
Reflections on 3:16 the verse

“John 3:16 is the North Star of the Bible. If you align your life with it, you can find The Way home.”

—ANNE GRAHAM LOTZ,
ANGEL MINISTRIES

“I remember vividly that I walked down an aisle in a church one night, without prompting by my parents, and knelt at a humble altar. There through my tears, I gave my heart to Jesus. I was three years old. That night proved to be the highlight of my entire life. The ‘whosoever’ in John 3:16 even extended to a little toddler. Praise the Lord!”

—DR. JAMES DOBSON,
FOUNDER OF
FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

“To me, John 3:16 is the very foundation of my faith. It is because of God’s love that He gave and it’s because of God’s love that I am saved forever.”

—CECE WINANS,
GOSPEL MUSIC ARTIST

“There it is in black and white. As simple and gentle as $1+1=2$. For God so loved the world that He gave His only son and whoever believes in Him shall NOT perish, but shall have everlasting life. That’s it. Admission is free.”

—DELILAH,
RADIO HOST

“This is the first verse that I learned as a child and it changed my life. To most ten-year-olds, these would be sweet words to recite to Mom and Dad to make them smile. To me they were a lighthouse in the darkness, a concrete promise when everything else seemed untrue and a hope that could not be extinguished. Over forty years later I wrap the truth of these words around me every day as I look for others who are lost at sea, betrayed and hopeless. All the literature in the world cannot compete with the treasure contained in these twenty-six words.”

—SHEILA WALSH,
AUTHOR OF *PRAYING*
WOMEN

“We can *all* endure a great deal of pain and grief, and general ‘life-is-not-fair’ experiences when we know who *loves* us, and how incredible and incomprehensible the *joy* is that awaits us.”

—MICHAEL BLANTON,
ARTIST MANAGEMENT

“Out of great need is born great faith. I have seen both. 3:16 brings life and faith to a hope-starved world. May we embrace its message anew.”

—BISHOP JOHN K.
RUCYAHANA, AUTHOR OF
THE BISHOP OF RWANDA

“John 3:16 is the foundation of my faith. A picture of undeserved, unconditional, and unwavering love from a Father to his kids.”

—ERNIE JOHNSON,
SPORTSCASTER FOR
TURNER SPORTS AND CBS
SPORTS

“When I was a boy I used to hug a rubber hot water bottle in bed at night to beat off the chill air from the frigid Irish Sea. Comfort! I woke up wet, cold, and miserable. The rubber hot water bottle had perished. It had slowly deteriorated, imperceptibly disintegrated and was ultimately useless. Perished! That can happen to humans too—and God so loved the world that He gave us Jesus so that we would not perish but have everlasting life.”

—STUART BRISCOE,
AUTHOR OF *WHAT WORKS
WHEN LIFE DOESN'T*

“I love John 3:16 because it is the gospel in a nutshell. It shares God’s great love for us, and our great need for him.”

—MAC POWELL,
SINGER-SONGWRITER AND
FOUNDER OF THIRD DAY

“There are hundreds of verses in Scripture that are of significant importance to me. But this is the most important verse in the Bible.”

—JOHN SMOLTZ,
HALL OF FAME BASEBALL
PITCHER

“This is the promise that bears hope for the hopeless. When we finally realize ‘I can’t do this on my own’ this is the Father responding, ‘I know, so I’ve done it for you.’”

—JEFF FOXWORTHY,
COMEDIAN

“By twenty I was visibly unraveling mentally and emotionally. It would take the harrowing experience of living as an agoraphobic before I considered God’s intervening love and relinquished my heart to Christ. 3:16 is the undeniable address my sanity, safety, and eternal security takes refuge in.”

—PATSY CLAIRMONT,
AUTHOR OF *DANCING*
BONES

“God’s love is not some mere sentiment, but rather something that He showed in a tangible way. God offers to us the gift of eternal life. To receive a gift, you must reach out to accept it, and then open it.”

—GREG LAURIE,
PASTOR/EVANGELIST

“John 3:16. What an amazing scripture—God loved us while we were quite unlovable people. He reached out to us when we were unreachable. Knowing that we would fail Him, deny Him, and spurn this unconditional love, He still gave . . . unconditionally!”

—DON MOEN,
SINGER-SONGWRITER AND
AUTHOR OF *GOD WILL
MAKE A WAY*

“God gave his son as payment for our sins, everyone’s sins—the payment was as horrible as anything you can imagine. Beyond the physical pain, the experience of separation from his Father was a pain that cannot be described. But Jesus endured this for us so that we can enjoy eternal life.”

—NED YOST,
FORMER MANAGER OF THE
MILWAUKEE BREWERS AND
THE KANSAS CITY ROYALS

“Without hope, the fear of death is overwhelming. But as Christians, the Bible verse John 3:16 assures us that there is everlasting life—and this promise alone should give all of us hope at the time of death.”

—KENNETH COOPER,
M.D., M.P.H.

Reflections on *3:16* the book

“Lucado digs deeply into one of the most famous and oft-quoted passages of the Bible—John 3:16. First situating it in its biblical context as part of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, Lucado then dissects the 26-word promise phrase by phrase, picking out key theological ideas that provide hope to Christians. What does it mean that God ‘so loved the world’? What must we do to gain everlasting life? Using his trademark folksy style, Lucado employs great stories and real-life illustrations to drive home points about God’s love, justice and determination to save.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“John 3:16 is one of the most powerful verses in Scripture. I can’t think of another verse that the gospel hinges on so clearly as John 3:16. Over the years, this verse was displayed behind my father’s platform at all his Crusades. Max Lucado’s *3:16: The Numbers of Hope* is refreshing and insightful. May the powerful Gospel message of this verse bring hope to all who read.”

—FRANKLIN GRAHAM,
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
BILLY GRAHAM
EVANGELISTIC
ASSOCIATION AND
SAMARITAN’S PURSE

“Max gave us humor and charm in *Hermie and Wormie*. Now he has given us faith and wisdom.”

—TIM CONWAY, ACTOR

“My friend Max Lucado has done it again! He’s taken the most beloved passage of Scripture, unwrapped its deepest truths revealing the greatest expression of God’s love. *3:16*’s message of hope will show you how much you matter to God. This is a must-read for anyone.”

—RICK WARREN,
PASTOR OF SADDLEBACK
CHURCH AND AUTHOR OF
THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE

“I’m a sucker for a simple love story. Want to learn why on earth you are on this earth? Want to learn how to really love? Read this book. Max has taken the single most important (and simple) verse in the Bible and dissected it for those of us who need to keep it simple.”

—RICK PERRY,
FORMER GOVERNOR OF
TEXAS

“At the heart of our worship is the message of John 3:16. The story still inspires—out of God’s great love was born great sacrifice. In *3:16*, Max makes new and fresh one of the oldest and deepest truths of our faith. I cannot help but sing and shout and dance from a grateful and humble heart when I think of what God has done for me and all of humanity. How great is our God!”

—CHRIS TOMLIN,
SINGER-SONGWRITER

“Whether you are kicking the tires of Christianity or you cut your teeth on a church pew, *3:16* promises to broaden your horizons and further your understanding of God’s most fundamental, life-transforming promise—the promise of eternal life.”

—ED YOUNG,
PASTOR OF FELLOWSHIP
CHURCH AND AUTHOR
OF *OUTRAGEOUS*,
CONTAGIOUS JOY

“Max Lucado brings words, and now numbers, to new life. The truth in *3:16* is life changing, and nobody makes it more relevant for today and compelling for the future than our friend Max.”

—MARY GRAHAM,
FORMER PRESIDENT OF
WOMEN OF FAITH

“One of America’s favorite authors helps us to see this precious gem from a variety of perspectives, each of which sheds additional light on an inexhaustible truth.”

—TONY CAMPOLO, PH.D.,
PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY
AT EASTERN UNIVERSITY

316

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
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
You Were Made for
This Moment

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
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
You Can Count on
God for Kids
Where'd My Giggle Go?

YOUNG ADULT BOOKS

3:16
Anxious for Nothing
(Young Readers Edition)
It's Not About Me
Make Every Day Count
One God, One Plan, One Life
Wild Grace
You Were Made to
Make a Difference
Unshakable Hope
Promise Book

GIFT BOOKS

Dad Time
Everyday Blessings
Fear Not Promise Book
For the Tough Times
God Is with You Every Day
God Thinks You're Wonderful
God Will Help You
Grace for the Moment
Grace Happens Here
Happy Today
Let the Journey Begin
Live Loved
Praying the Promises
Safe in the Shepherd's Arms
This Is Love
Trade Your Cares for Calm
You Can Count on God
You Changed My Life

3:16

THE NUMBERS OF HOPE

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

© 2007, 2022 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 HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

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

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (NIV). © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Other Scripture references are from the following sources:

THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE: Old Testament (AMP). © 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by the Zondervan Corporation (used by permission); and THE AMPLIFIED NEW TESTAMENT. © 1958 by the Lockman Foundation (used by permission). The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV). © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The Good News Bible: The Bible in Today's English Version (TEV), © 1976 by the American Bible Society. The Living Bible (TLB), © 1971 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL. All rights reserved. The Message (MSG) by Eugene H. Peterson, © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. New American Standard Bible® (NASB), © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. New Century Version® (NCV). © 1987, 1988, 1991, 2005 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The New English Bible (NEB). © 1961, 1970 by the Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press. Reprinted by permission. The New King James Version (NKJV), © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers. The Holy Bible, New Living Translation (NLT), © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV), © 1946, 1952, 1971, 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. The Contemporary English Version (CEV), © 1991 by the American Bible Society. Used by permission. The King James Version of the Bible (KJV), © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson Publishers. The New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms (NAB) © 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., and are used by the permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. Any italics in the Scripture quotations reflect the author's own emphasis.

ISBN: 978-1-4002-3303-8 (repackage)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lucado, Max.

3:16 / Max Lucado.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN: 978-0-8499-0193-5 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0-8499-1981-7 (IE)

ISBN: 978-0-8499-2101-8 (TP)

ISBN: 978-0-8499-4753-7 (repackage)

1. Bible. N.T. John III, 16—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Salvation—Christianity I. Title. II. Title: Three sixteen.

BS2615.6.S25L83 2007

226.5'06—dc22

2007015849

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 27 LSC 6 5 4 3 2 1

With pride as deep and powerful as the Gulf Stream, Denalyn and I dedicate this book to our daughter Sara. If you receive half the joy you've given us, you'll radiate the rest of your life. We love you.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxi
<i>Introduction</i>	xxiii
CHAPTER 1	1
The Most Famous Conversation in the Bible	
CHAPTER 2	11
No One Like Him	
<i>“For God so loved the world . . .”</i>	
CHAPTER 3	19
Hope for the Hard Heart	
<i>“For God so loved the world . . .”</i>	

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 4	25
When You Get Booted Out	
<i>“For God so loved the world . . .”</i>	
CHAPTER 5	33
The Only One and Only	
<i>“. . . he gave his one and only Son . . .”</i>	
CHAPTER 6	43
The Heart He Offers	
<i>“. . . he gave his one and only Son . . .”</i>	
CHAPTER 7	51
Heaven’s “Whoever” Policy	
<i>“. . . whoever believes in him shall not perish . . .”</i>	
CHAPTER 8	61
Believe and Receive	
<i>“. . . whoever believes in him shall not perish . . .”</i>	
CHAPTER 9	67
God’s Gracious Grip	
<i>“. . . whoever believes in him shall not perish . . .”</i>	
CHAPTER 10	75
Hell’s Supreme Surprise	
<i>“. . . whoever believes in him shall not perish . . .”</i>	

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 11	85
What Makes Heaven Heavenly	
<i>“ . . . shall not perish but have eternal life”</i>	
CHAPTER 12	95
The Last Word on Life	
<i>“ . . . shall not perish but have eternal life”</i>	
CONCLUSION	105
The 3:16ed Life	
ONE MORE WORD FROM MAX	109
Let God Love You	
<i>Only Jesus: 40 Days with the Son</i>	119
<i>Notes</i>	203

Acknowledgments

May I thank some people who helped this book become one?

Liz Heaney and Karen Hill were, as always, apt editors: equally skilled with surgical blades and soothing balm.

Steve and Cheryl Green tirelessly pastored these ideas and oversaw the hectic process of publication.

Carol “Bloodhound” Bartley let no slipup slip by uncorrected.

Susan and Greg Ligon and the entire Thomas Nelson team were the Fort Knox of creativity.

Dave Drury contributed dozens of helpful insights and suggestions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

David Treat offered hours of heaven-headed intercessions.

The UpWords team makes all our lives easier.

The Oak Hills Church has, for two decades, tolerated my teachings and forgiven my shortcomings. I'm grateful to each of you.

Jenna, Andrea, and Sara. What dad deserves such splendid daughters? (Return to the nest anytime you like.)

Denalyn, I'm confused. I thought our honeymoon was supposed to last ten days. My, it's been forty years, and we're still celebrating! Did you book this trip?

And one final prayer to the Giver of all words. Eternal thanks, dear King. Would you convince the ones who read these words that the best of life is yet to be?

Introduction

I love golf. If only it loved me in return. Alas, it is a one-sided romance. My golf swing is the stuff that keeps an instructor awake at night. One kindly compared it to an octopus falling from a tree. Another said, “I know your problem. You are standing too close to the ball *after* you hit it.” Still another suggested that I take a couple of weeks off from golf, then try bowling.

One coach refuses to give up on me. He is a terrific friend and experienced sleuth of the game. He works on golf like a mechanic on a V-8 engine, taking my swing apart piece by piece. During one lesson, I thought I had done the impossible. I thought I had stumped him. He studied me as I hit ball after

ball. He watched from every angle. He stood behind me, to either side of me. Finally, I asked him, “What do you think I should do?”

He rested his elbow on a crossed arm and cupped his chin in his hand. “I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m trying to find the one problem that is causing the other nine.”

(We are still looking for it.)

His approach makes sense. Problems are best solved when traced to their beginnings. This teaching strategy explains my fascination with the most well-known verse in the Bible: John 3:16.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Could a single sentence contain more significance? Consider the weight of its words: “God . . . loved . . . world . . . perish . . . eternal life.”

Each phrase deserves a deep dive. Each term warrants its own conversation. Each word merits its own chapter.

Hence, the book 3:16.

I am grateful that my dear friends at HarperCollins Christian Publishing have chosen to relaunch it for a new generation of readers. When it released in 2007, we had no idea it would be so well received. It’s been read by all ages, translated into twenty-five languages and used in countless settings. Numerous bookstore chains, church denominations, and entire congregations spent focused time examining this life-giving promise. Prisons. Small groups. Personal studies.

Stories came from readers around the world who found faith in this “twenty-six-word parade of hope,” whose words have been framed, T-shirted, tattooed, monogrammed, and bannered.

Every time I recall these words, they are fresh and as stunning as my first encounter with them. The mind-bending awareness of God’s limitless love, his incalculable sacrifice, and the priceless teaching at the core. How can we not review it again and again? I want this generation, and all who come after, to look closely at the key promise of God and choose the gift beyond all gifts.

John 3:16 does for the human heart what my coach attempted to do for my golf swing. It invites us to get to the root of the human story. We tend to do the opposite. We focus on the fruit. Am I well-employed, well-paid, well-built, or well-received by people in my world? Valid questions, for sure, but John 3:16 bids us to go deeper.

Who is God?

Why does his love matter?

Do I matter?

What is meant by “perish”?

Eternal life? Is it available to me?

John 3:16 takes us upriver to the headwaters of human existence. Once we find our source of life, it’s easier to stay on course.

I invite you to turn the page and engage with these wonderful words of Jesus. Though spoken more than two thousand years ago, they are as relevant as this morning’s headlines.

He loved. He gave. We believe. We live.

It’s that simple. It’s that vital.

Shall we get started?

(By the way, the jury is still out on my golf swing. A golfing buddy recently gave this assessment: “The good news: you are still going to heaven. The bad news: you won’t be on the golf team.”)

CHAPTER 1

The Most Famous Conversation in the Bible

He's waiting for the shadows. Darkness will afford the cover he covets. So he waits for the safety of nightfall. He sits near the second-floor window of his house, sipping olive-leaf tea, watching the sunset, biding his time. Jerusalem enchants at this hour. The disappearing sunlight tints the stone streets, gilds the white houses, and highlights the blockish temple.

Nicodemus looks across the slate roofs at the massive square: gleaming and resplendent. He walked its courtyard this morning. He'll do so again tomorrow. He'll gather with religious leaders and do what religious leaders do: discuss God. Discuss reaching God, pleasing God, appeasing God.

God.

Pharisees converse about God. And Nicodemus sits among them. Debating. Pondering. Solving puzzles. Resolving dilemmas. *Sandal-tying on the Sabbath. Feeding people who won't work. Divorcing your wife. Dishonoring parents.*

What does God say? Nicodemus needs to know. It's his job. He's a holy man and leads holy men. His name appears on the elite list of Torah scholars. He dedicated his life to the law and occupies one of the seventy-one seats of the Judean supreme court. He has credentials, clout, and questions.

Questions for this Galilean crowd-stopper. This backwater teacher who lacks diplomas yet attracts people. Who has ample time for the happy-hour crowd but little time for clergy and the holy upper crust. He banishes demons, some say; forgives sin, others claim; purifies temples, Nicodemus has no doubt. He witnessed Jesus purge Solomon's Porch.¹ He saw the fury. Braided whip, flying doves. "There will be no pocket padding in my house!" Jesus erupted. By the time the dust settled and coins landed, hustling clerics were running a background check on him. The man from Nazareth won no favor in the temple that day.

So Nicodemus comes at night. His colleagues can't know of the meeting. They wouldn't understand. But Nicodemus can't wait until they do. As the shadows darken the city, he steps out, slips unseen through the cobbled, winding streets. He passes servants lighting lamps in the courtyards and takes a path that ends at the door of a simple house. Jesus and his followers are staying here, he's been told. Nicodemus knocks.

The noisy room silences as he enters. The men are wharf workers and tax collectors, unaccustomed to the highbrow

world of a scholar. They shift in their seats. Jesus motions for the guest to sit. Nicodemus does and initiates the most famous conversation in the Bible: “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2 NKJV).

Nicodemus begins with what he “knows.” *I’ve done my homework*, he implies. *Your work impresses me*.

We listen for a kindred salutation from Jesus: “And I’ve heard of you, Nicodemus.” We expect, and Nicodemus expected, some hospitable chitchat.

None comes. Jesus makes no mention of Nicodemus’s VIP status, good intentions, or academic credentials, not because they don’t exist, but because, in Jesus’s algorithm, they don’t matter. He simply issues this proclamation: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3 NKJV).

Behold the Continental Divide of Scripture, the international date line of faith. Nicodemus stands on one side, Jesus on the other, and Christ pulls no punches about their differences.

Nicodemus inhabits a land of good efforts, sincere gestures, and hard work. Give God your best, his philosophy says, and God does the rest.

Jesus’ response? Your best won’t do. Your works don’t work. Your finest efforts don’t mean squat. Unless you are born again, you can’t even see what God is up to.

Nicodemus hesitates on behalf of us all. Born again? “How can a man be born when he is old?” (v. 4 NKJV). You must be kidding. Put life in reverse? Rewind the tape? Start all over? We can’t be born again.

Oh, but wouldn’t we like to? A do-over. A try-again. A

reload. Broken hearts and missed opportunities bob in our wake. A mulligan would be nice. Who wouldn't cherish a second shot? But who can pull it off? Nicodemus scratches his chin and chuckles. "Yeah, a graybeard like me gets a maternity-ward recall."

Jesus doesn't crack a smile. "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (v. 5 NKJV). About this time a gust of wind blows a few leaves through the still-open door. Jesus picks one off the floor and holds it up. God's power works like that wind, Jesus explains. Newborn hearts are born of heaven. You can't wish, earn, or create one. New birth? Inconceivable. God handles the task, start to finish.

Nicodemus looks around the room at the followers. Their blank expressions betray equal bewilderment.

Old Nick has no hook upon which to hang such thoughts. He speaks self-fix. But Jesus speaks—indeed introduces—a different language. Not works born of men and women, but a work done by God.

Born again. Birth, by definition, is a passive act. The enwombed child contributes nothing to the delivery. Post-partum celebrations applaud the work of the mother. No one lionizes the infant. ("Great work there, little one.") No, give the tyke a pacifier not a medal. Mom deserves the gold. She exerts the effort. She pushes, agonizes, and delivers.

When my niece bore her first child, she invited her brother and mother to stand in the delivery room. After witnessing three hours of pushing, when the baby finally crowned, my nephew turned to his mom and said, "I'm sorry for every time I talked back to you."

The mother pays the price of birth. She doesn't enlist the child's assistance or solicit his or her advice. Why would she? The baby can't even take a breath without umbilical help, much less navigate a path into new life. Nor, Jesus is saying, can we. Spiritual rebirthing requires a capable parent, not an able infant.

Who is this parent? Check the strategically selected word *again*. The Greek language offers two choices for *again*:²

1. *Palin*, which means a repetition of an act; to redo what was done earlier.³
2. *Anothen*, which also depicts a repeated action, but requires the original source to repeat it. It means "from above, from a higher place, things which come from heaven or God."⁴ In other words, the one who did the work the first time does it again. This is the word Jesus chose.

The difference between the two terms is the difference between a painting by da Vinci and one by me. Suppose you and I are standing in the Louvre, admiring the famous *Mona Lisa*. Inspired by the work, I produce an easel and canvas and announce, "I'm going to paint this beautiful portrait again."

And I do! Right there in the Salle des Etats, I brandish my palette and flurry my brush and re-create the *Mona Lisa*. Alas, Lucado is no Leonardo. Ms. Lisa has a Picassoesque imbalance to her—crooked nose and one eye higher than the other. Technically, however, I keep my pledge and paint the *Mona Lisa again*.

Jesus means something else. He employs the second Greek term, calling for the action of the original source. He uses the

word *another*, which, if honored in the Paris gallery, would require da Vinci's presence. *Another* excludes:

Latter-day replicas.

Second-generation attempts.

Well-meaning imitations.

He who did it first must do it again. The original creator re-creates his creation. This is the act that Jesus describes.

Born: God exerts the effort.

Again: God restores the beauty.

We don't *try* again. We need, not the muscle of self, but a miracle of God.

The thought coldcocks Nicodemus. "How can this be?" (v. 9). Jesus answers by leading him to the Hope diamond of the Bible.

For God

so loved the world

that he gave his one and only Son,

that whoever believes in him

shall not perish but have

eternal life.

A twenty-six-word parade of hope: beginning with God, ending with life, and urging us to do the same. Brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment, yet solid enough

to weather two thousand years of storms and questions. If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder. The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human. And God's treatment is prescribed in John 3:16.

He loved.

He gave.

We believe.

We live.

The words are to Scripture what the Mississippi River is to America—an entryway into the heartland. Believe or dismiss them, embrace or reject them, any serious consideration of Christ must include them. Would a British historian dismiss the Magna Carta? Egyptologists overlook the Rosetta stone? Could you ponder the words of Christ and never immerse yourself into John 3:16?

The verse is an alphabet of grace, a table of contents to the Christian hope, each word a safe-deposit box of jewels. Read it again, slowly and aloud, and note the word that snatches your attention. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

“God so *loved* the world . . .” We’d expect an anger-fueled God. One who punishes the world, recycles the world, forsakes the world . . . but loves the world?

The *world*? This world? Heartbreakers, hope-snatchers, and dream-dousers prowl this orb. Dictators rage. Abusers inflict. Reverends think they deserve the title. But God loves. And he loves the world so much he gave his:

Declarations?

Rules?

Dicta?

Edicts?

No. The heart-stilling, mind-bending, deal-making-or-breaking claim of John 3:16 is this: *God gave his Son . . . his only Son*. No abstract ideas but a flesh-wrapped divinity. Scripture equates Jesus with God. God, then, gave himself. Why? So that “*whoever* believes in him shall not perish.”

John Newton, who set faith to music in “Amazing Grace,” loved this barrier-breaking pronoun. He said, “If I read ‘God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that when John Newton believed he should have everlasting life,’ I should say, perhaps, there is some other John Newton; but ‘whosoever’ means this John Newton and the other John Newton, and everybody else, whatever his name may be.”⁵

Whoever . . . a universal word.

And *perish* . . . a sobering word. We’d like to dilute, if not delete, the term. Not Jesus. He pounds Do Not Enter signs on every square inch of Satan’s gate and tells those hell-bent on entering to do so over his dead body. Even so, some souls insist.

In the end, some perish and some live. And what determines the difference? Not works or talents, pedigrees or possessions. Nicodemus had these in hoards. The difference is determined by our belief. “Whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Bible translators in the New Hebrides islands struggled to find an appropriate verb for *believe*. This was a serious problem, as the word and the concept are essential to Scripture.

One Bible translator, John G. Paton, accidentally came upon a solution while hunting with a tribesman. The two

men bagged a large deer and carried it on a pole along a steep mountain path to Paton's home. When they reached the veranda, both men dropped the load and plopped into the porch chairs. As they did so, the native exclaimed in the language of his people, "My, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest." Paton immediately reached for paper and pencil and recorded the phrase.

As a result, his final translation of John 3:16 could be worded: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever stretcheth himself out on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."⁶

Stretch out on Christ and rest.

Martin Luther did. When the great reformer was dying, severe headaches left him bedfast and pain struck. He was offered a medication to relieve the discomfort. He declined and explained, "My best prescription for head and heart is that *God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*"⁷

The best prescription for head and heart. Who couldn't benefit from a dose? As things turned out, Nicodemus took his share. When Jesus was crucified, the theologian showed up with Joseph of Arimathea. The two offered their respects and oversaw Jesus's burial. No small gesture, given the anti-Christ climate of the day. When word hit the streets that Jesus was out of the tomb and back on his feet, don't you know Nicodemus smiled and thought of his late-night chat?

Born again, eh? Who would've thought he'd start with himself.

CHAPTER 2

No One Like Him

“For God so loved the world . . .”

If only I could talk to the pilot. Thirty seconds would do. Face-to-face. Just an explanation. He was, after all, the one bumping my wife and me from his plane.

Not that I could blame him. Denalyn had picked up more than souvenirs in Hong Kong. On the plane, she was so nauseous I had to wheelchair her through the airport. She flopped onto her seat and pillowed her head against the window, and I promised to leave her alone for the fourteen-hour flight.

I had a simple goal: get Denalyn on the plane.

The airline staff had an opposite one: get Denalyn off.

Fault me for their fear. When a concerned flight attendant inquired about my wife’s condition, I sent shock waves through

the fuselage with my answer: “Virus.” Attendants converged on our seats like police at a crime scene. Presidential news conferences have stirred fewer questions.

“How long has she been sick?”

“Did you see a doctor?”

“Have you considered swimming home?”

I downplayed Denalyn’s condition. “Give us one barf bag, and we’re happy travelers.” No one laughed. Apparently bug-bearing patrons compete with terrorists for the title “Most Unwanted Passenger.” The virus word reached the pilot, and the pilot rendered his verdict: “Not on my plane.”

“You must leave,” his bouncer informed matter-of-factly.

“Says who?”

“The pilot.”

I leaned sideways and looked down the aisle for the man in charge, but the cockpit door was closed. If only I could talk to him, present my side. We didn’t deserve banishment. We pay our taxes, vote in primaries, tip waiters. I wanted to plead my case, but the man in charge was unavailable for comment. He had a 747 to fly, seven thousand miles to navigate . . . and no time for us.

A few disheartening minutes later Denalyn and I found ourselves back at the gate, making plans to spend an extra night in China. As an airline representative made a list of hotel phone numbers, I noticed the plane pulling away. Hurrying over to the airport window, I stared into the cockpit, hoping for a glimpse of the mystery aviator. I waved both arms and mouthed my request: “Can we talk?” He didn’t stop. I never saw his face. (But if you’re reading this page, sir or ma’am, perhaps we could chat?)

Can you relate? You may feel similar sentiments about the pilot of the universe. God: the too-busy-for-you commander in chief, the faceless skipper who passes down nonnegotiable decisions. His universe hums like a Rolls-Royce, but sick passengers never appear on his radar screen. Even worse, you may suspect a vacant captain's seat. How do we know a hand secures the controls? Can we assume the presence of a pilot behind the steel door?

Christ weighs in decidedly on this discussion. He escorts passengers to the cockpit, enters 3:16 in the keypad, and unlocks the door to God. No Bible verse better expresses his nature. (We ought to submit it to *Webster's*.) Every word in the passage explains the second one. "For *God* so loved the world . . ."

Jesus assumes what Scripture declares: *God is*.

For proof, venture away from the city lights on a clear night and look up at the sky. That fuzzy band of white light is our galaxy, the Milky Way. One hundred billion stars.¹ Our galaxy is one of billions of others!² Who can conceive of such a universe, let alone infinite numbers of universes?

No one can. But let's try anyway. Suppose you attempt to drive to the sun. A car dealer offers you a sweet deal on a space vehicle (no doubt solar powered) that averages 150 mph. You hop in, open the moonroof, and blast off. You drive non-stop, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. Any guess as to the length of your trip? Try 70 years! Suppose, after stretching your legs and catching a bit of sun, you fuel up and rocket off to Alpha Centauri, the next closest star system. Best pack a lunch and clear your calendar. You'll need 15 million years to make the trip.³

Don't like to drive, you say? Board a jet, and zip through our solar system at a blistering 600 mph. In 16.5 days you'll reach the moon, in 17 years you'll pass the sun, and in 690 years you can enjoy dinner on Pluto. After seven centuries you haven't even left our solar system, much less our galaxy.⁴

Our universe is God's preeminent missionary. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1). A house implies a builder; a painting suggests a painter. Don't stars suggest a star maker? Doesn't creation imply a creator? "The heavens declare His righteousness" (Ps. 97:6 NKJV). Look above you.

Now look within you. Look at your sense of right and wrong, your code of ethics. Somehow even as a child you knew it was wrong to hurt people and right to help them. Who told you? Who says? What is this magnetic pole that pulls the needles on the compass of your conscience if not God?

You aren't alone with your principles. Common virtues connect us. Every culture has frowned upon selfishness and celebrated courage, punished dishonesty and rewarded nobility. Even cannibals display rudimentary justice, usually refusing to eat their children.⁵ A universal standard exists. Just as a code writer connects computers with common software bundles, a common code connects people. We may violate or ignore the code, but we can't deny it. Even people who have never heard God's name sense his law within them. "There is something deep within [humanity] that echoes God's yes and no, right and wrong" (Rom. 2:15 MSG). When atheists decry injustice, they can thank God for the ability to discern it. The conscience is God's fingerprint, proof of his existence.

Heavens above, moral code within—pings indicating the

presence of an occupied cockpit. Someone got this plane airborne, and it wasn't any of us. There is a pilot, and he is unlike anyone we've seen.

"To whom, then, will you compare God?" the prophet invites (Isa. 40:18). To whom indeed? "Human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs" (Acts 17:25 NLT). You and I start our days needy. Indeed, basic needs prompt us to climb out of bed. Not God. Uncreated and self-sustaining, he depends on nothing and no one. Never taken a nap or a breath. Needs no food, counsel, or physician. "The Father has life in himself" (John 5:26). Life is to God what wetness is to water and air is to wind. He is not just alive but life itself. God is, without help.

Hence, he always is. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (Ps. 90:2 NKJV).

God never began and will never cease. He exists endlessly, always. "The number of His years is unsearchable" (Job 36:26 NASB).

Even so, let's try to search them. Let every speck of sand, from the Sahara to South Beach, represent a billion years of God's existence. With some super vacuum, suck and then blow all the particles into a mountain, and count how many you have. Multiply your total by a billion and listen as God reminds: "They don't represent a fraction of my existence."

He is "the eternal God" (Rom. 16:26). He invented time and owns the patent. "The day is yours, and yours also the night" (Ps. 74:16). He was something before anything else was. When the first angel lifted the first wing, God had already always been.

Most staggering of all, he has never messed up. Not once. The prophet Isaiah described his glimpse of God. He saw six-winged angels. Though sinless, they covered themselves in God's presence. Two wings covered eyes, two wings covered feet, and two carried the angels airborne. They volleyed one phrase back and forth: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:3 NKJV).

God is holy. Every decision, exact. Each word, appropriate. Never out-of-bounds or out of place. Not even tempted to make a mistake. "God is impervious to evil" (James 1:13 MSG).

Tally this up. No needs. No age. No sin. No wonder he said, "I am God, and there is none like me" (Isa. 46:9).

But is God's grandness good news? When Isaiah saw it, he came unraveled: "Woe is me, for I am undone!" (Isa. 6:5 NKJV). Competent pilots boot sick people off the plane. An all-powerful God might do likewise. Shouldn't the immensity of his universe intimidate us? It did Carl Sagan. A lifetime of studying the skies led the astronomer to conclude: "Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves."⁶

Understandable pessimism. In the cockpit: God, who has no needs, age, or sin. Bouncing in the back of the plane: Max. Burger dependent. Half-asleep. Compared to God, I have the life span of a fruit fly. And sinless? I can't maintain a holy thought for my two-minute morning commute. Is God's greatness good news? Not without the next four words of John 3:16: "For God *so loved the world.*"

Try that mantra on for size. The one who holds the aces holds your heart. The one who formed you pulls for you.

Untrumpable power stoked by unstoppable love. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

God does for you what Bill Tucker’s father did for him. Bill was sixteen years old when his dad suffered a health crisis and consequently had to leave his business. Even after Mr. Tucker regained his health, the Tucker family struggled financially, barely getting by.

Mr. Tucker, an entrepreneurial sort, came up with an idea. He won the bid to reupholster the chairs at the local movie theater. This stunned his family. He had never stitched a seat. He didn’t even own a sewing apparatus. Still, he found someone to teach him the skill and located an industrial-strength machine. The family scraped together every cent they had to buy it. They drained savings accounts and dug coins out of the sofa. Finally they had enough.

It was a fine day when Bill rode with his dad to pick up the equipment. Bill remembers a jovial, hour-long trip discussing the bright horizons this new opportunity afforded them. They loaded the machine in the back of their truck and secured it right behind the cab. Mr. Tucker then invited his son to drive home. I’ll let Bill tell you what happened:

“As we were driving along, we were excited, and I, like any sixteen-year-old driver, was probably not paying enough attention to my speed. Just as we were turning on the cloverleaf to get on the expressway, I will never ever, ever forget watching that sewing machine, which was already top-heavy, begin to tip. I slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. I saw it go over the side. I jumped out and ran around the back of the truck. As I rounded the corner, I saw our hope and our dream lying on its side in pieces. And then I saw my dad just

looking. All of his risk and all of his endeavor and all of his struggling and all of his dream, all of his hope to take care of his family was lying there, shattered.

“You know what comes next, don’t you? ‘Stupid, punk kid driving too fast, not paying attention, ruined the family by taking away our livelihood.’ But that’s not what he said. He looked right at me. ‘Oh, Bill, I am so sorry.’ And he walked over, put his arms around me, and said, ‘Son, this is going to be okay.’”⁷

God is whispering the same to you. Those are his arms you feel. Trust him. That is his voice you hear. Believe him. Allow the only decision maker in the universe to comfort you. Life at times appears to fall to pieces, seems irreparable. But it’s going to be okay. How can you know? Because *God* so loved the world. And,

Since he has no needs, you cannot tire him.

Since he is without age, you cannot lose him.

Since he has no sin, you cannot corrupt him.

If God can make a billion galaxies, can’t he make good out of our bad and sense out of our faltering lives? Of course he can. He is God. He not only flies the plane, but he knows the passengers and has a special place for those who are sick and ready to get home.

Notes

CHAPTER 1: THE MOST FAMOUS CONVERSATION IN THE BIBLE

1. A colonnade on the east of the temple, so called from a tradition that it was a relic of Solomon's temple left standing after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. (See *Bible Encyclopedia*, "Solomon's Porch," ChristianAnswers.net, <http://www.christiananswers.net/dictionary/porchsolomons.html>.)
2. The earliest copies of the books of the New Testament were written in Greek, so Greek word studies shed light on the meaning of New Testament passages.
3. *The New Testament Greek Lexicon*, "pa/lin," Heartlight's SearchGodsWord, <http://www.searchgodsword.org/lex/grk/browse.cgi?letter=p&sn=21&pn=2>.

NOTES

4. Ibid., “another,” Heartlight’s SearchGodsWord, <http://www.searchgodsword.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=509&1=en>.
5. Stanley Barnes, comp., *Sermons on John 3:16* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Productions, 1999), 90.
6. James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 195.
7. Barnes, *Sermons on John 3:16*, 25.

CHAPTER 2: NO ONE LIKE HIM

1. Andy Christofides, *The Life Sentence: John 3:16* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Publishing, 2002), 11.
2. Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay W. Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004), 143.
3. Christofides, *The Life Sentence*, 13.
4. “Liftoff to Space Exploration,” NASA, http://liftoff.msfc.nasa.gov/academy/universe_travel.html.
5. Bob Sheehan, “A Self-Revealing God,” *Reformation Today*, no. 127, May–June 1992, 6.
6. Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 7, quoted in Gonzalez and Richards, *The Privileged Planet*, x.
7. Bill Tucker (speech, Oak Hills Church men’s conference, San Antonio, TX, May 3, 2003).

MAX LUCADO

RECENT RELEASES



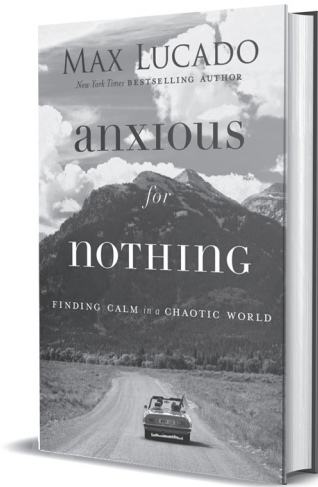
FIND WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT
AND INSPIRATION THAT WILL
DRAW YOU INTO A DEEPER
EXPERIENCE WITH JESUS



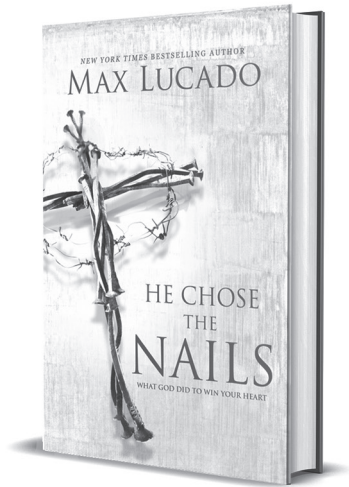
WWW.MAXLUCADO.COM

MAX LUCADO

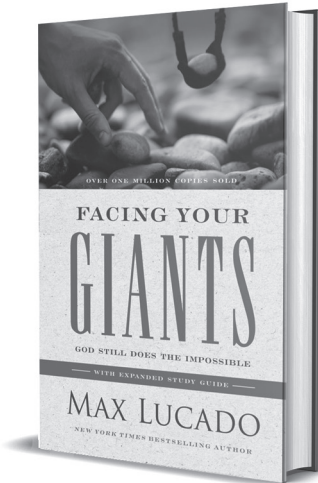
BESTSELLERS



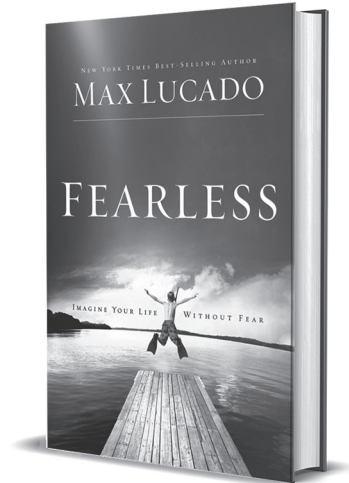
Anxious for Nothing



He Chose the Nails



Facing Your Giants



Fearless



WWW.MAXLUCADO.COM

Inspired by what you just read?

Connect with Max.



Listen to Max's teaching ministry, UpWords, on the radio and online.
Visit www.MaxLucado.com to get FREE resources for spiritual growth and encouragement, including:

- Archives of *UpWords*, Max's daily radio program, and a list of radio stations where it airs
- Devotionals and e-mails from Max
- First look at book excerpts
- Downloads of audio, video, and printed material
- Mobile content

You will also find an online store and special offers.

www.MaxLucado.com

1-800-822-9673

UpWords Ministries

P.O. Box 692170

San Antonio, TX 78269-2170

Join the Max Lucado community:

[Facebook.com/MaxLucado](https://www.facebook.com/MaxLucado)

[Instagram.com/MaxLucado](https://www.instagram.com/MaxLucado)

[Twitter.com/MaxLucado](https://www.twitter.com/MaxLucado)