

3:16

THE NUMBERS OF HOPE

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

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ONLY JESUS:  
40 DAYS WITH  
THE SON



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## An Invitation from Max

**T**he story of Jesus reads a bit like a scrapbook. Headline clippings. Newspaper photos. Jesus' favorite stories and lesson outlines. Here's Luke's snapshot of Jesus riding in Peter's boat. Matthew took this group photo when the seventy followers met for a party after the first mission trip. (Jesus is the one seated cross-legged in the center of the first row, smiling like his troop captured the Boy Scout Jamboree trophy.) John pasted a wedding napkin from Cana in the book as well as a funeral program from Bethany. He was the contributor who lamented, "There are so many other things Jesus did. If they were all written down, each of them, one by one, I can't imagine a world big enough to hold such a library of books" (John 21:25 MSG).

Flipping through the scrapbook leaves the reader with this impression: Jesus was, at once, common and not; alternately normal and heroic. One minute blending in with the domino players in the park, the next commanding the hell out of madmen, disease out of the dying, and death out of the dead. He conversed with kids and fishermen yet spoke with equal ease to waves, wind gusts, and demons. Who was this man?

No question matters more. I've collected a few scrapbook entries to help us find an answer. Having dedicated the book to the deep drilling of one of Jesus' statements, I want us to conclude with a flyby read of his entire life. Consider reading one entry a day for the next forty days, from the Bethlehem manger to the vacated tomb. Keep in mind that the final entries are yet to come, including the snapshot of you and your Savior at heaven's gateway.

DAY 1

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## An EXTRA-Ordinary Night

*“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.’”*

—LUKE 2:13–14

There is one word that describes the night he came—*ordinary*.

The sky was ordinary. An occasional gust stirred the leaves and chilled the air. The stars were diamonds sparkling on black velvet.

The sheep were ordinary. Some fat. Some scrawny. Common animals. No history makers. No blue-ribbon winners.

And the shepherds. Peasants they were. Probably wearing all the clothes they owned. Smelling like sheep and looking just as woolly.

An ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds. And were it not for a God who loves to hook an “extra” on the front of the ordinary, the night would have gone unnoticed. The sheep would have been forgotten, and the shepherds would have slept the night away.

But God dances amidst the common. And that night he did a waltz.

The black sky exploded with brightness. Trees that had been shadows jumped into clarity. Sheep that had been silent became a chorus of curiosity. One minute the shepherd was dead asleep; the next he was rubbing his eyes and staring into the face of an alien.

The night was ordinary no more.

The announcement went first to the shepherds. Had the angel gone to the theologians, they would have first consulted their commentaries. Had he gone to the elite, they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching.

So he went to the shepherds. Men who didn't know enough to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep and that messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags and sleeping in a feed trough.



DAY 2

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## Mary Cradles God

*“And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

—LUKE 2:7

God had entered the world as a baby. Yet, were someone to chance upon the sheep stable on the outskirts of Bethlehem that morning, what a peculiar scene they would behold.

The stable stinks like all stables do. The ground is hard, the hay scarce. Cobwebs cling to the ceiling, and a mouse scurries across the dirt floor.

A more lowly place of birth could not exist.

Near the young mother sits the weary father. If anyone is dozing, he is. He can't remember the last time he sat down.

And now that the excitement has subsided a bit, now that Mary and the baby are comfortable, he leans against the wall of the stable and feels his eyes grow heavy.

Wide awake is Mary. My, how young she looks! Her head rests on the soft leather of Joseph's saddle. The pain has been eclipsed by wonder. She looks into the face of the baby. Her son. Her Lord. His Majesty. At this point in history, the human being who best understands who God is and what he is doing is a teenage girl in a smelly stable. She can't take her eyes off him. Mary knows she is holding God. She remembers the words of the angel: "His kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:33).

He looks like anything but a king. His face is prunish and red. He is absolutely dependent upon Mary for his well-being.

Majesty in the midst of the mundane. She touches the face of the infant-God. *How long was your journey!*

DAY 3

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## Joseph, Caught in the Middle

*“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.”*

—MATTHEW 1:24–25

Matthew describes Jesus’ earthly father as a craftsman (Matt. 13:55). A small-town carpenter, he lives in Nazareth: a single-camel map dot on the edge of boredom. Is he the right choice? Doesn’t God have better options? An eloquent priest from Jerusalem or a scholar from the Pharisees? Why Joseph? A major part of the answer lies in his reputation: he gives it up for Jesus. “Then Joseph [Mary’s] husband, being

a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly” (Matt. 1:19 NKJV).

With the phrase “a just man,” Matthew recognizes the status of Joseph. Nazareth viewed him as we might view an elder, deacon, or Bible class teacher. Joseph likely took pride in his standing, but Mary’s announcement jeopardized it. *I’m pregnant.*

Now what? His fiancée is blemished, tainted . . . he is righteous, godly. On one hand, he has the law. On the other, he has his love. The law says, stone her. Love says, forgive her. Joseph is caught in the middle.

Then comes the angel. Mary’s growing belly gives no cause for concern, but reason to rejoice. “She carries the Son of God in her womb,” the angel announces. But who would believe it?

A bead of sweat forms beneath Joseph’s beard. He faces a dilemma. Make up a lie and preserve his place in the community, or tell the truth and kiss his reputation good-bye. He makes his decision. “Joseph . . . took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son” (Matt. 1:24–25 NKJV).

Joseph swapped his Torah studies for a pregnant fiancée and an illegitimate son and made the big decision of discipleship. He placed God’s plan ahead of his own.

DAY 4

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## Because of Love

*“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.”*

—JOHN 3:16

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

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

If you knew that those you loved would laugh in your face, would you still care? Christ did.

He humbled himself. He went from commanding angels to sleeping in the straw. From holding stars to clutching

Mary's finger. The palm that held the universe took the nail of a soldier.

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

Love goes the distance . . . and Christ traveled from limitless eternity to be confined by time in order to become one of us. He didn't have to. He could have given up. At any step along the way, he could have called it quits.

When he saw the size of the womb, he could have stopped.

When he saw how tiny his hand would be, how soft his voice would be, how hungry his tummy would be, he could have stopped. At the first whiff of the stinky stable, at the first gust of cold air. The first time he scraped his knee or blew his nose or tasted burnt bagels, he could have turned and walked out.

When he saw the dirt floor of his Nazareth house. When Joseph gave him a chore to do. When his fellow students were dozing off during the reading of the Torah, his Torah. At any point Jesus could have said, "That's it! That's enough! I'm going home." But he didn't.

He didn't, because he is love.

DAY 5

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## Jesus Goes Home First

*“And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.”*

—LUKE 2:40

When do we get our first clue that Jesus knows he is the Son of God? In the temple of Jerusalem. He is twelve years old. His parents are three days into the return trip to Nazareth before they notice he is missing.

The temple is the last place they think to search. But it is the first place Jesus goes. He doesn't go to a cousin's house or a buddy's playground. Jesus seeks the place of godly thinking and, in doing so, inspires us to do the same. By the time Joseph and Mary locate their son, he has confounded the most learned men in the temple.

As a young boy, Jesus already senses the call of God. But

what does he do next? Recruit apostles and preach sermons and perform miracles? No, he goes home to his folks and learns the family business.

That is exactly what you should do. Want to bring focus to your life? Do what Jesus did. Go home, love your family, and take care of business. *But, Max, I want to be a missionary.* Your first mission field is under your roof. What makes you think they'll believe you overseas if they don't believe you across the hall?



DAY 6

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## Chickens, Hammer, and Jesus

*“He’s just a carpenter.”*

—MARK 6:3 (MSG)

**E**nvision a dusty, quiet village. Nazareth. An unimpressive town in an unimpressive nation.

Ignore the nicer homes of the village. Joseph and Mary celebrated the birth of Jesus with a temple offering of two turtle-doves, the gift of the poor (Luke 2:22–24). Go to the poorer part of town. Not poverty stricken or destitute, just simple.

And look for a single mom. The absence of Joseph in the adult life of Jesus suggests that Mary may have raised him and the rest of the kids alone. We need a simple home with a single mom and an ordinary laborer. Jesus’ neighbors

remembered him as a worker. “He’s just a carpenter” (Mark 6:3 MSG).

Jesus had dirty hands, sweat-stained shirts, and—this may surprise you—common looks. “No stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him” (Isa. 53:2 NASB).

Raised in an overlooked nation among oppressed people in an obscure village. Can you spot him? See the adobe house with the thatched roof? Yes, the one with the chickens in the yard and the gangly teenager repairing chairs in the shed.

“He had to enter into every detail of human life. Then, when he came before God as high priest to get rid of the people’s sins, he would have already experienced it all himself—all the pain, all the testing—and would be able to help where help was needed” (Heb. 2:17–18 MSG).

Why would heaven’s finest Son endure earth’s toughest pain? So you would know that he knows how you feel.

DAY 7

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## Good-Bye, Nazareth

*“Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.”*

—MARK 1:14

Jesus’ obedience began in a small-town carpentry shop. His uncommon approach to his common life groomed him for his uncommon call. “When Jesus entered public life he was about thirty years old” (Luke 3:23 MSG). In order to enter public life, you have to leave private life. In order for Jesus to change the world, he had to say good-bye to *his* world.

He had to give Mary a kiss. Have a final meal in the kitchen, a final walk through the streets. Did he ascend one of the hills of Nazareth and think of the day he would ascend the hill near Jerusalem?

He knew what was going to happen. “God chose him for this purpose long before the world began” (1 Peter 1:20 NLT). Every

ounce of suffering had been scripted—it just fell to him to play the part.

Not that he had to. Nazareth was a cozy town. Why not build a carpentry business? Keep his identity a secret? Return in the era of guillotines or electric chairs, and pass on the cross. To be forced to die is one thing, but to willingly take up your own cross is something else.

I wonder, what kind of love is this? When you come up with a word for such a love, give it to Christ. For the day he left Nazareth is the day he declared his devotion for you and me. According to Peter, our lives were “dead-end, empty-headed” (1 Peter 1:18 MSG). But God, “immense in mercy and with an incredible love . . . embraced us” (Eph. 2:4 MSG).

Jesus left Nazareth and brought us to life.

DAY 8

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## Baptize You?

*“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’”*

—MATTHEW 3:16–17

Nothing in his appearance separates him from the crowd. Like the rest, he is standing in line, waiting his turn. He, like the others, can hear the voice of the preacher in the distance.

Between baptisms, John the Baptist is prone to preach. Impetuous. Fiery. Bronzed face, unshorn locks. He stands waist-deep in the cobalt-colored Jordan. He makes a point of calling all people to the water. “He went into all the country

around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3).

Baptism wasn’t a new practice. It was a required rite for any Gentile seeking to become a Jew. Baptism was for the moldy, second-class, unchosen people, not the clean, top-of-the-line class favorites—the Jews. Herein lies the rub. John refuses to delineate between Jew and Gentile. In his book, every heart needs a detail job.

Every heart, that is, except one. That’s why John is stunned when that one wades into the river.

John’s reluctance is understandable. A baptismal ceremony is an odd place to find the Son of God. He should be the baptizer not the baptizee. Why would Christ want to be baptized? Why would he need to be baptized?

Here’s why: Since you and I cannot pay, Christ did. We’ve broken commandments, promises, and, worst of all, we’ve broken God’s heart.

But Christ sees our plight. We owe God a perfect life. Perfect obedience to every command. Not just the command of baptism, but the commands of humility, honesty, integrity. We can’t deliver. Might as well charge us for the property of Manhattan. But Christ can and he did. His plunge into the Jordan is a picture of his plunge into our sin. His baptism announces, “Let me pay.”

Your baptism responds, “You bet I will.”

DAY 9

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## Satan Stalked Him

*“He faced all of the same temptations we do.”*

—HEBREWS 4:15 (NLT)

**Y**ou and I know what it is like to endure a moment of temptation or an hour of temptation, even a day of temptation. But *forty* days? That is what Jesus faced. “The Spirit led Jesus into the desert where the devil tempted Jesus for forty days” (Luke 4:1–2 NCV).

We imagine the wilderness temptation as three isolated events scattered over a forty-day period. Would that it had been. In reality, Jesus’ time of testing was nonstop; “the devil tempted Jesus for forty days.” Satan got on Jesus like a shirt and refused to leave. Every step, whispering in his ear. Every turn of the path, sowing doubt. Was Jesus impacted by the devil? Apparently so. Luke doesn’t say that Satan *tried*

to tempt Jesus. No, the passage is clear: “the devil tempted Jesus.” Jesus was *tempted*; he was tested. Tempted to change sides? Tempted to go home? Tempted to settle for a kingdom on earth? I don’t know, but I know he was tempted. A war raged within. Stress stormed without.

Like Jesus we are tempted. Like Jesus we are accused. But unlike Jesus, we give up. We give out. We sit down. How can our hearts have the endurance Jesus had?

By focusing where Jesus focused: on “the joy that God put before him” (Heb. 12:2 NCV). He lifted his eyes beyond the horizon and saw the table. He focused on the feast. And what he saw gave him strength to finish—and finish strong.

Such a moment awaits us. In an hour that has no end, we will rest. Surrounded by saints and engulfed by Jesus himself, the work will, indeed, be finished. The final harvest will have been gathered, we will be seated, and Christ will christen the meal with these words: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:23 KJV).



DAY 10

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## Bifocals and Binoculars

*“We have found the Messiah.”*

—JOHN 1:41

For John and Andrew, it wasn't enough to listen to John the Baptist. Most would have been content to serve in the shadow of the world's most famous evangelist. Could there be a better teacher? Only one. And when John and Andrew saw him, they left John the Baptist and followed Jesus. Note the request they made.

“Rabbi,” they asked, “where are you staying?” (John 1:38 NCV). Pretty bold request. They didn't ask Jesus to give them a minute or an opinion or a message or a miracle. They asked for his address. They wanted to hang out with him. They wanted to know him. They wanted to know what caused his head to turn and his heart to burn and his soul to yearn. They wanted

to study his eyes and follow his steps. They wanted to see him. They wanted to know what made him laugh and if he ever got tired. And most of all, they wanted to know, *Could Jesus be who John said he was—and if he is, what on earth is God doing on the earth?* You can't answer such a question by talking to his cousin; you've got to talk to the man himself.

Jesus' answer to the disciples? "Come and see" (v. 39 NCV). He didn't say, "Come and glance" or "Come and peek." He said, "Come and see." Bring your bifocals and binoculars. There is no time for side-glances or occasional peeks. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2).

The disciple fixes his eyes on the Savior.

DAY 11

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## Almighty—Not High and Mighty

*“Both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding.”*

—JOHN 2:2 (NKJV)

Maybe it was Andrew who asked it. Perhaps Peter. Could be that all approached Jesus. But I wager that at some point in Jesus’ first journey, the disciples expressed their assumptions.

“So, Rabbi, where are you taking us? To the desert?”

“No,” opines another, “he’s taking us to the temple.”

Then a chorus of confusion breaks out and ends only when Jesus lifts his hand and says softly, “We’re on our way to a wedding.”

Silence. John and Andrew look at each other. “A wedding?” they say.

Why did Jesus go to the wedding?

The answer? It’s found in the second verse of John 2. “Jesus and his followers were also invited to the wedding” (NCV).

When the bride and groom were putting the guest list together, Jesus’ name was included. Jesus wasn’t invited because he was a celebrity. He wasn’t one yet. The invitation wasn’t motivated by his miracles. He’d yet to perform any. Why did they invite him?

I suppose they liked him.

Big deal? I think so. I think it’s significant that common folk in a little town enjoyed being with Jesus. I think it’s noteworthy that the Almighty didn’t act high and mighty.

He went to great pains to be as human as the guy down the street. He didn’t need to study, but still went to the synagogue. He had no need for income, but still worked in the workshop. Upon his shoulders rested the challenge of redeeming creation, but he still took time to walk ninety miles from Jericho to Cana to go to a wedding.

As a result, people liked him.

DAY 12

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## Just Call Her Grace

*“He knows me inside and out!”*

—JOHN 4:39 (MSG)

Talk about a woman who could make a list. Number one, discrimination. She is a Samaritan, hated by Jews. Number two, gender bias. She is a female, condescended to by the men. Third, she is a divorcée, not once, not twice. Let’s see if we can count. Four? Five? Five marriages turned south, and now she’s sharing a bed with a guy who won’t give her a ring.

When I add this up, I envision a happy-hour stool sitter who lives with her mad at half boil. Husky voice, cigarette breath, and a dress cut low at the top and high at the bottom. Certainly not Samaria’s finest. Certainly not the woman you’d put in charge of the ladies’ Bible class.

Which makes the fact that Jesus does just that all the more

surprising. He doesn't just put her in charge of the class; he puts her in charge of evangelizing the whole town. Before the day is over, the entire city hears about a man who claims to be God. "He told me everything I ever did" (John 4:39), she tells them, leaving unsaid the obvious, "and he loved me anyway."

A little rain can straighten a flower stem. A little love can change a life. Who knew the last time this woman had been entrusted with anything, much less the biggest news in history!

Listen. You have not been sprinkled with forgiveness. You have not been spattered with grace. You are submerged in mercy. Let it change you! See if God's love doesn't do for you what it did for the woman in Samaria. He found her full of trash and left her full of grace.

DAY 13

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## Christ's Crazy Kin

*“And he was amazed at their lack of faith.”*

—MARK 6:6

**I**t may surprise you to know that Jesus' family was less than perfect. They were. If your family doesn't appreciate you, take heart; neither did Jesus'. “A prophet is honored everywhere except in his hometown and with his own people and in his own home” (Mark 6:4 NCV).

One minute he was a hero, the next a heretic. When his neighborhood friends tried to kill him . . . his brothers were invisible. They thought their brother was a lunatic. “His family . . . went to get him because they thought he was out of his mind” (Mark 3:21 NCV). They weren't proud—they were embarrassed!

How did Jesus put up with these guys? When you and your family have two different agendas, what do you do?

Jesus gives us some answers.

It's worth noting that he didn't try to control his family's behavior, nor did he let their behavior control his. He didn't demand that they agree with him. He didn't sulk when they insulted him. He didn't make it his mission to try to please them.

When Jesus' brothers didn't share his convictions, he didn't try to force them. He recognized that his spiritual family could provide what his physical family didn't. He didn't let the difficult dynamic of his family overshadow his call from God.



DAY 14

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## Too Early to Retire

*“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.  
Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s  
will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

—ROMANS 12:2

**H**aving withstood the devil’s wilderness temptations and his hometown’s harsh rejection, Jesus journeyed to Capernaum, where the citizens gave him a ticker-tape reception. “They were astonished at His teaching” (Luke 4:32 NKJV).

But the people brought Jesus more than sick bodies and seeking souls. They brought him agendas. Itineraries. Unsolicited advice. The herd of humanity wanted to set Jesus’ course. “Heed us,” they said. “We’ll direct your steps.”

The people of Capernaum “tried to keep Him from leaving

them; but He said to them, ‘I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent’” (vv. 42–43 NKJV).

He resisted the undertow of the people by anchoring to the rock of his purpose: employing his uniqueness (to “preach . . . to the other cities also”) to make a big deal out of God (“the kingdom of God”) everywhere he could.

And aren’t you glad he did? Suppose he had heeded the crowd and set up camp in Capernaum, reasoning, “I thought the whole world was my target and the cross my destiny. But the entire town tells me to stay in Capernaum. Could all these people be wrong?”

Yes, they could! In defiance of the crowd, Jesus turned his back on the Capernaum pastorate and followed the will of God. Doing so meant leaving some sick people unhealed and some confused people untaught. He said no to good things so he could say yes to the right thing: his unique call.

DAY 15

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## When Jesus Gets into Your Boat

*“They caught such a large number of fish  
that their nets began to break.”*

—LUKE 5:6

Jesus needs a boat; Peter provides one. Jesus preaches; Peter is content to listen. Jesus suggests a midmorning fishing trip, however, and Peter gives him a look. The it’s-too-late look. He runs his fingers through his hair and sighs, “Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing” (Luke 5:5 NASB). Can you feel Peter’s futility?

Oh, the thoughts Peter might have had. *I’m tired. Bone-tired. I want a meal and a bed, not a fishing trip.*

“Put out into the deep water,” the God-man instructs.

Why the deep water? You suppose Jesus knew something Peter didn't? Finding fish is simple for the God who made them. To Jesus, the Sea of Galilee is a dollar-store fishbowl on a kitchen cabinet.

I like to think that Peter, while holding the net, looks over his shoulder at Jesus. And I like to think that Jesus, knowing Peter is about to be half yanked into the water, starts to smile.

Peter's arm is pulled into the water. It's all he can do to hang on until the other guys can help. Within moments the four fishermen and the carpenter are up to their knees in flopping silver.

Peter lifts his eyes off the catch and onto the face of Christ. In that moment, for the first time, he sees Jesus. Not Jesus the Fish Finder. Not Jesus the Rabbi. Peter sees Jesus the Lord.

Peter falls face-first among the fish. Their stink doesn't bother him. It is his stink that he's worried about. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (v. 8 NKJV).

Christ had no intention of honoring that request. He doesn't abandon self-confessed schlemiels. Quite the contrary, he enlists them. "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men" (v. 10 NASB).

DAY 16

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## Chumming with the Mafia

*“I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.”*

—MATTHEW 9:13 (MSG)

According to his résumé, Matthew was a revenue consultant for the government. According to his neighbors, he was a crook. He kept a tax booth and a hand extended at the street corner. That’s where he was the day he saw Jesus. “Follow me,” the Master said, and Matthew did. And in the very next verse we find Jesus sitting at Matthew’s dining room table. “Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house” (Matt. 9:10 NCV).

A curbside conversion couldn’t satisfy his heart, so Matthew took Jesus home. Something happens over a dinner table that doesn’t happen over an office desk. Take off the tie, heat up the grill, break out the sodas, and spend the evening with the

suspender of the stars. “You know, Jesus, forgive me for asking, but I’ve always wanted to know . . .”

Though the giving of the invitation is impressive, the acceptance is more so. Didn’t matter to Jesus that Matthew was a thief. Didn’t matter to Jesus that Matthew had built a split-level house with the proceeds of extortion. What did matter was that Matthew wanted to know Jesus.

The ratio between those who missed Jesus and those who sought him was thousands to one. But the ratio between those who sought him and those who found him was one to one. All who sought him found him.

DAY 17

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## Standing on His Word

*“Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool.  
... Here a great number of disabled people used to lie.”*

—JOHN 5:2–3

Jesus encounters a paralyzed man near a large pool north of the temple in Jerusalem. It’s 360 feet long, 130 feet wide, and 75 feet deep. A colonnade with five porches overlooks the body of water.

It’s called Bethesda. An underwater spring causes the pool to bubble occasionally. The people believe the bubbles are caused by the dipping of angels’ wings. They also believe that the first person to touch the water after the angel does will be healed.

Picture a battleground strewn with wounded bodies, and you see Bethesda. An endless wave of groans. A field of faceless need. Most people walk past, ignoring the hurting.

But not Jesus. He is in Jerusalem for a feast. He is alone. He's not there to teach the disciples or to draw a crowd. The people need him—so he's there.

Can you picture it? Jesus walking among the suffering? People have come from miles around to meet God in the temple. Little do they know that he is with the sick. Little do they know that the strong young carpenter who surveys the ragged landscape of pain is God.

Before Jesus heals the paralytic, he asks him a question: "Do you want to be well?"

"Sir, there is no one to help me get into the pool when the water starts moving" (John 5:6–7 NCV).

Is the fellow complaining? Who knows. But before we think about it too much, look what happens next.

"Stand up. Pick up your mat and walk.' And immediately the man was well; he picked up his mat and began to walk" (vv. 8–9 NCV).

I wish we would do that. I wish we would learn that when Jesus says something, it happens. When Jesus tells us to stand, let's stand.



DAY 18

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## The God-Man Jesus

*“What kind of man is this?”*

—MATTHEW 8:27

Most people stand quietly as funeral processions pass. Mouths closed. Hands folded. Reverently silent. Not Jesus. Not that day in Nain. He approached the mother of the dead boy and whispered something in her ear that made her turn and look at her son. She started to object but didn't. Signaling to the pallbearers, Jesus instructed, “Wait.”

He walked toward the boy. Eye level with the corpse, he spoke. Not over it, as a prayer, but to it, as a command. “Young man, I say to you, arise!” (Luke 7:14 NASB).

With the tone of a teacher telling students to sit or the authority of a mom telling kids to get out of the rain, Jesus commanded the dead boy *not to be dead*. And the boy obeyed. Cold

skin warmed. Stiff limbs moved. White cheeks flushed. The men lowered the coffin, and the boy jumped up and into his mother's arms. Jesus "gave him back to his mother" (Luke 7:15).

An hour later Jesus and the guys were eating the evening meal. He laughed at a joke and asked for seconds on bread, and the irony of it all jolted Peter. *Who are you?* he wondered so softly that no one but God could hear. *You just awakened the dead! Should you not be encased in light or encircled by angels or enthroned higher than a thousand Caesars? Yet, look at you—laughing at jokes I tell and eating the food we all eat. Just who are you?*

He was, at once, man and God. Don't we need a God-man Savior? A just-God Jesus could make us but not understand us. A just-man Jesus could love us but never save us. But a God-man Jesus? Near enough to touch. Strong enough to trust. A next-door Savior.

DAY 19

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## The Waves Are Listening

*“Even the wind and the waves obey him!”*

—MARK 4:41

Jesus and the disciples are in a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee. A storm arises suddenly, and what was placid becomes violent—monstrous waves rise out of the sea and slap the boat. Mark describes it clearly: “A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped” (Mark 4:37).

Imagine yourself in the boat. It’s a sturdy vessel, but no match for these ten-foot waves. It plunges nose-first into the wall of water. The force of the wave dangerously tips the boat until the bow seems to be pointing straight at the sky. A dozen sets of hands join yours in clutching the mast. All your shipmates have wet heads and wide eyes. You tune your ear for a

calming voice, but all you hear are screams and prayers. All of a sudden it hits you—someone is missing. Where is Jesus? He's not at the mast. He's not grabbing the edge. Where is he? You turn and look, and there curled in the stern of the boat is Jesus, sleeping!

You don't know whether to be amazed or angry, so you're both. How can he sleep at a time like this? How could he sleep through the storm?

Simple, he was in charge of it.

Jesus “got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down and it was completely calm” (v. 39). The raging water becomes a stilled sea, instantly. Immediate calm. Not a ripple.

The waves are his subjects, and the winds are his servants. The whole universe is his kingdom.

DAY 20

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## The Hand He Loves to Hold

*“Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”*

—MARK 5:34

Can you see it? Her hand? Gnarled. Thin. Diseased. Dirt blackens the nails and stains the skin. Look carefully amid the knees and feet of the crowd. They’re scampering after Christ. He walks. She crawls. People bump her, but she doesn’t stop. Others complain. She doesn’t care. The woman is desperate. Blood won’t stay in her body. “There was a woman in the crowd who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years” (Mark 5:25 NLT).

She has nothing. No money. No home. No health. Dilapidated dreams. Deflated faith. Unwelcome in the synagogue. Unwanted by her community. For twelve years she has

suffered. She is desperate. And her desperation births an idea.

“She had heard about Jesus” (v. 27 NLT). Every society has a grapevine, even—or especially—the society of the sick. Word among the lepers and the left out is this: Jesus can heal. And Jesus is coming. By invitation of the synagogue ruler, Jesus is coming to Capernaum.

As the crowd comes, she thinks, “If I can just touch his clothing, I will be healed” (v. 28 NLT). At the right time, she crab-scurries through the crowd. Knees bump her ribs. “Move out of the way!” someone shouts. She doesn’t care and doesn’t stop.

She touches the robe of Jesus, and “immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel that she had been healed!” (v. 29 NLT). Life rushes in. Pale cheeks turn pink. Shallow breaths become full.

Illness took her strength. What took yours? Red ink? Hard drink? Late nights in the wrong arms? Long days on the wrong job? Pregnant too soon? Too often? Is her hand your hand? If so, take heart. Christ wants to touch it. When your hand reaches through the masses, he knows.

Yours is the hand he loves to hold.

DAY 21

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## When God Sighs

*“He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, ‘Ephphatha!’ (which means, ‘Be opened!’).”*

—MARK 7:34

Perhaps he stammered. Maybe he spoke with a lisp. Perhaps, because of his deafness, he never learned to articulate words properly.

Jesus, refusing to exploit the situation, took the man aside. He looked him in the face. Knowing it would be useless to talk, he explained what he was about to do through gestures. He spat and touched the man’s tongue, telling him that whatever restricted his speech was about to be removed. He touched his ears. They, for the first time, were about to hear.

But before the man said a word or heard a sound, Jesus did something I never would have anticipated.

He sighed.

I'd never thought of God as one who sighs. I'd thought of God as one who commands. I'd thought of God as one who called forth the dead with a command or created the universe with a word . . . but a God who sighs?

When Jesus looked into the eyes of Satan's victim, the only appropriate thing to do was sigh. "It was never intended to be this way," the sigh said. "Your ears weren't made to be deaf; your tongue wasn't made to stumble." The imbalance of it all caused the Master to languish.

And in the agony of Jesus lies our hope. Had he not sighed, we would be in a pitiful condition. Had he simply chalked it all up to the inevitable or washed his hands of the whole stinking mess, what hope would we have?

But he didn't. That holy sigh assures us that God still groans for his people. He groans for the day when all sighs will cease, when what was intended to be will be.



DAY 22

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## Not Guilty

*“Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”*

—JOHN 8:12

The woman stands in the center of the circle. Those men around her are religious leaders. Pharisees, they are called. Self-appointed custodians of conduct. And the other man—the one in the simple clothes, the one sitting on the ground, the one looking at the face of the woman—that’s Jesus.

Jesus has been teaching. The woman has been cheating. And the Pharisees are out to stop them both.

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery” (John 8:4). In an instant she is yanked from private passion to public spectacle. Nothing can hide her shame. From this second on, she’ll be known as an adulteress. When she goes

to the market, women will whisper. When she passes, heads will turn.

“The law of Moses commands that we stone to death every woman who does this. What do you say we should do?” (v. 5 NCV).

What does Jesus do? Jesus writes in the sand. And after he writes, he speaks: “Anyone here who has never sinned can throw the first stone at her” (v. 7 NCV).

The young look to the old. The old look in their hearts. They are the first to drop their stones.

“Woman, where are they? Has no one judged you guilty?”

She answers, “No one, sir.”

Then Jesus says, “I also don’t judge you guilty. You may go now, but don’t sin anymore” (vv. 10–11 NCV).

If you have ever wondered how God reacts when you fail, watch carefully. He’s writing. He’s leaving a message. Not in the sand, but on a cross. His message has two words: *not guilty*.

## Jesus vs. Death

*“Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’”*

—JOHN 11:40

In this scene there are two people: Martha and Jesus. Her words are full of despair. “If you had been here . . .” (John 11:21). She stares into the Master’s face with confused eyes. Her brother, Lazarus, is dead. And the one man who could have made a difference didn’t. Something about death makes us accuse God of betrayal. “If God were here, there would be no death!” we claim.

You see, if God is God anywhere, he has to be God in the face of death. Pop psychology can deal with depression. Prosperity can handle hunger. But only God can deal with our ultimate dilemma—death. And only the God of the Bible has dared to

stand on the canyon's edge and offer an answer. He has to be God in the face of death. If not, he is not God anywhere.

Perhaps it is Jesus' patience that causes Martha to change her tone from frustration to earnestness. "Even now God will give you whatever you ask" (v. 22).

Jesus then makes one of those claims that place him either on the throne or in the asylum: "Your brother will rise again" (v. 23).

Jesus' words echo off the canyon walls. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (vv. 25–26).

It is a hinge point in history. With eyes locked on hers, he asks the greatest question found in Scripture.

"Do you believe this?" (v. 26).

There it is. The question that drives any responsible listener to absolute obedience to or total rejection of the Christian faith.

DAY 24

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## Jesus Minds His Mind

*“Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”*

—LUKE 5:16

Jesus stubbornly guarded the gateway of his heart. Many thoughts were denied entrance. Need a few examples?

How about arrogance? On one occasion the people determined to make Jesus their king. What an attractive thought. Most of us would delight in the notion of royalty. Not Jesus. “Jesus saw that in their enthusiasm, they were about to grab him and make him king, so he slipped off and went back up the mountain to be by himself” (John 6:15 MSG).

Another dramatic example occurred in a conversation Jesus had with Peter. Upon hearing Jesus announce his impending death on the cross, the impetuous apostle objected. “Impossible, Master! That can never be!” (Matt. 16:22 MSG).

Apparently, Peter was about to question the necessity of Calvary. But he never had a chance. Christ blocked the doorway. He sent both the messenger and the author of the heresy scurrying: “Peter, get out of my way. Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works” (v. 23 MSG).

And how about the time Jesus was mocked? Responding to an appeal to heal a sick girl, he entered her house only to be told she was dead. His response? “The child is not dead but sleeping.” The response of the people in the house? “They laughed at him.” Just like all of us, Jesus had to face a moment of humiliation. But unlike most of us, he refused to receive it. Note his decisive response: “he put them all outside” (Mark 5:39–40 RSV). The mockery was not allowed in the house of the girl nor in the mind of Christ.

Jesus guarded his heart. If he did, shouldn't we do the same?

DAY 25

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## Step into the Basin

*“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.”*

—MATTHEW 10:32

**I**t’s not easy watching Jesus wash these feet. To see the hands of God massaging the toes of men is, well . . . it’s not right. The disciples should be washing his feet. Nathanael should pour the water. Andrew should carry the towel. But they don’t. No one does. Rather than serve, they argue over which one is the greatest (Luke 22:24).

As they bicker, Jesus stands. He removes his robe and takes the servant’s wrap off of the wall. Taking the pitcher, he pours the water into the basin. He kneels before them with the basin and sponge and begins to wash. The towel that covers his waist is also the towel that dries their feet.

It's not right.

Isn't it enough that these hands will be pierced in the morning? Must they scrub grime tonight? And the disciples . . . do they deserve to have their feet washed?

Look around the table, Jesus. Out of the twelve, how many will stand with you in Pilate's court? How many will share with you the Roman whip? When you fall under the weight of the cross, which disciple will be close enough to spring to your side and carry your burden?

None of them will.

But the cleansing is not just a gesture; it is a necessity. Listen to what Jesus said: "If I don't wash your feet, you are not one of my people" (John 13:8 NCV).

We will never be cleansed until we confess we are dirty. And we will never be able to wash the feet of those who have hurt us until we allow Jesus, the one we have hurt, to wash ours.



DAY 26

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## Go First to God

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.”*

—JOHN 14:1

**I**t’s the expression of Jesus that puzzles us. We’ve never seen his face like this.

Jesus smiling, yes.

Jesus weeping, absolutely.

Jesus stern, even that.

But Jesus anguished? Cheeks streaked with tears? Face flooded in sweat? Rivulets of blood dripping from his chin? You remember the night.

“Jesus . . . kneeled down and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take away this cup of suffering. But do what you want, not

what I want.' . . . His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:41–44 NCV).

Jesus was more than anxious; he was afraid. How remarkable that Jesus felt such fear. But how kind that he told us about it. We tend to do the opposite. Gloss over our fears. Cover them up. Keep our sweaty palms in our pockets, our nausea and dry mouths a secret. Not so with Jesus. We see no mask of strength. But we do hear a request for strength.

"Father, if you are willing, take away this cup of suffering." The first one to hear his fear is his Father. He could have gone to his mother. He could have confided in his disciples. He could have assembled a prayer meeting. All would have been appropriate, but none was his priority.

How did Jesus endure the terror of the crucifixion? He went first to the Father with his fears. He modeled the words of Psalm 56:3: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you" (NLT).

Do the same with yours. Don't avoid life's gardens of Gethsemane. Enter them. Just don't enter them alone. And while there, be honest. Pounding the ground is permitted. Tears are allowed. And if you sweat blood, you won't be the first. Do what Jesus did; open your heart.

DAY 27

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## Unbelievable Betrayal

*“You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.”*

—JOHN 16:32

**O**n the night before his death, a veritable landfill of woes tumbled in on Jesus. Somewhere between the Gethsemane prayer and the mock trial is what has to be the darkest scene in the history of the human drama.

“With [Judas] were many people carrying swords and clubs who had been sent from the leading priests. . . . Then the people came and grabbed Jesus and arrested him” (Matt. 26:47, 50 NCV).

Judas arrived with an angry crowd. John is even more specific. The term he employs is the Greek word *speira*, or a “group

of soldiers” (John 18:3 NCV). At minimum, *speira* depicts a group of two hundred soldiers.

Surely in a group this size there is one person who will defend Jesus. He came to the aid of so many. All those sermons. All those miracles. We wait for the one person who will declare, “Jesus is an innocent man!” But no one does. The people he came to save have turned against him.

We can almost forgive the crowd. Their contact with Jesus was too brief, too casual. Perhaps they didn’t know better. But the disciples did. They knew better. They knew *him* better. But did they defend Jesus? Hardly. The most bitter pill Jesus had to swallow was the unbelievable betrayal by the disciples. “All of Jesus’ followers left him and ran away” (Matt. 26:56 NCV).

From a human point of view, Jesus’ world had collapsed. No help from the people, no loyalty from his friends. But that’s not how Jesus saw it. He saw something else entirely. He wasn’t oblivious to the circumstances; he just wasn’t limited to them. Somehow he was able to see good in the bad, the purpose in the pain, and God’s presence in the problem.

DAY 28

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## The Point of the Crown

*“The soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium. . . . And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head.”*

—MATTHEW 27:27–29 (NKJV)

**T**hroughout Scripture thorns symbolize not sin, but the consequence of sin (Gen. 3:17–18; Num. 33:55; Prov. 22:5). The fruit of sin is thorns—spiny, prickly, cutting thorns.

I emphasize the “point” of the thorns to suggest a point you may have never considered: If the fruit of sin is thorns, isn’t the thorny crown on Christ’s brow a picture of the fruit of our sin that pierced his heart?

What is the fruit of sin? Step into the briar patch of humanity and feel a few thistles. Shame. Disgrace. Discouragement. Anxiety. Haven’t our hearts been caught in these brambles?

The heart of Jesus, however, had not. He had never been cut by the thorns of sin. What you and I face daily, he never knew. Anxiety? He never worried! Guilt? He was never guilty! Jesus never knew the fruits of sin . . . until he became sin for us.

And when he did, all the emotions of sin tumbled in on him like shadows in a forest. He felt anxious, guilty, and alone. Can't you hear the emotion in his prayer? "My God, my God, why have you rejected me?" (Matt. 27:46 NCV). These are not the words of a saint. This is the cry of a sinner.

And this prayer is one of the most remarkable parts of his coming. But I can think of something even greater. Want to know what it is? Want to know the coolest thing about the One who gave up the crown of heaven for a crown of thorns?

He did it for you. Just for you.

DAY 29

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## The First Step to the Cross

*“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*

—JOHN 3:17

The most notorious road in the world is the Via Dolorosa, “the Way of Sorrows.” According to tradition, it is the route Jesus took from Pilate’s hall to Calvary. The path is marked by stations frequently used by Christians for their devotions. One station marks the passing of Pilate’s verdict. Another, the appearance of Simon to carry the cross. Three stations commemorate the stumbles of Christ, another the words of Christ. There are fourteen stations in all, each one a reminder of the events of Christ’s final journey.

Is the route accurate? Probably not. When Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and again in A.D. 135, the streets of the

city were destroyed. As a result, no one knows the exact route Christ followed that Friday.

But we do know where the path actually began.

The path began, not in the court of Pilate, but in the halls of heaven. Jesus began his journey when he left his home in search of us. Armed with nothing more than a passion to win your heart, he came looking. His desire was singular—to bring God’s children home. The Bible has a word for this quest: *reconciliation*.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19 NKJV). The Greek word for *reconcile* means “to render something otherwise.”<sup>1</sup> Reconciliation restitches the unraveled, reverses the rebellion, rekindles the cold passion.

Reconciliation touches the shoulder of the wayward and woos him homeward.

The path to the cross tells us exactly how far God will go to call us back.



DAY 30

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## He Saw the List

*“Jesus . . . endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

—HEBREWS 12:2

Come with me to the hill of Calvary. Watch as the soldiers shove the Carpenter to the ground and stretch his arms against the beams. One presses a knee against a forearm and a spike against a hand. Jesus turns his face toward the nail just as the soldier lifts the hammer to strike it.

Couldn't Jesus have stopped him? With a flex of the biceps, with a clench of the fist, he could have resisted. Is this not the same hand that stilled the sea? Summoned the dead?

But the fist doesn't clench . . . and the moment isn't aborted. The mallet rings and the skin rips and the blood begins to

drip, then rush. Then the questions follow. Why? Why didn't Jesus resist?

"Because he loved us," we reply. That is true, wonderfully true, but—forgive me—only partially true. There is more to his reason. He saw something that made him stay. As the soldier pressed his arm, Jesus rolled his head to the side, and with his cheek resting on the wood, he saw:

A mallet? Yes.

A nail? Yes.

The soldier's hand? Yes.

But he saw something else. Between his hand and the wood, there was a list. A long list. A list of our mistakes: our lusts and lies and greedy moments and prodigal years. A list of our sins.

The bad decisions from last year. The bad attitudes from last week. There, in broad daylight for all of heaven to see, was a list of your mistakes.

He saw the list! He knew the price of those sins was death. He knew the source of those sins was you, and since he couldn't bear the thought of eternity without you, he chose the nails.

DAY 31

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## Disgraced

*“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said,  
‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”*

—JOHN 1:29

Every aspect of the crucifixion was intended not only to hurt the victim but to shame him. Death on a cross was usually reserved for the most vile offenders: slaves, murderers, assassins, and the like. The condemned person was marched through the city streets, shouldering his crossbar and wearing a placard about his neck that named his crime. At the execution site he was stripped and mocked.

Crucifixion was so abhorrent that Cicero wrote, “Let the very name of the cross be far away, not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was not only shamed before people, he was shamed before heaven.

Since he bore the sin of the murderer and adulterer, he felt the shame of the murderer and adulterer. Though he never lied, he bore the disgrace of a liar. Though he never cheated, he felt the embarrassment of a cheater. Since he bore the sin of the world, he felt the collective shame of the world.

While on the cross, Jesus felt the indignity and disgrace of a criminal. No, he was not guilty. No, he had not committed a sin. And, no, he did not deserve to be sentenced. But you and I were, we had, and we did.

“He changed places with us” (Gal. 3:13 NCV).

DAY 32

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## Christ's Clothing on the Cross

*“They divided his clothes among the four of them. They also took his robe, but it was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said, ‘Let’s not tear it but throw dice to see who gets it.’”*

—JOHN 19:23–24 (NLT)

**I**t must have been Jesus’ finest possession. Jewish tradition called for a mother to make such a robe and present it to her son as a departure gift when he left home. Had Mary done this for Jesus? We don’t know. But we do know the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom. Why is this significant?

Scripture often describes our behavior as the clothes we wear. Peter urges us to be “clothed with humility”

(1 Peter 5:5 NKJV). David speaks of evil people who clothe themselves “with cursing” (Ps. 109:18 NKJV). Garments can symbolize character, and like his garment, Jesus’s character was uninterrupted perfection.

The character of Jesus was a seamless fabric woven from heaven to earth . . . from God’s thoughts to Jesus’ actions. From God’s tears to Jesus’ compassion. From God’s word to Jesus’ response. All one piece.

But when Christ was nailed to the cross, he took off his robe of seamless perfection and assumed a different wardrobe, the wardrobe of indignity.

*The indignity of nakedness.* Stripped before his own mother and loved ones. Shamed before his family.

*The indignity of failure.* For a few pain-filled hours, the religious leaders were the victors, and Christ appeared the loser. Shamed before his accusers.

Worst of all, he wore *the indignity of sin*. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24).

The clothing of Christ on the cross? Sin—yours and mine. The sins of all humanity.

DAY 33

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## Two Thieves—Two Choices

*“Therefore, there is now no condemnation  
for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

—ROMANS 8:1

Ever wonder why there were two crosses next to Christ? Why not six or ten? Ever wonder why Jesus was in the center? Why not on the far right or far left? Could it be that the two crosses on the hill symbolize one of God’s greatest gifts? The gift of choice.

The two criminals have so much in common. Convicted by the same system. Condemned to the same death. Surrounded by the same crowd. Equally close to the same Jesus. In fact, they begin with the same sarcasm: “The two criminals also said cruel things to Jesus” (Matt. 27:44 CEV).

But one changed. “He said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you

come into your kingdom.’ Jesus said to him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise’” (Luke 23:42–43 NCV).

Think about the thief who repented. Though we know little about him, we know this: He made some bad mistakes in life. He chose the wrong crowd, the wrong morals, the wrong behavior. But would you consider his life a waste? Is he spending eternity reaping the fruit of all the bad choices he made? No, just the opposite. He is enjoying the fruit of the one good choice he made. In the end all his bad choices were redeemed by a solitary good one.

You’ve made some bad choices in life, haven’t you? You look back over your life and say, “If only . . . if only I could make up for those bad choices.” You can. One good choice for eternity offsets a thousand bad ones on earth.

The choice is yours.



DAY 34

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## Abandoned by God

*“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.”*

—ISAIAH 53:4

Noises intermingle on the hill: Pharisees mocking, swords clanging, and dying men groaning. Jesus scarcely speaks. When he does, diamonds sparkle against velvet. He gives his killers grace and his mother a son. He answers the prayer of a thief and asks for a drink from a soldier.

Then, at midday, darkness falls like a curtain. “At noon the whole country was covered with darkness, which lasted for three hours” (Matt. 27:45 TEV).

This is a supernatural darkness. Not a casual gathering of clouds or a brief eclipse of the sun. This is a three-hour blanket

of blackness. Merchants in Jerusalem light candles. Soldiers ignite torches. The universe grieves. The sky weeps.

Christ lifts his heavy head and eyelids toward the heavens and spends his final energy crying out toward the ducking stars. “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” which means, ‘My God, my God, why did you abandon me?’” (v. 46 TEV).

We would ask the same. Why him? Why forsake your Son? Forsake the murderers. Desert the evildoers. Turn your back on perverts and peddlers of pain. Abandon them, not him. Why would you abandon earth’s only sinless soul?

What did Christ feel on the cross? The icy displeasure of a sin-hating God. Why? Because he “carried our sins in his body” (1 Peter 2:24 NCV).

With hands nailed open, he invited God, “Treat me as you would treat them!” And God did. In an act that broke the heart of the Father, yet honored the holiness of heaven, sin-purging judgment flowed over the sinless Son of the ages.

And heaven gave earth her finest gift: the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.

“My God, my God, why did you abandon me?” Why did Christ scream those words? So you’ll never have to.

DAY 35

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## “It Is Finished”

*“Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”*

—HEBREWS 12:2 (NKJV)

The face of Jesus softened, and an afternoon dawn broke as he spoke a final time. “It is finished. . . . Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (John 19:30; Luke 23:46).

As he gave his final breath, the earth gave a sudden stir. A rock rolled, and a soldier stumbled. Then, as suddenly as the silence was broken, the silence returned.

And now all is quiet. The mocking has ceased. There is no one to mock.

The soldiers are busy with the business of cleaning up the dead. Two men have come. Dressed well and meaning well, they are given the body of Jesus.

And we are left with the relics of his death. Three nails

in a bin. Three cross-shaped shadows. A braided crown with scarlet tips.

Bizarre, isn't it? The thought that this blood is not man's blood but God's?

Crazy, isn't it? To think that these nails held your sins to a cross?

Absurd, don't you agree? That a scoundrel's prayer was offered and answered? Or more absurd that another scoundrel offered no prayer at all?

Absurdities and ironies. The hill of Calvary is nothing if not both.

We would have scripted the moment differently. Ask us how a God should redeem his world, and we will show you! White horses, flashing swords. Evil flat on his back. God on his throne.

But God on a cross? A split-lipped, puffy-eyed, blood-masked God on a cross? Sponge thrust in his face? Spear plunged in his side? Dice tossed at his feet?

No, we wouldn't have written the drama of redemption this way. But, then again, we weren't asked to. These players and props were heaven picked and God ordained. We were not asked to design the hour.

But we have been asked to respond to it.

DAY 36

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## Secret Friends

*“Going to Pilate, [Joseph] asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him.”*

—MATTHEW 27:58

**T**hey are coming as friends—secret friends—but friends nonetheless. “You can take him down now, soldier. I’ll take care of him.”

A soldier leans a ladder against the center tree, ascends it, and removes the stake that holds the beam to the upright part of the cross. Two of the other soldiers, glad that the day’s work is nearing completion, assist with the heavy chore of laying the cypress crosspiece and body on the ground.

“Careful now,” says Joseph.

The five-inch nails are wrenched from the hard wood. The body that encased a Savior is lifted and laid on a large rock.

“He’s yours,” says the sentry.

The two are not accustomed to this type of work. Yet their hands move quickly to their tasks.

Joseph of Arimathea kneels behind the head of Jesus and tenderly wipes the wounded face. With a soft, wet cloth he cleans the blood that came in the garden, that came from the lashings and from the crown of thorns. With this done, he closes the eyes tight.

Nicodemus unrolls some linen sheeting that Joseph brought and places it on the rock beside the body. The two Jewish leaders lift the lifeless body of Jesus and set it on the linen. Parts of the body are now anointed with perfumed spices. As Nicodemus touches the cheeks of the Master with aloe, the emotion he has been containing escapes. His own tear falls on the face of the crucified King. He pauses to brush away another. The middle-aged Jew looks longingly at the young Galilean.

The high society of Jerusalem wasn’t going to look too kindly on two of their religious leaders burying a revolutionist. But for Joseph and Nicodemus the choice was obvious. And, besides, they’d much rather save their souls than their skin.

DAY 37

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## It's All Right to Dream Again

*“As the new day was dawning . . .”*

—MATTHEW 28:1 (NLT)

**M**ary, the mother of James, and Mary Magdalene have come to the tomb to place warm oils on a cold body and bid farewell to the one man who gave reason to their hopes.

The women think they are alone. They aren't. They think their journey is unnoticed. They are wrong. God knows. And he has a surprise waiting for them.

“An angel of the Lord came down from heaven, went to the tomb, and rolled the stone away from the entrance” (Matt. 28:2 NCV).

Why did the angel move the stone? For whom did he roll away the rock?

For Jesus? That's what I always thought. But think about it. Did the stone have to be removed in order for Jesus to exit? Did God have to have help? Was the death conqueror so weak that he couldn't push away a rock?

I don't think so. The text gives the impression that Jesus was already out when the stone was moved! For whom, then, was the stone moved?

Listen to what the angel says: "Come and see the place where his body was" (v. 6 NCV).

The stone was moved—not for Jesus—but for the women; not so Jesus could come out, but so the women could see in!

Mary looks at Mary Magdalene, and Mary is grinning the same grin she had when the bread and fish kept coming out of the basket. Suddenly it's all right to dream again.

"Go quickly and tell his followers, 'Jesus has risen from the dead. He is going into Galilee ahead of you, and you will see him there,'" the angel says (v. 7 NCV).

Mary and Mary don't have to be told twice. They turn and start running to Jerusalem. The darkness is gone. The sun is up. The Son is out.



DAY 38

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## Victory Rags

*“Every detail in our lives of love for God  
is worked into something good.”*

—ROMANS 8:28 (MSG)

Very early on Sunday morning Peter and John were given the news: “Jesus body is missing!” Instantly the two disciples hurried to the sepulcher, John outrunning Peter and arriving first. What he saw so stunned him he froze at the entrance.

What did he see? “Strips of linen cloth.” He saw “the cloth that had been around Jesus’ head . . . folded up and laid in a different place from the strips of linen.” He saw “cloth lying” (John 20:5–7 NCV).

The original Greek provides helpful insight here. John employs a term that means “rolled up,” “still in their folds.” These

burial wraps had not been ripped off and thrown down. They were still in their original state! The linens were undisturbed. The graveclothes were still rolled and folded.

How could this be?

If friends had removed the body, would they not have taken the clothes with it? If foes had taken the body, would they not have done the same?

If not, if for some reason friends or foes had unwrapped the body, would they have been so careful as to dispose of the clothing in such an orderly fashion? Of course not!

But if neither friend nor foe took the body, who did?

This was John's question, and this question led to John's discovery. "He saw and believed" (v. 8 NCV).

Through the rags of death, John saw the power of life. Odd, don't you think, that God would use something as sad as a burial wrap to change a life?

But God is given to such practices:

In his hand, empty wine jugs at a wedding become a symbol of power.

A crude manger in Bethlehem is his symbol of devotion.

And a tool of death is a symbol of his love.

DAY 39

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## Grace Before Breakfast

*“Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said.”*

—JOHN 21:12 (NLT)

Peter’s thoughts are interrupted by a shout from the shore.  
“Catch any fish?”

Peter and John look up. Probably a villager. “No!” they yell.  
“Try the other side!” the voice yells back.

John looks at Peter. What harm? So out sails the net. Peter wraps the rope around his wrist to wait.

But there is no wait. The rope pulls taut, and the net catches. Peter sets his weight against the side of the boat and begins to bring in the net. He’s so intense with the task, he misses the message.

John doesn’t. The moment is déjà vu. This has happened before. The long night. The empty net. The call to cast again.

Fish flapping on the floor of the boat. Wait a minute . . . He lifts his eyes to the man on the shore. “It’s him,” he whispers.

Then louder, “It’s Jesus.”

Peter turns and looks. Jesus, the God of heaven and earth, is on the shore . . . and he’s building a fire.

Peter plunges into the water, swims to the shore, and stumbles out wet and shivering and stands in front of the friend he betrayed. Jesus has prepared a bed of coals.

For one of the few times in his life, Peter is silent. What words would suffice? The moment is too holy for words. God is offering breakfast to the friend who betrayed him. And Peter is once again finding grace at Galilee.

DAY 40

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## His Life Means Life

*“My purpose is to give life.”*

—JOHN 10:10 (NLT)

**T**he heart of Jesus was pure. The Savior was adored by thousands, yet content to live a simple life. He was cared for by women (Luke 8:1–3), yet never accused of lustful thoughts; scorned by his own creation, but willing to forgive them before they even requested his mercy. Peter, who traveled with Jesus for three and a half years, described him as a “lamb unblemished and spotless” (1 Peter 1:19 NASB). After spending the same amount of time with Jesus, John concluded, “And in him is no sin” (1 John 3:5).

Jesus’ heart was peaceful. The disciples fretted over the need to feed the thousands, but not Jesus. He thanked God for the problem. The disciples shouted for fear in the storm,

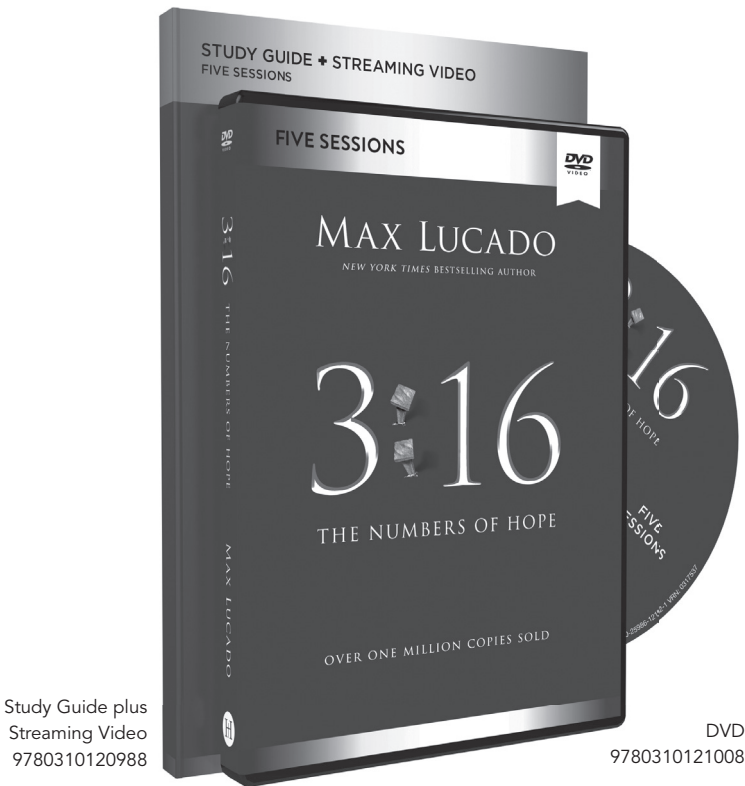
but not Jesus. He slept through it. Peter drew his sword to fight the soldiers, but not Jesus. He lifted his hand to heal. His heart was at peace. When his disciples abandoned him, did he pout and go home? When Peter denied him, did Jesus lose his temper? When the soldiers spit in his face, did he breathe fire in theirs? Far from it. He was at peace. He forgave them. He refused to be guided by vengeance.

He also refused to be guided by anything other than his high call. His heart was purposeful. Most lives aim at nothing in particular and achieve it. Jesus aimed at one goal—to save humanity from its sin. He could summarize his life with one sentence: “The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10 RSV).

The same one who saved your soul longs to remake your heart. God is willing to change us into the likeness of the Savior. Shall we accept his offer?

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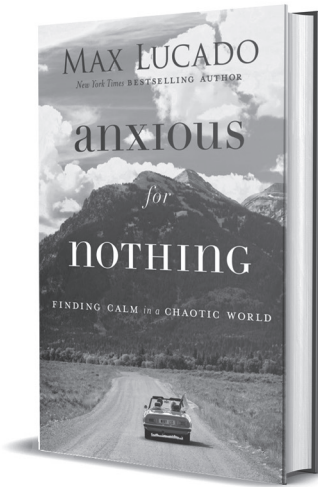


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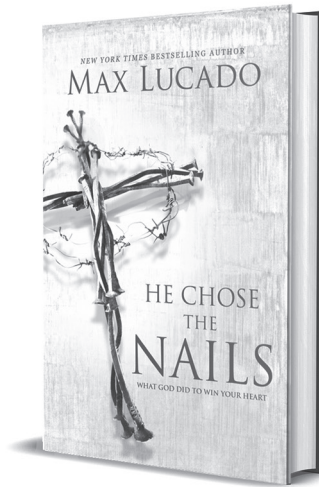


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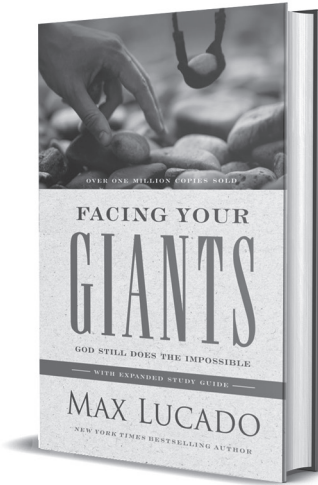
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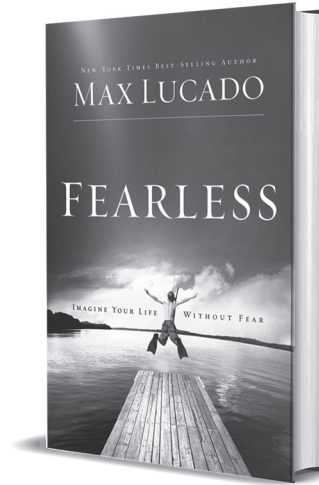
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