

JESUS

ALSO BY MAX LUCADO

INSPIRATIONAL

3:16

A Gentle Thunder
A Love Worth Giving
And the Angels Were Silent
Anxious for Nothing
Because of Bethlehem
Before Amen
Come Thirsty
Cure for the Common Life
Facing Your Giants
Fearless
Glory Days
God Came Near
Grace
Great Day Every Day
He Chose the Nails
He Still Moves Stones
How Happiness Happens
In the Eye of the Storm
In the Grip of Grace
It's Not About Me
Just Like Jesus
Max on Life
More to Your Story
Next Door Savior
No Wonder They Call Him the Savior
On the Anvil
Outlive Your Life
Six Hours One Friday
The Applause of Heaven
The Great House of God
Traveling Light
Unshakable Hope
When Christ Comes
When God Whispers Your Name
You'll Get Through This

FICTION

Christmas Stories
Miracle at the Higher Grounds Café
The Christmas Candle

BIBLES (GENERAL EDITOR)

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

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A Max Lucado Children's Treasury
Do You Know I Love You, God?
God Always Keeps His Promises
God Forgives Me, and I Forgive You
God Listens When I Pray
Grace for the Moment: 365
Devotions for Kids
Hermie, a Common Caterpillar
I'm Not a Scaredy Cat
Itsy Bitsy Christmas
Just in Case You Ever Wonder
Lucado Treasury of Bedtime Prayers
One Hand, Two Hands
Thank You, God, for Blessing Me
Thank You, God, for Loving Me
The Boy and the Ocean
The Crippled Lamb
The Oak Inside the Acorn
The Tallest of Smalls
You Are Mine
You Are Special

YOUNG ADULT BOOKS

3:16

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

GIFT BOOKS

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

JESUS

*The God Who Knows
Your Name*

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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*Denalyn and I joyfully dedicate this volume
to our son-in-law Jeff Jones.*

*Everyone who knows you is a better person because they do.
Thanks for loving our girl! We sure love you.*

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Introduction

Carinette has a spark in her. A look. A bounce in her step. A light in her eyes. She is one of fifty-seven children in the Haitian orphanage: all dark skinned, bright eyed, curly haired, Creole speaking, and fun loving. Each one is precious. But this seven-year-old stands out from the others. Not as a result of special treatment. She eats the same rice and beans as the others eat and plays on the same grassless playground. She sleeps beneath the same tin roof as the other girls, hearing the nearly nightly pound of rain. Her routine is identical to the other children's. Yet she is different.

The reason? Ask her. Ask Carinette about the visitors who traveled from a faraway world just to see her. They were looking for a girl, a little girl, a girl just like her. They knew her name. They knew her favorite song. They knew that she loves to look at books

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and jump rope. And, in a moment that changed her forever, they invited her to live with them.

“They are coming for me,” she will tell you.

Ask to see the pictures of her soon-to-be home; she’ll show them to you. Fail to ask; she’ll offer to show you. Her adoptive parents brought her pictures, a teddy bear, granola bars, and cookies. She shared the goodies with her friends and asked the director to guard her bear, but she keeps the pictures.

They remind her of the father who knows her. They remind her of the home that awaits her. The photographs convince her to believe the incredible: somebody knows her name and has promised to take her home.

As a result Carinette is different. She still lives in the same orphanage, plays on the same playground, eats in the same cafeteria. But her world changed the day she learned that someone faraway knows her name and is coming for her.

Might you be willing to believe the same?

Are you open to the idea of a Father, a heavenly Father, who knows you? A soon-to-be home that awaits you? Would you consider this life-changing idea: the almighty and all-knowing God has set his affection on you. Every detail about you he knows. Your interests, your hang-ups. Your fears and failures. He knows you.

About his children God says, “The LORD searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought” (1 Chron. 28:9).

He regards you as “the apple of his eye” (Zech. 2:8).

He can “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15 NKJV).

“When my spirit was overwhelmed within me . . .,” King David wrote, “You knew my path” (Ps. 142:3 NKJV).

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“He knows the way that I take,” declared Job (Job 23:10 NKJV).
Do you know this God who knows you?

He knows your name. And he can’t wait to get you home.

I came to know the story of the Cap-Haïtien orphan, not by traveling to Haiti, but by standing in the church foyer. I’m a pastor. Like other pastors I like to greet people after church services. And like other pastors I am a captive audience for parents and grandparents who want to show off new additions to the family. I’ve held more babies than I can count and looked at more pictures than a photographer. But I can’t recall ever being more surprised than the day Dan wanted to show me a photo of his new daughter.

The girl in the photo smiled a big smile, wore a pink ribbon, and had skin the color of chocolate.

The guy who handed me the photo smiled a big smile, wore cowboy boots and a hat, and had skin the color of Casper the Friendly Ghost.

“Daughter?”

That’s when I heard about the orphanage, the trip, and the decision to expand their family by adding one more face around the table. He scarcely took a breath for the next five minutes, telling me all about her hair, eyes, and favorite color, song, and book. He couldn’t stop talking about her. He was crazy about her.

Might you believe the same about your Father?

This is the ever-recurring, soul-lifting message of heaven.

“The LORD delights in you” (Isa. 62:4 NKJV).

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine” (Isa. 43:1 NKJV).

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“I have written your name on the palms of my hands” (Isa. 49:16 NLT).

“The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy” (Ps. 147:11 NKJV).

“The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the LORD holds them by the hand” (Ps. 37:23–24 NLT).

Do such words surprise you? Where did we get this idea of a God who does not care, who is not near? We certainly didn’t get it from Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the perfect picture of God. Just as Carinette had her photos, we have Jesus. Want to know how God feels about the sick? Look at Jesus. What angers God? Look at Jesus. Does God ever give up on people? Does he stand up for people? Find the answer in Jesus. “The Son is the radiance and only expression of the glory of [our awesome] God . . . and the exact representation and perfect imprint of His [Father’s] essence” (Heb. 1:3 AMP).

The pictures inform Carinette’s thoughts about her home-to-be. She’s not home yet. Within a month she will be, maybe. Two at the most. She knows the day is coming. She knows the hour is imminent. Every opening of the gate makes her heart jump. Any day now her father will appear. He’s coming. He promised he’d be back. He came once to claim her. He’ll come again to carry her.

Till then she lives with a heart headed home.

Shouldn’t we all? Carinette’s situation mirrors ours. Have we not been claimed? Are we not adopted children? “So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you

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received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:15 NLT).

God sought you. He searched you out. Before you knew you needed adopting, he'd already filed the papers.

"For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Rom. 8:29 NLT).

Abandon you to a fatherless world of tin plates and hard bunks? No way. Those privy to God's family Bible can read your name. He put your name in his book. What's more, he covered the adoption fees. "God sent him [Christ] to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children" (Gal. 4:5 NLT).

We don't finance our adoption, but we do accept it. Carinette could tell the Johnsons to get lost. But she didn't. You can tell God to get lost. But you wouldn't dare, would you? "You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26 NLT). The moment we accept his offer we go from orphans to heirs: "You are his heirs . . ." (Gal. 3:29 NLT).

Heirs! Heirs with a new name. New home. New life. "Heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17 NKJV). Heaven knows no stepchildren or grandchildren. You and Christ share the same will. What he inherits, you inherit. You are headed home.

Oh, but we tend to forget, don't we? We grow accustomed to hard bunks and crowded classrooms. Too seldom do we peer over the fence into the world to come. And how long since you pictured your future home? Is Peter speaking to us when he urges, "Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it" (1 Peter 2:11 THE MESSAGE)?

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Like Carinette we are adopted but not transported. We have a new family but haven't met all of them yet. We know our Father's name, and he has claimed us, but he has yet to come for us.

So here we are. Caught between what is and what will be. No longer orphans but not yet home. What do we do in the meantime? Indeed, it can be just that—a mean time. Time made mean with disease, deceit, death, and debt. How do we live in the meantime? How do we keep our hearts headed home?

“Let us look only to Jesus, the One who began our faith and who makes it perfect” (Heb. 12:2 NCV).

Look to Jesus. Ponder his life. Consider his ways. Meditate on his words. Jesus. Just Jesus.

That is the aim of this book that you hold. It contains both published and heretofore unpublished thoughts about the life of Christ. With these words may I offer this prayer:

May the Hero of all history talk personally to you. May you find in Jesus the answer to the deepest needs of your life. May you remember your highest privilege: you are known by God and cherished by heaven.

Keep an eye on the front gate. Your Father will show up to take you home before you know it.

PART 1

IMMANUEL

When our daughter Sara was four years old, she burst into the house carrying a water-filled baggie in which swam a wide-eyed burst of sunshine. “Look what they gave us at the birthday party!” (Gee thanks.) We dumped the pet into a fishbowl and gathered around to select a name. *Sebastian* won. He quickly became the star of the family. We actually set the bowl on the dinner table so we could watch him swim while we ate. The ultimate fish dinner.

But then we got bored. Can’t fault Sebastian. He did everything expected of a family fish. He swam in circles and surfaced on cue to gobble fish food. He never jumped out of the bowl into the sink or demanded a seat on the couch. He spent his nights nestled amid a green plant. Quiet. Novel. Contained. Like Jesus?

The Jesus of many people is small enough to be contained in an aquarium that fits on the cabinet. Package him up, and send him home with the kids. Dump him in a bowl, and watch him swim. He never causes trouble or demands attention. Everyone wants a goldfish bowl of Jesus, right? If you do, steer clear of the real Jesus Christ. He brings a wild ride. He comes at you like a fire hose—blasting, purging, cleansing. He will not swim quietly. He is more

JESUS

a force than a fixture, flushing away every last clod of doubt and death and infusing us with wonder and hope.

He changes everything. Jesus does not promise to stop your snoring, turn your kids into valedictorians, or guarantee you will have the correct lottery number. Jesus doesn't make you sexy, skinny, or clever. Jesus doesn't change what you see in the mirror. He changes how you see what you see.

He will not be silenced, packaged, or predicted. He is the pastor who chased people out of church. He is the prophet who had a soft spot for crooks and whores. He is the king who washed the grime off the feet of his betrayer. He turned a bread basket into a buffet and a dead friend into a living one. And most of all, he transformed the tomb into a womb out of which life was born. Your life.

Jesus: Five letters. Six hours. One cross. Three nails. We live because he does, hope because he works, and matter because he matters. To be saved by grace is to be saved by him—not by an idea, doctrine, creed, or church membership, but by Jesus himself, who will sweep into heaven anyone who so much as gives him the nod.

Goldfish Jesus? Not on your life.

Goldfish Jesus happens only on Christmas and Easter. The real Jesus claims every tick of the clock.

Goldfish Jesus winks at sin. The real Jesus nukes it.

Goldfish Jesus is a lucky charm crucifix on a necklace. Jesus is a tiger in your heart.

Do you know this Jesus? If your answer is no, let's talk about him. If your answer is yes, let's talk about him. Let's talk about Jesus.

Let's begin where the earthly ministry of Jesus began—in the

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womb of Mary. The God of the universe, for a time, kicked against the wall of that womb. He was born in the poverty of a peasant and spent his first night in the feed trough of a cow. “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14 THE MESSAGE).

Didn't have to, did he?

Jesus could have become a voice—a voice in the air.

Jesus could have become a message—a message in the sky.

Jesus could have become a light—a light in the night.

But he became more, so much more. He became flesh. Why? Why did he take the journey? Why did he go so far?

Might the answer include this word: *you*?

Jesus came to be near you. Any concerns you might have about his power and love were removed from the discussion the moment he became flesh and entered the world.

What a beginning. What an entrance. What a moment. Goldfish Jesus? No way.

Chapter 1

Born to You This Day

Born to a mother.

Acquainted with physical pain.

Enjoys a good party.

Rejected by friends.

Unfairly accused.

Loves stories.

Reluctantly pays taxes.

Sings.

Turned off by greedy religion.

Feels sorry for the lonely.

Unappreciated by siblings.

JESUS

Stands up for the underdog.
Kept awake at night by concerns.
Known to doze off in the midst of trips.
Accused of being too rowdy.
Afraid of death.

Whom am I describing? Jesus . . . or you? Perhaps both. Based on this list, it seems you and I have a lot in common with Jesus.

Big deal? I think so.

Jesus understands you. He understands small-town anonymity and big-city pressure. He's walked through pastures of sheep and palaces of kings. He's faced hunger, sorrow, and death and wants to face them with you. Jesus "understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin" (Heb. 4:15 NLT).

If Jesus understands our weaknesses, then so does God. Jesus was God in human form. He was God with us. That is why Jesus is called Immanuel.

Immanuel appears in the same Hebrew form as it did two thousand years ago. *Immanu* means "with us." *El* refers to *Elohim*, or God. So Immanuel is not an "above-us God" or a "somewhere-in-the-neighborhood God." He came as the "with-us God." God with us. Not "God with the rich" or "God with the religious." But God with *us*. All of us. Russians, Germans, Buddhists, Mormons, truck drivers and taxi drivers, librarians. God with *us*.

Don't we love the word *with*? "Will you go *with* me?" we ask. "To the store, to the hospital, through my life?" God says he will.

“I am *with* you always,” Jesus said before he ascended to heaven, “to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Search for restrictions on the promise; you’ll find none. You won’t find “I’ll be with you if you behave . . . when you believe. I’ll be with you on Sundays in worship . . . at mass.” No, none of that. There’s no withholding tax on God’s “with” promise. He is *with* us.

God is with us.

Prophets weren’t enough. Apostles wouldn’t do. Angels won’t suffice. God sent more than miracles and messages. He sent himself; he sent his Son. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 NKJV).

For thousands of years God gave us his voice. Prior to Bethlehem he gave us his messengers, his teachers, his words. But in the manger God gave us himself. Extraordinary, don’t you think?

I imagine even Gabriel scratched his head at the idea of “God with us.” Gabriel wasn’t one to question his God-given missions. Sending fire and dividing seas were all in an eternity’s work for this angel. When God sent, Gabriel went.

And when word got out that God was to become a human, Gabriel was no doubt enthused. He could envision the moment:

The Messiah in a blazing chariot.

The King descending on a fiery cloud.

An explosion of light from which the Messiah would emerge.

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

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

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

That's okay for humans, he thought to himself. But for God? The heavens can't contain him. How could a body? Besides, have you seen what comes out of those babies? Hardly befitting the Creator of the universe. Babies must be carried and fed, bounced and bathed. Some mother burping God on her shoulder? Why, that was beyond what even an angel could imagine.

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

So Gabriel scratched his head. *What happened to the good ol' days?* Global floods. Flaming swords. That's the action he liked.

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

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

What if he gets laid off?

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What if he gets cranky?

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

It was all Gabriel could do to keep from turning back. “This is a peculiar idea you have, God,” he must have muttered to himself, but he followed through. He wasn’t about to rebel against his boss, who also happened to control the universe.

He visited Mary and told her:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. (Luke 1:30–31 NKJV)

The story of Jesus begins with the story of a great descent. The Son of God became the child of Mary. He became one of us so we might become one with Him. He entered our world in the high hope that we will enter his.

Chapter 2

No Ordinary Night

Only one word describes the night he finally came—*ordinary*. The sky was ordinary. An occasional gust stirred the leaves and chilled the air. The stars were diamonds sparkling on black velvet. Fleets of clouds floated in front of the moon.

It was a beautiful night—a night worth peeking out your bedroom window to admire—but not really an unusual one. No reason to expect a surprise. Nothing to keep a person awake. An ordinary night with an ordinary sky.

The sheep were ordinary. Some fat. Some scrawny. Some with barrel bellies. Some with twig legs. Common animals. No fleece made of gold. No history makers. No blue-ribbon winners. They were simply sheep—lumpy, sleeping silhouettes on a hillside.

And the shepherds. Peasants they were. Probably wearing all the clothes they owned. Smelling like sheep and looking just as woolly. They were conscientious, willing to spend the night with their flocks. But you won't find their staffs in a museum or their writings in a library. No one asked their opinion on social justice or the application of the Torah. They were nameless and simple.

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.

But God dances amid 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 angel, who declared, "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11 NKJV).

The night was ordinary no more.

As dark gave way to dawn, the noise and the bustle began earlier than usual in the village of Bethlehem. People were already on the streets. Vendors were positioning themselves on the corners of the most heavily traveled avenues. Store owners were unlocking the doors to their shops. Children were awakened by the excited barking of the street dogs and the complaints of donkeys pulling carts.

The owner of the inn had awakened earlier than most in the town. After all, the inn was full, all the beds taken. Every available mat or blanket had been put to use. Soon all the customers would be stirring, and there would be a lot of work to do.

One's imagination is kindled, thinking about the conversation of the innkeeper and his family at the breakfast table. Did anyone mention the arrival of the young couple the night before? Did anyone ask about their welfare? Did anyone comment on the pregnancy of the girl on the donkey? Perhaps. Perhaps someone raised the subject. But, at best, it was raised, not discussed. There was nothing novel about them. They were possibly one of several families turned away that night.

Besides, who had time to talk about them when there was so much excitement in the air? Augustus did the economy of Bethlehem a favor when he decreed that a census should be taken and people should return to their hometowns. Who could remember when such commerce had hit the village?

No, it is doubtful that anyone mentioned the couple's arrival or wondered about the condition of the girl. They were too busy. The day was upon them. The day's bread had to be made. The morning's chores had to be done. There was too much to do to imagine that the impossible had occurred.

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 as all stables do. The stench of urine, dung, and sheep reeks pungently in the air. 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.

Off to one side is a group of shepherds. They sit silently on the

floor, perhaps perplexed, perhaps in awe, no doubt in amazement. Their night watch had been interrupted by an explosion of light from heaven and a symphony of angels. God goes to those who have time to hear him, so on this cloudless night he went to simple shepherds.

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. He still hasn't figured it all out. The mystery of the event puzzles him. But he hasn't the energy to wrestle with the questions. What's important is that the baby is fine and Mary is safe. As sleep comes, he remembers the name the angel told him to use—*Jesus*. "We will call him Jesus."

Mary is wide awake. 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. Somehow Mary knows she is holding God. *So this is he*. 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. His cry, though strong and healthy, is still the helpless and piercing cry of a baby. And he is absolutely dependent on Mary for his well-being.

Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. Divinity entering the world on the floor

NO ORDINARY NIGHT

of a stable, through the womb of a teenager, and in the presence of a carpenter.

She touches the face of the infant God. *How long was your journey!*

This baby had overseen the universe. His golden throne room had been abandoned in favor of a dirty sheep pen. And worshiping angels had been exchanged for kind but bewildered shepherds.

God's nature would not hold him in heaven. It led him to earth. In God's great gospel he not only sends, but he also becomes; he not only looks down, but he also lives among; he not only talks to us, but he also lives with us as one of us.

God with us.

Chapter 3

The Word Became Flesh

Do you know the most remarkable part of the incarnation? Not just that God swapped eternity for calendars, though such an exchange deserves our notice.

Scripture says that the number of God's years is unsearchable (Job 36:26 NASB). We may search out the moment the first wave slapped on a shore or the first star burst in the sky, but we'll never find the first moment when God was God, for there is no moment when God was not God. He has never not been, for he is eternal. God is not bound by time.

But when Jesus came to the earth, all this changed. He heard for the first time a phrase never used in heaven: "Your time is up." As a child he had to leave the temple because his time was up. As

a man he had to leave Nazareth because his time was up. And as a Savior he had to die because his time was up. For thirty-three years the stallion of heaven lived in the corral of time.

That's certainly remarkable, but there is something even more so.

Do you want to see the brightest jewel in the treasure of the incarnation? You might think it was the fact that he lived in a body. One moment he was a boundless spirit; the next he was flesh and bones. Do you remember these words of King David: "Where can I go to get away from your Spirit? Where can I run from you? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I lie down in the grave, you are there. If I rise with the sun in the east and settle in the west beyond the sea, even there you would guide me" (Ps. 139:7-10 NCV)?

Our asking "Where is God?" is like a fish asking "Where is water?" or a bird asking "Where is air?" God is everywhere! Equally present in Peking and Peoria. As active in the lives of Icelanders as in the lives of Texans. The dominion of God is "from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Ps. 72:8). We cannot find a place where God is not.

Yet when God entered time and became a man, he who was boundless became bound. Imprisoned in flesh. Restricted by weary-prone muscles and droopy eyelids. For more than three decades his once-limitless reach would be limited to the stretch of an arm, his speed checked to the pace of human feet.

I wonder, Was he ever tempted to reclaim his boundlessness? In the middle of a long trip, did he ever consider transporting himself to the next city? When the rain chilled his bones, was he tempted to change the weather? When the heat parched his lips, did he give thought to popping over to the Caribbean for some refreshment?

If ever he entertained such thoughts, he never gave in to them. Not once. Stop and think about this. Not once did Christ use his supernatural powers for personal comfort. With one word he could've transformed the hard earth into a soft bed, but he didn't. With a wave of his hand, he could've boomeranged the spit of his accusers back into their faces, but he didn't. With an arch of his brow, he could've paralyzed the hand of the soldier as he braided the crown of thorns. But he didn't.

Remarkable. But is this the most remarkable part of the coming? Many would argue not. Many, perhaps most, would point beyond the surrender of timelessness and boundlessness to the surrender of sinlessness. It's easy to see why.

Isn't this the message of the crown of thorns?

An unnamed soldier took branches—mature enough to bear thorns, nimble enough to bend—and wove them into a crown of mockery, a crown of thorns.

Throughout Scripture thorns symbolize, not sin, but the consequence of sin. Remember Eden? After Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the land: “So I will put a curse on the ground. . . . The ground will produce thorns and weeds for you, and you will eat the plants of the field” (Gen. 3:17–18 *NCV*). Brambles on the earth are the product of sin in the heart.

What is the fruit of sin? Step into the briar patch of humanity and feel a few thistles. Shame. Fear. 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! Fear? He

never left the presence of God! 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 the waves of a stormy sea. He felt anxious, guilty, and alone. Can't you hear the emotion in his prayer? "My God, my God, why have you abandoned 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 coming?

Not that the One who played marbles with the stars gave it up to play marbles with marbles. Or that the One who hung the galaxies gave it up to hang doorjambs to the displeasure of a cranky client who wanted everything yesterday but couldn't pay for anything until tomorrow.

Not that he in an instant went from needing nothing to needing air, food, a tub of hot water and salts for his tired feet, and, more than anything, needing somebody—anybody—who was more concerned about where he would spend eternity than where he would spend Friday's paycheck.

Or that he resisted the urge to fry the two-bit, self-appointed hall monitors of holiness who dared to suggest that he was doing the work of the devil.

Not that he kept his cool while the dozen best friends he ever had felt the heat and got out of the kitchen. Or that he gave no command to the angels who begged, "Just give the nod, Lord. One word and these demons will be deviled eggs."

Not that he refused to defend himself when blamed for every sin

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

of every sex worker and sailor since Adam. Or that he stood silent as a million guilty verdicts echoed in the tribunal of heaven and the giver of light was left in the chill of a sinner's night.

Not even that after three days in a dark hole, he stepped into the Easter sunrise with a smile and a swagger and a question for lowly Lucifer—"Is that your best punch?"

That was cool, incredibly cool.

But 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.

Chapter 4

Jesus Gets You

I am watching a family of black-tailed squirrels. I should be working on a Christmas message but can't focus. They seem set on entertaining me. They scamper amid the roots of the tree north of my office. We've been neighbors for three years now. They watch me peck at the keyboard. I watch them store their nuts and climb the trunk. We're mutually amused. I could watch them all day. Sometimes I do.

But I've never considered becoming one of them. The squirrel world holds no appeal to me. Who wants to sleep next to a hairy rodent with beady eyes? (No comments from you, Denalyn.) Give up the Rocky Mountains, bass fishing, weddings, and laughter for a hole in the ground and a diet of dirty nuts? Count me out.

JESUS

But count Jesus in. What a world he left. Our classiest mansion would be a tree trunk to him. Earth's finest cuisine would be walnuts on heaven's table. And the idea of becoming a squirrel with claws and tiny teeth and a furry tail? It's nothing compared to God's becoming an embryo and entering the womb of Mary.

Nonetheless, he did. The God of the universe was born into the poverty of a peasant and spent his first night in the feed trough of a cow. "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14 NRSV). The God of the universe left the glory of heaven and moved into the neighborhood. Our neighborhood! Who could have imagined he would do such a thing?

He loves to be with the ones he loves, so much so that the One who made everything "made himself nothing" (Phil. 2:7 NCV). Christ made himself small. He made himself dependent on lungs, a larynx, and legs. He experienced hunger and thirst. He went through all the normal stages of human development. He was taught to walk, stand, wash his face, and dress himself. His muscles grew stronger; his hair grew longer. His voice cracked when he passed through puberty. He was genuinely human.

When he was "full of joy" (Luke 10:21), his joy was authentic. When he wept for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), his tears were as real as yours or mine. When he asked, "How long must I put up with you?" (Matt. 17:17 NLT), his frustration was honest. When he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46), he needed an answer.

He took "the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:7). He became like us so he could serve us! He entered the world not to demand our allegiance but to display his affection.

Jesus may have had pimples. He may have been tone deaf. Perhaps a girl down the street had a crush on him or vice versa. It could be that his knees were bony. One thing's for sure: he was, while completely divine, completely human.

Why? Why did Jesus expose himself to human difficulties? Growing weary in Samaria (John 4:6). Disturbed in Nazareth (Mark 6:6). Angry in the temple (John 2:15). Sleepy in the boat on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:38). Sad at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35). Hungry in the wilderness (Matt. 4:2).

Why did he endure all these feelings? Because he knew you would feel them too. He knew you would be weary, disturbed, and angry.

He knew you'd be sleepy, grief stricken, and hungry. He knew you'd face pain. If not the pain of the body, the pain of the soul . . . pain too sharp for any drug. He knew you'd face thirst. If not a thirst for water, at least a thirst for truth, and the truth we glean from the image of a thirsty Christ is that he understands. And because he understands, we can go to him.

Wouldn't his lack of understanding keep us from him? Doesn't the lack of understanding keep us from others? Suppose you were discouraged because of your financial state and needed some guidance from a sympathetic friend. Would you go to the son of a zillionaire? (Remember, you're asking for guidance, not a handout.) Would you approach someone who inherited a fortune? Probably not. Why? He would not understand. He's likely never been where you are, so he can't relate to how you feel.

Jesus, however, has and can. He has been where you are and can relate to how you feel. And if his life on earth doesn't convince

you, his death on the cross should. He understands what you are going through. Our Lord does not patronize us or scoff at our needs. He responds “generously to all without finding fault” (James 1:5). How can he do this? No one penned it more clearly than the author of Hebrews.

Jesus understands every weakness of ours, because he was tempted in every way that we are. But he did not sin! So whenever we are in need, we should come bravely before the throne of our merciful God. There we will be treated with undeserved kindness, and we will find help. (Heb. 4:15–16 CEV)

For thirty-three years he felt everything you and I have felt. He felt weak. He grew weary. He was afraid of failure. He was susceptible to wooing women. He got colds, burped, and had body odor. His feelings got hurt. His feet got tired. And his head ached.

To think of Jesus in such a light is . . . Well, it seems almost irreverent, doesn't it? It's not something we like to do; it's uncomfortable. It is much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. Clean the manure from around the manger. Wipe the sweat out of his eyes. Pretend he never snored or blew his nose or hit his thumb with a hammer.

He's easier to handle that way. Something about keeping him divine also keeps him distant, packaged, predictable.

But don't do it. For heaven's sake don't. Let him be as human as he intended to be. Let him into the mire and muck of our world, for only if we let him in, can he pull us out.

Let him in, and listen to him.

“Love your neighbor” (Matt. 22:39 NCV) was spoken by a man whose neighbors tried to kill him.

The challenge to leave family for the gospel (Luke 14:26) was issued by the One who kissed his mother goodbye in the doorway.

“Pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44) came from the lips that would soon be begging God to forgive his murderers.

“I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20) are the words of a God who in one instant did the impossible to make it all possible for you and me.

God came to earth.

It all happened in a moment. In one moment . . . a most remarkable moment. The Word became flesh.

There will be another. The world will see another instantaneous transformation. In becoming human God made it possible for humans to see God. When Jesus went home, he left the back door open. As a result “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, . . . we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52 KJV).

The first moment of transformation went unnoticed by the world. But the second one won't. The next time you use the phrase “just a moment,” remember that's all the time it will take to change this world.

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He Chose the Nails

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core scripture: 1 Peter 1:18–20

He Still Moves Stones

... the God who still does the impossible—in your life.

core scripture: Matthew 12:20

In the Eye of the Storm

... peace in the storms of your life.

core scripture: John 6

In the Grip of Grace

... the greatest gift of all—the grace of God.

core scripture: Romans

It's Not About Me

... why focusing on God will make sense of your life.

core scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:18

Just Like Jesus

... a life free from guilt, fear, and anxiety.

core scripture: Ephesians 4:23–24

A Love Worth Giving

... how living loved frees you to love others.

core scripture: 1 Corinthians 13

Next Door Savior

... a God who walked life's hardest trials—and still walks with you through yours.

core scripture: Matthew 16:13–16

No Wonder They Call Him the Savior

... hope in the unlikely place—upon the cross.

core scripture: Romans 5:15

Outlive Your Life

... that a great God created you to do great things.

core scripture: Acts 1

Six Hours One Friday

... forgiveness and healing in the middle of loss and failure.

core scripture: John 19–20

Traveling Light

... the power to release the burdens you were never meant to carry.

core scripture: Psalm 23

Unshakable Hope

... God has given us his very great and precious promises.

core scripture: 2 Peter 1:4

When God Whispers Your Name

... the path to hope in knowing that God knows you, never forgets you, and cares about the details of your life.

core scripture: John 10:3

You'll Get Through This

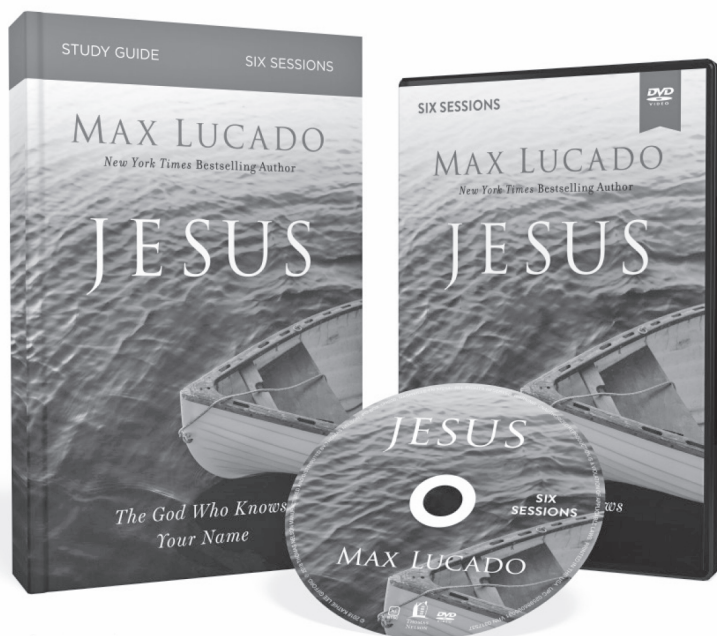
... hope in the midst of your hard times and a God who uses the mess of life for good.

core scripture: Genesis 50:20

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