of exceptional skill. They could prod a donkey to dance and teach a fish to sing.
- Carol Bartley—she is so capable, that we plan to ask her to copy edit the Book of Life for typos.
- David Drury—had he been born two thousand years earlier, he would have been on epistle duty. He will keep Lucado on the doctrinal straight and narrow.

- Steve and Cheryl Green—everyone needs friends like Steve and Cheryl. We reserved them for Max.
- The HCCP team of heroes—Mark Schoenwald, Don Jacobson, Tim Paulson, Mark Glesne, Erica Smith, Janene MacIvor, and Laura Minchew. There’s enough talent on that team to run a galaxy.
- Greg and Susan Ligon—they are receiving twice the quota of spiritual gifts. They will lead, serve, administer, encourage, and counsel. Superstars, they are!
- Dave Treat—he prays like Daniel and looks like Moses.
- Peggy Campbell, Jim Sanders, and the Ambassador team—they are set apart from on high to shepherd dozens of spiritual shepherds. They will treat Lucado with loving care.
- Caroline Green—the perfect Martha/Mary combination. A go-getter and a Jesus-lover.
- Andrea Lucado—same last name, but far smarter than her dad.
- Jana Muntsinger and Pamela McClure—a rare blend of smile and savvy; perfect for publicity.
- Janie Padilla and Margaret Mechinus—ever steady, quiet, and rock solid.
- Mike Cospser and Yoram Hazony—their insights in their respective works on Esther will inspire and inform Max.
- Brett, Jenna, Rosie, Max, Andrea, Jeff, and Sara—a family tree with deep roots and abundant fruit.
- And Denalyn, the bride—each night Max will go to bed thinking, *I married an angel!* He will be right. She will be heaven-sent.”

The two angels looked at the other and smiled, “With a team like this,” one said, “even Lucado will be able to write.”

Chapter One

SEARCHING FOR SPRINGTIME



Winter casts a cold shadow. The days are short. The nights are long. The sun seems shy, hidden behind the grayness. Warmth has packed her bags and migrated to the tropics. Beach weather would be nice.

But that's not going to happen. It's winter.

Spring will see blossoms. Summer sways leafy bushes in the wind. Autumn gives forth a harvest of plenty. But winter? Winter is still, deathly still. Fields are frosty. Trees extend skeletal limbs. Wildlife is silent. Gone.

Winter brings danger. Blizzards. Ice storms. Caution is the theme. Come springtime you'll run barefoot through the meadow and plunge into the pond. But now? It's best to button up, zip up, stay in, and stay safe.

It's winter out there.

Is it winter where you are? Are you trapped in a perpetual gloom? Do you know the solstice of sunless days and barren trees?

I know a mom who does. A mom of three kids. Two in diapers and one with a disability. Her apartment is small. Her income is meager. And her husband is AWOL. Life in Camp Chaos was too much for him. It's too much for her as well. But what choice does she have? Somebody always needs to be fed, changed, held, or bathed. So she does whatever needs doing, and it appears she will be doing it forever. She wonders if this winter will ever pass.

So does my friend Ed. He and I have much in common. Our health is good. Our golf game is poor. We both like dogs. We both have marriages that predate the Carter administration. The difference? My wife just asked me what I want for dinner. His keeps asking him who he is. He placed her in a memory-care facility a year ago. They'd dreamed of touring the country in an RV. So far he's spent his retirement sleeping alone and making daily visits to a woman who stares out the window.

Can you relate? When did you first realize that life was not going to turn out the way you thought?

Your parents divorced.

Your spouse cheated.

Your health never recovered.

Your friend never returned.

In that moment a Siberian cold settled over your life. Your world became an arctic circle of dark days, long nights, and bitter weather.

Winter.

This book was born in winter. As I pen these words, every person on the planet is living in the frostnip of COVID-19. A pandemic has locked us down. The mom I told you about? Her income is meager because her restaurant job was discontinued. Ed can still see his wife but only through a window. Church doors are closed. Students are stuck at home. Masks hide smiles. A microscopic virus has paralyzed us.

And an ancient sin threatens to undo us. Those of us who'd hoped racism was fading were convinced otherwise. An officer's knee on the neck of a Black man activated a subterranean anger. A volcano spewed into the streets of many cities.

The entire world seems wrapped in winter. We are all searching for springtime.

Winters are a part of life—some personal, some global—but all are powerful. Try as we might to bundle up and lean into the wind,

the heartiest among us can fall. The wind is too strong. Nights are too long, and the question is all too common: Will this winter ever pass? You wonder (don't you wonder?) if you will survive this.

If so, God has a six-letter word of encouragement for you: E-S-T-H-E-R.

The book that bears her name was written to be read in winter-time. Written for the emotionally weary. Written for the person who feels outnumbered by foes, outmaneuvered by fate, and outdone by fear. It's as if God, in his kind providence, heard all the prayers of all the souls who have ever been stuck in an arctic February. To every person who has longed to see a green sprig on a barren branch, he says, "Follow me. I want you to see what I can do."

He escorts us to the front row of a grand theater and invites us to take a seat. He nods at the symphony conductor. The baton is lifted, the music begins, the curtain opens, and we are eyewitnesses to a triumph of divine drama.

The setting is the city of Susa in fifth century BC Persia (modern-day Iran). The empire was to its day what Rome was to the first century. During the reign of Darius I, also known as Darius the Great (522–486 BC), "it controlled more than 2.9 million square miles." The empire consisted of roughly 44 percent of the world's population, an estimated 50 million people.¹ It stretched some 4,464 miles from what is now Punjab, India, to Khartoum, Sudan.² To get the scope of it, walk from Los Angeles to Atlanta, turn around, and walk back to LA. Or, if you prefer, duplicate the United States map, set the two copies side by side, and you get a feel for the breadth of the Persian Empire.

The cast consists of a memorable quartet of characters.

Xerxes, the king, had a thirst for wine, a disregard for women, and convictions that changed with the weather. He ruled over Persia from 486 to 465 BC.³ His name in Hebrew was Ahasuerus, which pronounced correctly sounds like a good sneeze. For that reason his

name in Greek—Xerxes—will be my choice. (Besides, any name that makes double use of the letter X is fun to write.)

The book of Esther portrays him as a wimp, an accomplished drinker, but not much of a thinker. He was most comfortable holding a goblet and delegating decisions. The story attributes to him no profound thoughts or statesmanlike decrees. Catch him in the right mood, and he'd agree to genocide.

At least that was the experience of Haman, the villain in our story. His name sounds like “hangman,” which is convenient, because this tyrant was all about death. He was a wealthy and influential officer in the cabinet of Xerxes. His jet was private. His wardrobe was tailored. He got manicures on Mondays and played golf with Xerxes on Thursdays. He had the ear of the king, the swagger of a pimp, and the compassion of Hitler.

Yes, that's accurate. We see a lot of Adolf in Haman. Both demanded to be worshipped. Both were intolerant of subversion. And both set out to exterminate the entire Jewish race. Can't you almost hear Hitler saying what Haman said?

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain. If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries.” (Est. 3:8–9 NKJV)

Those “certain people” were none other than the Hebrew nation: the children of Israel, descendants of Abraham, and the family tree of Jesus Christ. They were scattered throughout the Persian Empire. To Haman they were inconsequential flecks of dandruff on the royal

robe of Xerxes. But to God they were a chosen race through whom he would redeem humankind.

One of the exiled Jews really got under Haman's skin. His name was Mordecai. You're going to love him eventually. But you'll be puzzled by him initially. Quite content to be quiet, he chose to keep his ancestry under wraps. But a person could take only so much of Haman.

"Mordecai had a cousin . . . whom he had brought up" because she was an orphan. She must have been a head turner. Esther "had a lovely figure and was beautiful" (Est. 2:7). The ancient rabbinical writings position her as one of the four most beautiful women in the world, along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail.⁴ She gained access to the king because of her appearance, but her story has relevance to yours because of her conviction and courage.

Are you sensing the elements of the drama?

A clueless brute of a king.

A devious, heartless, bloodthirsty Haman.

A nation of Jews under the threat of extermination.

Mordecai, defiant and determined.

Esther, gorgeous and gutsy.

And God? Where is God in the story? Aah, there's a question fit for the asking.

The book of Esther is known for being one of the two books in the Bible that never mention the name of God.⁵ Until this point he has been everywhere, seemingly on every page. In Eden the Creator. In Ur the Prompter. In Egypt the Liberator. In the promised land the Warrior. But in Persia? The trail has grown cold.

At no point do we read "And God said" or "God chose" or "God decreed." There is no mention of the temple or the name *Yahweh* or *Elohim*, Hebrew nouns meaning God. There is no mention of apocalyptic visions, as Daniel saw, or concern for God's law, as Ezra expressed. Prayer is implied but not described. The seas do not split. The heavens do not roar. No dry bones come to life.

Why? Why the absence of spirituality? Why the seeming silence of God?

If you are in the midst of winter, you can relate to these questions. God may seem hidden to you. Distant. Removed. Absent from your script. Your world feels cut loose from the sun.

Others hear from God. You don't. Others say they know the will of God. You're bewildered. Others have a backstage pass to his performance. But you? You can't find his name on the playbill. Is he there? Does he care? You're unsure.

Might you be open to a gold nugget that lies in the substratum of the Esther story? Quiet providence. *Providence* is the two-dollar term theologians use to describe God's continuous control over history. He not only spoke the universe into being, but he governs it by his authority. He is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3). He is regal, royal, and—this is essential—he is *right here*. He is not preoccupied with the plight of Pluto at the expense of your problems and pain.

He has been known to intervene dramatically. By his hand the Red Sea opened, the manna fell from heaven, a virgin gave birth, and a tomb gave life. Yet for every divine shout there are a million whispers. The book of Esther relates the story of our whispering God, who in unseen and inscrutable ways superintends all the actions and circumstances for the good of his people. This priceless book

God is still eloquent in his seeming silence and still active when he appears most distant.

reminds us that he need not be loud to be strong. He need not cast a shadow to be present. God is still eloquent in his seeming silence and still active when he appears most distant.

Does God seem absent to you?

If so, the book of Esther deserves your attention. Allow yourself to be caught up in the drama.

Act 1—*Confusion*: God’s people choose the glamor of Persia over the goodness of God. Compromise replaces conviction. Confusion replaces clarity.

Act 2—*Crisis*: A decree of death places all Jews on life support. What hope does a fringe minority have in a pagan society?

Act 3—*Conquest*: The unimaginable happens. Something so unexpected that “sorrow turned to joy, [and their] mourning somersaulted into a holiday for parties and fun and laughter” (Est. 9:22 THE MESSAGE).

The theme of the book of Esther—indeed, the theme of the Bible—is that all the injustices of the world will be turned on their head. Grand reversals are God’s trademark. When we feel as though everything is falling apart, God is working in our midst, causing everything to fall into place. He is the King of quiet providence, and he invites you and me to partner with him in his work. The headline of the book of Esther reads: *Relief will come. . . . Will you be a part of it?*

When all seems lost, it’s not. When evil seems to own the day, God still has the final say. He has a Joseph for every famine and a David for every Goliath. When his people need rescuing, God calls a Rahab into service. When a baby Moses needs a mama, God prompts an Egyptian princess to have compassion. He always has his person.

He had someone in the story of Esther.

And in your story he has you.

You want to retreat, stay quiet, stay safe, stay backstage. *I don’t have what it takes*, you tell yourself. You could dismiss the “made for this moment” idea as mere folly.

But I oh-so-hope you won’t.

Relief will come. . . . Will you be a part of it?

Grand reversals are God’s trademark.

The headline of the
book of Esther reads:
Relief will come. . . .
Will you be a part of it?



This world gets messy, for sure. But God's solutions come through people of courage. People like Mordecai and Esther. People like you. People who dare to believe that they, by God's grace, were made to face a moment like this.

For those stuck in acts 1 and 2, be assured act 3 is on the way. In God's plan confusion and crisis give way to conquest. Winters don't last forever. Trees will soon bud. Snow will soon melt. Springtime is only a turn of the calendar away. For all we know God's hand is about to turn the page.



ACT 1

CONFUSION

FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD



The couple sat wordlessly at the table. He picked at the lentil-and-lamb stew on his plate. She stared at the food on hers. “You’ve not taken a bite,” he finally said. “You need to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

He began to object but then thought better of it. He looked at her young face, bathed in candlelight. Silken skin. High cheekbones. Brown eyes speckled with a hint of gold.

“Esther,” he offered softly, “this is the best plan.”

She raised her face to look at his. Moisture had gathered in her eyes, ready to spill. “But they will know. They will find out.”

“Not if you are careful. Say little. Offer nothing. Go unnoticed.”

Her eyes asked for help.

“Our people are adrift here in Susa. No one remembers Jerusalem. No one remembers the temple. Your parents—may their memory be blessed—lived and died in Persia. We will do the same. It’s best to make the best of it.”

“But he will demand so much of me.”

Mordecai ran his fingers through his gray hair and then reached across the table for her hand. “We have no choice. The king has issued the order. The soldiers will come for you tomorrow. We cannot avoid the edict.”

Mordecai sighed and stood and walked to the window. From his house in the citadel, he could faintly hear the evening prayers and see

the flickering lights of Al-Yahudu, the town of the Judeans, a segregated community of Jews. He often looked out over the village but seldom visited it. Its residents didn't understand him. He, with his place in the court. He, with his buried identity. He, with his hidden faith.

And he didn't understand them. Can a person not manage more than one loyalty? A compromise here. A secret there. Fudge a few facts. Who's to know?

"Besides, Esther," he said as he turned to face her, "this could be our opportunity. Who knows what doors will open for us?"

"Yes, but who knows what we will lose in the process?" She stood and joined him at the window.

Mordecai placed an arm around her shoulders and whispered, "The Lord will be with you, as will I."

Chapter Two

DON'T GET COZY
IN PERSIA



Blame it on the sudden warmth. Blame it on the welcome sight of buds on the trees. Blame it on a dash of young love. But blame it mostly on a serious case of stupidity.

She and I were in college. We'd gone on a date or two and felt a spark or two. Spring was in the air. The gray sky had finally shed her cloudy coat. The Saturday afternoon sky was blue, and the breeze was warm. We drove through the countryside with windows down and spirits high. Was the ride planned or impromptu? I don't recall. What I do remember are the fields of winter wheat. So lush. So green. So inviting.

I'm sure the romp was my idea. I'm a bit prone to spontaneous folly. I once tried to impress a girl with a leaping plunge into a river, only to discover that it was three feet deep. Good thing I didn't dive. I sank up to my ankles in mud.

But back to the wheat field. Did I mention its beauty? An olive-green carpet, it was. Did I mention that romance was beginning to blossom? She for me. I for her. So when I suggested a barefoot scamper through the field, I was thinking hand in hand, skip and jump, and who knows—maybe a first kiss?

I stopped the car. We peeled off our shoes and socks and jumped over the fence, expecting to land on the equivalent of a soft mattress. But, alas, we'd been duped.

Winter wheat fields are green on the surface but rocky and sticky

beneath. After three or four steps we came to a sudden stop. She gave me a what-were-you-thinking glare. By the time we retraced our steps, my ego was as bruised as our feet. That was the beginning of the end for us. The day love died in a West Texas wheat field. (Sounds like a country song.)

You've made the same mistake. Not on a farm, but in life. You have been fooled. Deceived. Tricked. Lured into a field of green only to realize it was a bed of thorns.

Remember how the bright lights led to lonely nights? How the promise of fast cash led to dead-end debt? Remember the time he lured you into his bed or she convinced you of her love? You didn't bloody your feet, but you broke your heart or drained your bank account and, I hope, learned this lesson: things aren't always what they seem. What's too good to be true usually is.

This is a word to the wise. And this is a relevant warning for those who are stuck in winter. Tough times can trigger poor decisions. We lose our bearings. We forget God's call. We exchange our convictions for the bright lights of Persia. This was the temptation that faced the Jews.

Here is the way the story begins:

In the third year of his reign [Xerxes] gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. (Est. 1:3)

Xerxes' excuse for this lavish event was to convince Persian nobles, officials, princes, governors, and military leaders to support his campaign against the Greeks.¹ The citadel, his seat of power, towered over the city. It was visible for miles. Its immensity sent a message: in these halls walks an important king. "Hear ye him!"

Tough times
can trigger
poor decisions.

Xerxes was thirty-five years of age and rich beyond imagination. His palace boasted “hangings of white and blue linen . . . couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones” (v. 6). The palace hall had thirty-six columns that stood seventy feet tall. Each column was crowned with sculptures of twin bulls, which supported the immense wooden timbers of the ceiling.² Even the mosaic pavements were works of art. When Alexander the Great entered the palace at Susa a century later, he discovered, in today’s dollars, the equivalent of \$54.5 billion in bullion and 270 tons of minted gold coins.³ Xerxes was not hurting for cash.

He promised wealth and rewards to all willing warriors. And to prove he could make good on his promise, he staged a six-month Vegas extravaganza. “For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king’s palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa” (vv. 4–5).

It was a Mardi Gras of drinking and dining. Guests from a hundred posts and ports. Officials, power brokers, and wannabes mingled, schmoozed, and indulged. Feasts on a dozen tables. Wine was water. Everyone imbibed as much as they desired, then drank some more. Six months of fine food, who’s who, pinot noir, and excess. Xerxes presided over the whole event.

But toward the end of the carnival, the king’s true colors began to appear. On his 187th day of feasting, when he was “in high spirits from wine” (v. 10), he sent for Queen Vashti. A bit tipsy, Xerxes decided to show off his wife. She “was lovely to look at” (v. 11). Apparently he expected her to dance in front of his frat friends and leave them entranced in a cloud of perfume.

According to the Midrash, an ancient commentary on Esther, Xerxes told his queen to enter the room wearing nothing but a crown.⁴ That detail cannot be verified. But this much is sure: he did not invite

Vashti in order to hear her opinions on matters of state. He wanted to flaunt her in front of his poker pals.

Persia was not a safe place for a woman. Females, including the queen, were property. Vashti spent most of her time cloistered in some corner, pampered and preened for her next appearance before the king. She was an accoutrement, nothing more, a trophy in his case. Her only function was to make Xerxes look potent and important.

Boy, was he in for a surprise. She refused to comply. Prance about in front of a bunch of bibulous males? No thank you. (Good for you, Vashti.)

“The king became furious and burned with anger” (v. 12).

A chuckle is permitted here. Big, strong, billionaire Xerxes, ruler of 127 provinces,⁵ mighty overlord who controlled the world, was undone by his wife. He’d spent six months wining, dining, and flexing his muscles. Yet on the last night he was made to look namby-pamby in front of his drinking buddies. When the ruler showed off, his incompetency showed up. He was so taken aback that he called a committee meeting. He assembled his seven (barely sober) advisors and said, “Duh, . . . what am I supposed to do?”

Wiser consultants would have urged the king to settle the matter in private. They would have reminded the king that six months of wine can fog the mind and would have suggested that he let his brain clear a bit. But Xerxes was blessed with cabinet members who were seemingly as dense and drunk as he. They huddled, strategized, and gave this bizarre report.

Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, “King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.” (vv. 16–17)

I smell fear in those words. “Fellows, we’ve got to act. Something has to be done. If not, the world might spin off its axis.”

Women will begin thinking for themselves.

Men will need to be kind to their wives.

Daughters will envision a life outside the kitchen!

How to avoid such a tragedy? Banish Vashti.

Let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king’s edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest. (vv. 19–20)

On what planet were these men born? Who spiked their wine with silly juice? Were they really so blind, so arrogant, so out of touch with human nature that they thought an edict would engender the devotion of a gender? And these men oversaw the running of the largest empire in the world? A bunch of locker-room punks is what they were.

Xerxes’ display of importance (party, possessions, power) became Xerxes’ display of ignorance (temper, indecisiveness, folly). For all his strut and swagger, Xerxes was nothing more than a misogynistic chump.

Do you see the irony? Do you shake your head at the folly? Does the response of Xerxes cause you to roll your eyes in disgust? If so, the mission of the author is accomplished. The story of the insolent Xerxes and the story of my romp in a winter-wheat field posit the same possibility. What if the glitz and glamour are only folly and foibles? What if the lure of lights is a hoax? All the red carpets. All the social media pictures. All the fancy parties and invitation-only clubs. What if all the whoop-de-do and la-di-da are one big field of winter wheat?

Don’t romp in it.

Don't fall for it.

Don't buy the line.

Don't take the bait.

Don't take the bluff.

Don't get cozy in Persia.

Stay faithful to your call as a covenant people.

Let's widen our lens for a bit of context. Do you have time for a few paragraphs of Hebrew history?

When God called Abraham out of Ur, he made a covenant—a promise—that Abraham would be the father of a holy nation. “I will bless those who bless you, and I will place a curse on those who harm you. And all the people on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3 NCV).

Exactly how would God bless the world through Israel? First, they would model a way of living that reflected the glory and goodness of God. Unlike the depraved, promiscuous, violent Canaanites who surrounded them, they would worship their Maker, love their neighbors, and honor their families. Second, they would provide a lineage through whom Jesus Christ, the greatest global blessing, could be born. The children of Israel were the curators and caretakers of God's covenant to Abraham.

For this reason they were to remain separate. Different. Holy. Set apart. They were not permitted to marry non-Jews, worship pagan deities, or embrace the pagan culture. They had distinct ways to worship, live, and love.

Did they succeed at being separate? Sometimes marvelously so. (Think Joshua inheriting the promised land.) Sometimes, miserably, no. (Think the long line of corrupt kings, each more wicked than the prior one.) Eventually the people so forgot their God that he used exile to get their attention.

In 586 BC the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and deported about ten thousand of the city's elite. In 539 BC the Persians sacked the

Babylonians. By the time we meet Mordecai and Esther, the Jews were three generations and more than a thousand miles removed from their days in Jerusalem.

It's hard to imagine that any of them recalled life in their homeland. They were encircled by Persians. They daily heard the footsteps of the soldiers and the wheels of the chariots. Merchants did business with non-Jews. Farmers sold their produce to Persians. They lived amid the opulent wealth and fragrant temples of foreign people. What's more, the truly zealous Jews had taken the opportunity to return to Jerusalem either with Zerubbabel⁶ or with Ezra.⁷

The Jews who remained in Persia *chose* to remain in Persia. Exile had been kind to them. They had good jobs, secure positions. Some were more Persian than they were Hebrew. To enjoy the success and wealth of the people in Susa, all they had to do was play their cards right, abide by the rules, and fade into the fabric of the culture.

Unlike other books of the Old Testament that describe the Jews settling and settled in the promised land, the book of Esther depicts a people who are distant from their land. Jerusalem was so far away, and Persia was, well, so relevant, so lush, so inviting. It was a gigantic wheat field. The author didn't use my metaphor but would have appreciated it. The point of the first chapter of Esther is simply this: Persia is lying to you.

Do we need the same reminder? The assignment given to the Jews has been passed on to us. God displays his glory and goodness through the church. As we worship God, love our neighbors, and cherish our families, we become billboards of God's message.

We, too, are caretakers. Caretakers of the message of Jesus. He was born through the lineage of the Jews. Today he is born through the lives of his saints. As you and I live out our faith, he is delivered into a faith-famished culture. We have the hope this world needs.

But sometimes we forget our calling. We need this reminder. Persia is lying to us. I don't mean to be blunt, but, then again, I do.

As we worship God, love
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Billion-dollar industries are conning you by luring you into lifestyles that will leave you wounded and weary.

Examples? Try this one. *Pornography is a harmless expression of sexuality.* Really? It is as addictive as drugs and alcohol.⁸ It changes the makeup of the brain.⁹ What about the sex trafficking it encourages, the violence it engenders? Yet the message that porn peddlers whisper to the unsuspecting is “It won’t hurt. It’s just sex.”

Liar.

Or this: *Whoever dies with the most toys wins.* You are what you own, so own all you can. Take on the liability. Borrow the money. Saddle yourself with a budget-busting mortgage; it is worth it. The average American household carries more than \$145,000 in debt, including nearly \$7,000 in credit card debt.¹⁰ We worship stuff, hoping stuff will bring life. But your Maker? He tells you the truth: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:19–20 NKJV).

Here is one more falsehood. *A few drinks take the edge off the day. What could be wrong?* According to the marketing machine behind the liquor industry, the answer would be “Nothing at all.”

“Enjoy the high life,” says Miller beer.

“Find your beach,” beckons Corona Extra.

“The happiest hour on earth,” boasts Jameson Whiskey.

“A shot of adventure,” claims Jose Cuervo tequila.¹¹

Yet underneath the slick advertisements lies an ugly underbelly of alcohol abuse. Excessive drinking takes its toll on bodies, mental health, marriages, work, friendships, productivity, and pregnancies.¹²

The list of lies could go on for chapters. Deceptions about identity, race, pluralism. They are everywhere. And their consequences are devastating.

At the time of this writing, depression is on the rise,¹³ divorce filings are up 34 percent year to year,¹⁴ calls to mental health hotlines

have increased 891 percent,¹⁵ and the suicide rate is the highest it has been at any time since World War II.¹⁶ One in four people ages eighteen through twenty-four seriously considered suicide in the thirty days prior to being surveyed.¹⁷

How do God's people live in a godless society? Blend in and assimilate? No, this is the time to stand out and assist. We were made for this moment.

During my Boy Scout days I earned a first-aid merit badge. I could be counted on to wrap a sprained ankle or bandage a scraped knee. During one of our daylong jamborees, I was assigned a spot in the

This is the time to stand out and assist. We were made for this moment.

first-aid tent. Initially I was thrilled. I wore a first-aid armband and stood under a first-aid flag. I felt important. But as I stood outside and watched the activities, I began to feel left out. The other scouts were running, swimming, competing, and playing. And Max? I was standing at the front of the tent. I

wanted to remove my armband and join the fun. A scoutmaster heard my complaint and reminded me, "You have a special place here. You need to be different. This tent is the place for hurting kids."

So I kept my post.

Will you keep yours?

This is no time to play around in Persia.

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such

You were made for more
than moody kings and flashy
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good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:9–12)

You were made for more than moody kings and flashy parties. You were made to serve the almighty God and be a temple of his Holy Spirit. Persia offers nothing. Hollywood can't satisfy your needs. Madison Avenue makes big promises but leaves people naked of hope. Godless living is no life to live.

Will Mordecai and Esther see this? Cast in a story of decadence, will they resist the allure? Which will triumph—faith or façade? The answer might surprise you. The answer might *caution* you. Heroes of the Bible don't always begin that way. Like you and me, they've been known to romp on the wrong side of the fence.

I don't want to give away the details of the next chapter, but suffice it to say, our main characters are soon to have sore feet.

Chapter Three

THE GIRL WITH
TWO NAMES



I have two questions to bring up in heaven. Not complaints, because we will have no complaints. And I'm not sure we will have questions. If we do, I'd like clarity on two topics: mosquitos and middle school. Was either one necessary? Wouldn't the world have been better off without those little blood-sucking varmints and those in-between, off-balance years of middle school?

I was a nerd as an adolescent. Horribly shy. Had you asked me to choose between a chat with a girl and a root canal, I would have gone to the dentist. I had two bookworm buddies. We weren't cool. We didn't dress classy or talk the lingo. We studied. We actually had competitions to see who made the best grades. We sat in the front row of each class. We wore—hang on to your slide rule—pocket protectors! We were nerds. Which was fine with me until one geek moved away and the other got a paper route, and as quick as you can say “solitary,” I was. Bepimpled, gangly, and socially awkward.

I had one thing going for me: I could play baseball. Not great, but good enough for my father to convince me to try out for Pony League and good enough to get selected. Pony League, in case you don't know, bridges those unwieldy years between Little League and high school. I was a newcomer on a squad of seventh and eighth graders.

The first day of practice was a cold day in March. The winter wind kept spring at bay. A blue norther dropped the mercury and bent the barely budding trees. Mom gave me a sweatshirt to wear. It bore the

emblem of Abilene Christian College, a fine liberal arts institution from which my sisters had graduated and where I would eventually do the same. I was already in the car en route to the practice—my first practice with studly upperclassmen—when I pulled on the sweat-shirt and saw the words “Abilene Christian.” I was mortified. I could not show up wearing a shirt that bore the name “Christian.” Cool kids aren’t Christians. The in crowd isn’t Christian. I couldn’t debut as a Christian. The odds were already stacked against me. I was a Poindexter and a rookie.

The confession of what I did next might result in my defrocking. When Mom dropped me off at the practice field, I waited until she was out of view, and then I peeled off the shirt. I wadded it into a ball and stuck it in the base of the backstop. Rather than risk being left out by the team, I chose to shiver in short sleeves.

No, I’m not proud of my choice. The apostle Paul was speaking to the middle school version of Max when he wrote: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

We can conform or be transformed. On that day I chose to wad up the shirt.

Esther and Mordecai did the same. They disguised their identity. They conformed.

Does it trouble you to hear me say that? We tend to see Esther and Mordecai as rock solid. She, the female version of Daniel. He, a steel-spined Paul Revere. They never wavered, never floundered, never shirked their duty. They saved the Jewish nation, for crying out loud. Carve their faces on the Hebrew Mount Rushmore. They took a courageous stand.

But not before they didn’t.

Bible characters are complex. They aren’t one-dimensional felt figures that fit easily into a

We can
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Sunday school curriculum box. Moses was a murderer before he was a liberator. Joseph was a punk before he was a prince. Yes, the apostle Peter proclaimed Christ on the day of Pentecost. But he also denied Christ on the eve of the crucifixion. The people of the Bible were exactly that: people. Real people. Like you. Like me. And, like you and me, they had their good moments, and, well, they were known to hide their faith.

Chapter 2 of Esther opens with the phrase “after these things.”

After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus subsided, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed against her. (v. 1 NKJV)

“After these things.” After what things? What events had transpired between chapters 1 and 2? A clue to the answer is found later in the text. “Esther was taken to King Xerxes at the royal palace in early winter of the seventh year of his reign” (v. 16 NLT).

Our story began in the “third year of his reign” (1:3). Four years have passed since Vashti’s humiliation of Xerxes. During these four years Xerxes made an ambitious but disastrous attempt to invade Greece. It’s safe to imagine him weary and dispirited. Upon his return “he remembered Vashti.” He realized that he had no queen. He entered the gilded gate to no outstretched arms. No wife gave him comfort or offered him encouragement. Perhaps it was a wounded ego that prompted him to take the advice of his counselors and replace Vashti with “someone else who is better than she” (v. 19), code language for someone who will show up, shut up, and make the king look good.

The order went out to conscript the most beautiful virgins from the vast empire so Xerxes could make his choice. Estimates as to the number of candidates range from 400 to 1,460.¹ Bible class retellings of this decree fail to describe its atrocities. The girls were not asked

to love him, just entertain him. The inexperienced and no doubt terrified candidates abandoned their own aspirations and dreams for the whims of an insecure monarch. Fail to be selected and the young woman would spend the rest of her life as one of his concubines. She could not return to her family. She would see the king only at his request. The children she conceived with him would be raised to serve the court but would not be considered heirs to the throne.² She would never sleep with another man so that the king need never risk that another man, in the dark of night, be told that he was a better lover than Xerxes.³

Sickening, I know.

Into this toxic stew called Persia fell a Jew named Mordecai and his cousin Hadassah.

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. (2:5–6)

You and I read that paragraph with no reaction. We might comment on the hard-to-pronounce names, but that's it. But to the postexilic Jews? Trained in the ways of the Torah? Taught to cherish their identity as God's covenant people? That paragraph would arch a few eyebrows and raise a few questions.

For example, why was Mordecai in the citadel of Susa? To live in the citadel was to live on the equivalent of Capitol Hill. The fortress was the epicenter of Persian influence and government. Most Jews, exiled as they were, lived away from the citadel, far removed from the heart of Persian power and politics. Mordecai not only lived in the citadel, but he was also "on duty at the palace" (v. 21 TLB).

He worked for Xerxes! Mordecai placed himself in the thick of

the political thicket. Again, you and I are twenty-five hundred years and thousands of pages of history removed. No big deal. Good for you, Mordecai. You've made the big time in a foreign land. But to the Jews? That was a big deal. Remember, to be a Jew was to be called out and set apart. But Mordecai was on the payroll of a pagan king.

What's more, he had a pagan name! "Mordecai" was an adaptation of "Marduk," a Persian male deity.⁴ Mordecai's theonym memorialized a foreign god. Would a modern-day Jew name his son Muhammad? Would a God-fearing Jew in our day work for the Iranian military? Not likely. Then how do we explain a Jew named after a pagan numen and living on the Persian payroll?

An answer might be found by returning to the hard-to-pronounce words. Mordecai was the "son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah" (vv. 5–6). Mordecai was three generations removed from Jerusalem, plenty of time for the lines of Hebrew distinctiveness to fade. Living out the pagan name he was given, Mordecai went clandestine with his convictions. He had wadded up the sweatshirt and stuffed it at the base of the backstop.

He instructed Esther to follow suit.

Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. (v. 7)

Hadassah comes from the Hebrew word for *myrtle*. According to some rabbinical commentaries, *myrtle* implies "righteous."⁵ The name fits. Hadassah will soon take a righteous stand.

But she was also called Esther in deference to the Persian goddess Ishtar.⁶ How did she get this name? And how do we explain the decision of Mordecai to enter Esther in the contest to be queen of Persia?

When we first met Xerxes, you'll recall that he gave Vashti the boot because she refused to behave like a sugar baby. Next he solicited all the young beauties of Persia to apply for the now-vacant position.

When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor. . . .

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. (vv. 8–10)

Let's tally this up. Mordecai hid his heritage and taught his young cousin to do the same. He entered her in a bachelorette contest, knowing that the competition included a night in the bed of a Gentile king. He told her to show him a good time and keep her nationality a secret. She complied.

What in the world is going on here?

Like the Babylonians before them, polytheistic Persians did not require their conquered peoples to give up their gods. Go ahead, they said. Sacrifice to your cow, pray to your moon, bow before your goddess; just worship the gods of Persia too.

This proved problematic for the Jews. According to their Torah there was only one God. Every Jew worth his matzo bread quoted the Shema twice daily: "Listen, people of Israel! The LORD our God is the only LORD. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength" (Deut. 6:4–5 NCV). They were to worship Jehovah God only and have no other god before him. So how were

they to behave in Persia? The question of the psalmist is the question of the book of Esther. “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps. 137:4 NKJV). How does a person of faith live in a faithless world?

The initial response of Mordecai and Esther was disguise and compromise. The soft butter of their convictions melted against the warm knife of pragmatism.

Why risk angering the king?

What good comes from disclosure of the truth?

I can worship the Persian gods and God, right?

I can change my name and work for the king, right?

I can keep my identity a secret and sleep with the king, right?

They created a world of hidden identity. Mordecai kept his Hebrew ancestry a secret. Esther maneuvered through the queen-search contest without disclosing that she was a daughter of Abraham. By the time we meet Mordecai and Esther, they’ve buried their Jewish identity beneath several layers of compromise.

Which brings to mind another question for me to ask in heaven. In addition to clarification about mosquitos and middle school, I’d like a moment with Mr. Mordecai. “Why did you do it?” I’d inquire. “Why let them take her? You knew what would happen. She would be spruced up for one night and then lose her virginity to a brute. Unless selected as queen, she’d spend the rest of her life as a cloistered concubine. How many laws of the Torah did you violate?”

I’m thinking Mordecai would respond in one of two ways.

- “Max, you weren’t there. You don’t know how crazy Xerxes was. He was a fickle, psychotic dictator. In this way my precious Esther would at least be safe. That’s why I told her to tell no one that she was a Jew. I wanted to protect her.”

Or . . .

- “Max you don’t get it. This was all a part of my plan. I worked in the palace. I made friends with Hegai, head of the harem. I told him about her and her about him. We set the whole thing in motion. But if he knew her nationality . . .”

Then again . . .

- Mordecai might very well say, “Lucado, who are you to question me? You’re the one who was too embarrassed to wear the sweatshirt.”

He would be right to push back. The compulsion to hide our identity as children of God affects us all. Not in Persia but at work, school, on the bowling league, and in the Pony League. But at some point each of us has to figure out who we are and what that identity means for our lives.

The compulsion to hide our identity as children of God affects us all.

We face the identical temptation that Mordecai and Esther faced. Our society permits all beliefs except an exclusive one. Do whatever you want as long as you applaud what everyone else does. The incontestable value of Western culture is tolerance. Ironically, the champions of tolerance are

intolerant of a religion like Christianity that adheres to one Savior and one solution to the human problem. To believe in Jesus as the only Redeemer is to incur the disdain of Persia.

Are we not tempted to peel off the sweatshirt? In such moments God’s message is clear: remember your name. “What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we’re called children of God! That’s who we really are” (1 John 3:1 THE MESSAGE).

Every parent who has sent a child to camp, class, or college knows the dry-mouthed fear of the farewell moment. There is a frantic

You are the presence of
Jesus in this world—an
eternal being, destined
for an eternal home. You
are a citizen of heaven.



scramble for words. What advice can I give? What parting wisdom? Though the words take many forms, most are a version of this: “I love you. Don’t forget that. And don’t forget who you are. You are mine!”

Do you know who you are? And whose you are?

You are the presence of Jesus in this world—an eternal being, destined for an eternal home. Pimply faced and gangly? Hogwash. You are a citizen of heaven. Unique in all of creation. Secured by Christ for eternity. The devil can’t touch you. The demons can’t have you. The world can’t possess you. What people think about you matters not one whit. You belong to your heavenly Father.

I received an unexpected reminder about my identity a few weeks ago. My wife and I had the opportunity to drive through my hometown and pay respects at the grave site of my mom and dad. It’d been ten years since our last visit. It is easy to locate their burial spot. It is the only one with a live oak tree. The cemetery has many trees, mind you, but only one live oak. I can’t explain my dad’s fondness for this Texas tree. They have gnarly, knuckled trunks and tend to grow in all angles. But for some reason Dad took such a liking to them that he planted one over his burial plot. He’d just been diagnosed with ALS, and wanting to get his affairs in order, he requested permission to plant the tree.

He took me to see it. Barely a sapling it was. So small that I could wrap my hand around it and touch finger to thumb. That was three and a half decades ago. Today the trunk is as thick as a man’s torso, and its branches extend far over the grave site. But it wasn’t the size of the tree that impressed me; it was what my dad had carved.

A heart. I’d never noticed it. He etched the design and scraped out the bark so that as the tree has grown, so has the carving. In the center of the heart are the initials of his kids. When the tree was small, the heart was small as well. But as the tree has expanded, so has the message. He never told us that he did this. I suppose he wanted to leave a surprise. He knew we would need a reminder of his love, so he left it notched into the trunk. *You have a place in my heart.*

Your Father did the same. Not with a live oak tree, but with a cross. Not with a carving, but with the crimson blood of Christ. Years have passed, and the heart of the cross, the message of the cross, has only grown.

To the middle school version of Max, God says, “Look at Jesus Christ on the tree of Calvary. Let me tell you who you are. You are made special by the work of Christ.”

Like me, you’ve had, and will have, your sweatshirt moments. In those moments remember who you are.

Moreover, remember that the story of Mordecai and Esther didn’t stop at chapter 2. You are only a page from a fifth century BC version of a come-to-Jesus moment. Our duo will recall their identity, reach for their discarded sweatshirts, and put them back on. They will accept God’s invitation to partner with him, and God, who is so happy to give his children a second chance, will put them straight to work.

I wish I could report that I did the same. But I didn’t. I nearly froze that day as I stood short sleeved in left field. Sometimes we are left searching for springtime, not because of God’s choice, but because of our foolish ones.

Is it time for you to come in out of the cold?

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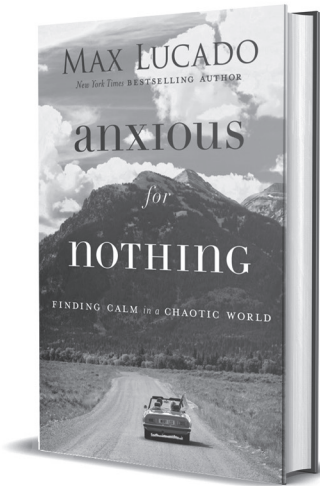
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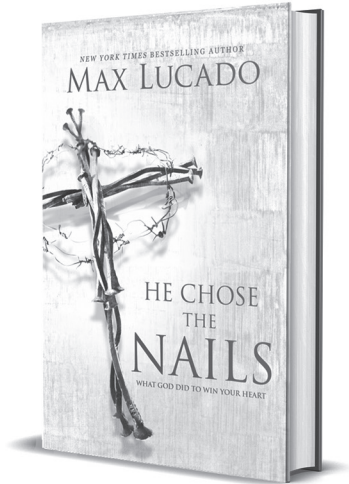
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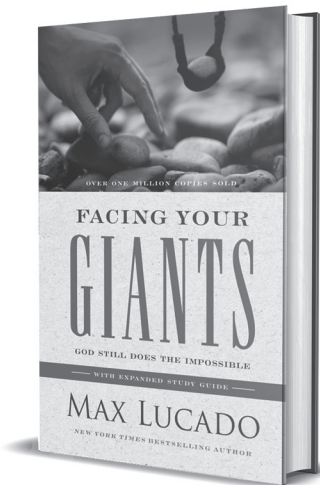
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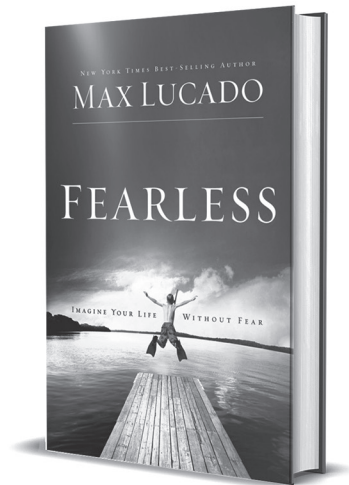
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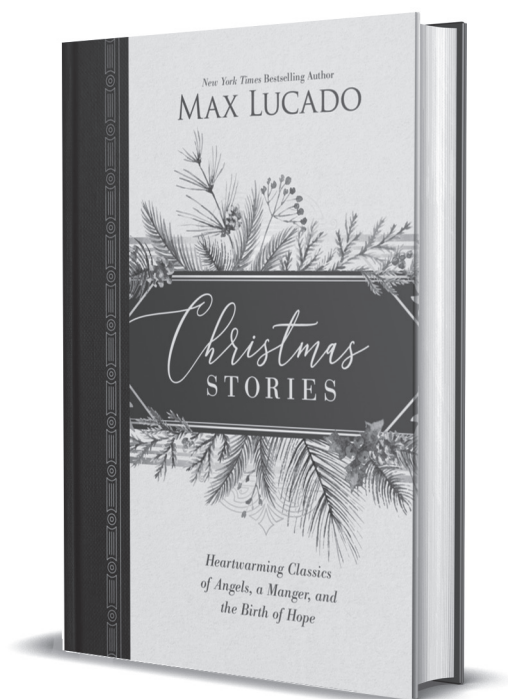


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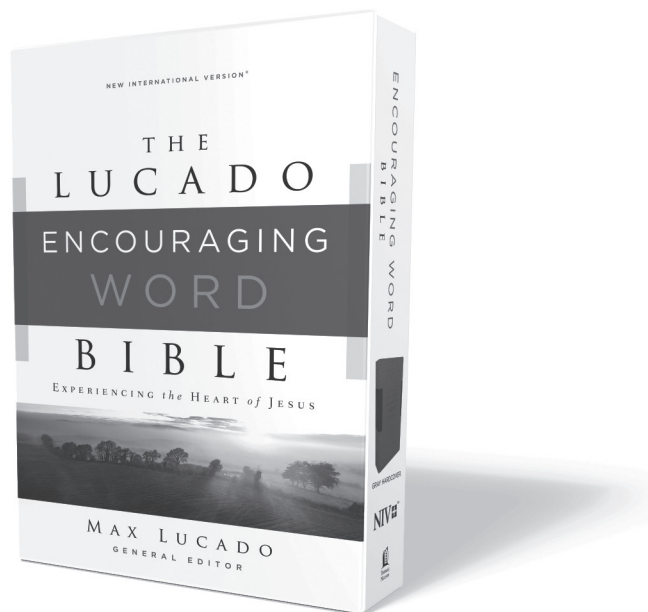
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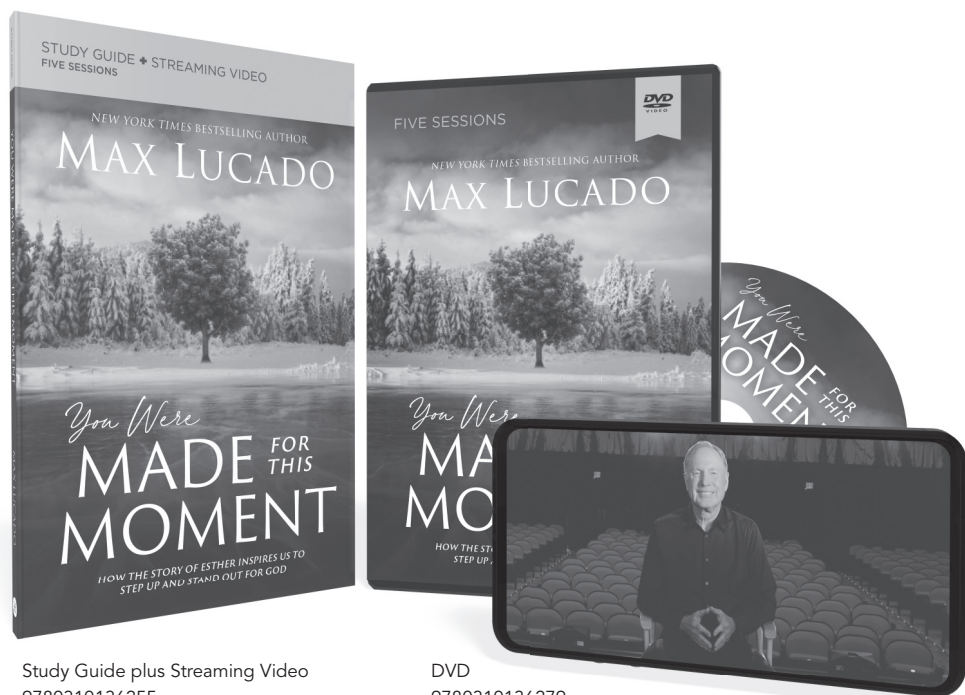
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