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MAX LUCADO

New York Times BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



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OUT
LIVE
YOUR
LIFE

YOU WERE MADE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Finding Father
Benjamin:
A Fable



Unfavorable winds blow the ship off course, and when they do, the sailors spot uncharted islands. They see half a dozen mounds rising out of the blue South Seas waters. The captain orders the men to drop anchor and goes ashore. He is a robust man with a barrel chest, full beard, and curious soul.

On the first island he sees nothing but sadness. Underfed children. Tribes in conflict. No farming or food development, no treatment for the sick, and no schools. Just simple, needy people.

The second and following islands reveal more of the same. The captain sighs at what he sees. “This is no life for these people.” But what can he do?

Then he steps onto the last and largest island. The people are healthy and well fed. Irrigation systems nourish their fields, and roads connect the villages. The children have bright eyes and strong bodies. The captain asks the chief for an explanation. How has this island moved so far ahead of the others?

The chief, who is smaller than the captain but every bit his equal in confidence, gives a quick response: “Father Benjamin. He educated

us in everything from agriculture to health. He built schools and clinics and dug wells.”

The captain asks, “Can you take me to see him?”

The chief nods and signals for two tribesmen to join him. They guide the captain over a jungle ridge to a simple, expansive medical clinic. It is equipped with clean beds and staffed with trained caretakers. They show the captain the shelves of medicine and introduce him to the staff. The captain, though impressed, sees nothing of Father Benjamin. He repeats his request. “I would like to see Father Benjamin. Can you take me to where he lives?”

The three natives look puzzled. They confer among themselves. After several minutes the chief invites, “Follow us to the other side of the island.” They walk along the shoreline until they reach a series of fishponds. Canals connect the ponds to the ocean. As the tide rises, fish pass from the ocean into the ponds. The islanders then lower canal gates and trap the fish for harvest.

Again the captain is amazed. He meets fishermen and workers, gatekeepers and net casters. But he sees nothing of Father Benjamin. He wonders if he is making himself clear.

“I don’t see Father Benjamin. Please take me to where he lives.”

The trio talks alone again. After some discussion the chief offers, “Let’s go up the mountain.” They lead the captain up a steep, narrow path. After many twists and turns the path deposits them in front of a grass-roofed chapel. The voice of the chief is soft and earnest. “He has taught us about God.”

He escorts the captain inside and shows him the altar, a large wooden cross, several rows of benches, and a Bible.

“Is this where Father Benjamin lives?” the captain asks.

The men nod and smile.

“May I talk to him?”

Their faces grow suddenly serious. “Oh, that would be impossible.”

“Why?”

“He died many years ago.”

The bewildered captain stares at the men. “I asked to see him, and you showed me a clinic, some fish farms, and this chapel. You said nothing of his death.”

“You didn’t ask about his death,” the chief explains. “You asked to see where he lives. We showed you.”

CHAPTER 1

Our Once-in-History
Opportunity



By the time you knew what to call it, you were neck deep in it. You'd toddler walked and talked, smelled crayons and swung bats, gurgled and giggled your way out of diapers and into childhood.

You'd noticed how guys aren't gals and dogs aren't cats and pizza sure beats spinach. And then, somewhere in the midst of it all, it hit you. At your grandpa's funeral perhaps. Maybe when you waved good-bye as your big brother left for the marines. You realized that these days are more than ice cream trips, homework, and pimples. This is called life. And this one is yours.

Complete with summers and songs and gray skies and tears, you have a life. Didn't request one, but you have one. A first day. A final day. And a few thousand in between. You've been given an honest-to-goodness human life.

You've been given *your* life. No one else has your version. You'll never bump into yourself on the sidewalk. You'll never meet anyone who has your exact blend of lineage, loves, and longings. Your life will never be lived by anyone else. You're not a jacket in an attic that can be recycled after you are gone.

And who pressed the accelerator? As soon as one day is lived, voilà, here comes another. The past has passed, and the good old days are exactly that: old days, the stuff of rearview mirrors and scrapbooks. Life is racing by, and if we aren't careful, you and I will look up, and our shot at it will have passed us by.

Some people don't bother with such thoughts. They grind through their days without lifting their eyes to look. They live and die and never ask why.

But you aren't numbered among them, or you wouldn't be holding a book entitled *Outlive Your Life*. It's not enough for you to do well. You want to do good. You want your life to matter. You want to live in such a way that the world will be glad you did.

But how can you? How can I? Can God use us?

I have one hundred and twenty answers to that question. One hundred and twenty residents of ancient Israel. They were the charter members of the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:15). Fishermen, some. Revenue reps, others. A former streetwalker and a converted revolutionary or two. They had no clout with Caesar, no friends at the temple headquarters. Truth be told, they had nothing more than this: a fire in the belly to change the world.

Thanks to Luke we know how they fared. He recorded their stories in the book of Acts. Let's listen to it. That's right—*listen* to the book of Acts. It cracks with the sounds of God's ever-expanding work. Press your ear against the pages, and hear God press into the corners and crevices of the world.

Hear sermons echo off the temple walls. Baptismal waters splashing, just-saved souls laughing. Hear the spoon scrape the bowl as yet another hungry mouth is fed.

Listen to the doors opening and walls collapsing. Doors to Antioch,

Ethiopia, Corinth, and Rome. Doors into palaces, prisons, and Roman courts.

And walls. The ancient prejudice between Jew and Samaritan—down! The thick and spiked division between Jew and Gentile—crash! The partitions that quarantine male from female, landowner from pauper, master from slave, black African from Mediterranean Jew—God demolishes them all.

Acts announces, “God is afoot!”

Is he still? we wonder. *Would God do with us what he did with his first followers?*

Heaven knows we hope so. These are devastating times: 1.75 billion people are desperately poor,¹ 1 billion are hungry,² millions are trafficked in slavery, and pandemic diseases are gouging entire nations. Each year nearly 2 million children are exploited in the global commercial sex trade.³ And in the five minutes it took you to read these pages, almost ninety children died of preventable diseases.⁴ More than half of all Africans do not have access to modern health facilities. As a result, 10 million of them die each year from diarrhea, acute respiratory illness, malaria, and measles. Many of those deaths could be prevented by one shot.⁵

Yet in the midst of the wreckage, here we stand, the modern-day version of the Jerusalem church. You, me, and our one-of-a-kind lifetimes and once-in-history opportunity.

Ours is the wealthiest generation of Christians ever. We are bright, educated, and experienced. We can travel around the world in twenty-four hours or send a message in a millisecond. We have the most sophisticated research and medicines at the tips of our fingers. We have ample resources. A mere 2 percent of the world’s grain harvest would be enough, if shared, to erase the problems of hunger

and malnutrition around the world.⁶ There is enough food on the planet to offer every person twenty-five hundred calories of sustenance a day.⁷ We have enough food to feed the hungry.

And we have enough bedrooms to house the orphans. Here's the math. There are 145 million orphans worldwide.⁸ Nearly 236 million people in the United States call themselves Christians.⁹ From a purely statistical standpoint, American Christians by themselves have the wherewithal to house every orphan in the world.

Of course, many people are not in a position to do so. They are elderly, infirm, unemployed, or simply feel no call to adopt. Yet what if a small percentage of them did? Hmmm, let's say 6 percent. If so, we could provide loving homes for the more than 14.1 million children in sub-Saharan Africa who have been orphaned by the AIDS epidemic.¹⁰ Among the noble causes of the church, how does that one sound? "American Christians Stand Up for AIDS Orphans." Wouldn't that headline be a welcome one?

I don't mean to oversimplify these terribly complicated questions. We can't just snap our fingers and expect the grain to flow across borders or governments to permit foreign adoptions. Policies stalemate the best of efforts. International relations are strained. Corrupt officials snag the systems. I get that.

But this much is clear: the storehouse is stocked. The problem is not in the supply; the problem is in the distribution. God has given this generation, *our generation*, everything we need to alter the course of human suffering.

A few years back, three questions rocked my world. They came from different people in the span of a month. Question 1: Had you been a German Christian during World War II, would you have taken a stand against Hitler? Question 2: Had you lived in the South

during the civil rights conflict, would you have taken a stand against racism? Question 3: When your grandchildren discover you lived during a day in which 1.75 billion people were poor and 1 billion were hungry, how will they judge your response?

I didn't mind the first two questions. They were hypothetical. I'd like to think I would have taken a stand against Hitler and fought against racism. But those days are gone, and those choices were not mine. But the third question has kept me awake at night. I do live today; so do you. We are given a choice . . . an opportunity to make a big difference during a difficult time. What if we did? What if we rocked the world with hope? Infiltrated all corners with God's love and life? What if we followed the example of the Jerusalem church? This tiny sect expanded into a world-changing force. We still drink from their wells and eat from their trees of faith. How did they do it? What can we learn from their priorities and passion?

Let's ponder their stories, found in the first twelve chapters of Acts. Let's examine each event through the lens of this prayer: *Do it again, Jesus. Do it again.* After all, "We are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (Eph. 2:10 NLT). We are created by a great God to do great works. He invites us to outlive our lives, not just in heaven but here on earth.

Here's a salute to a long life: goodness that outlives the grave, love that outlasts the final breath. May you live in such a way that your death is just the beginning of your life.

*After David had done the will
of God in his own generation, he died and was buried.*

(Acts 13:36 NLT)



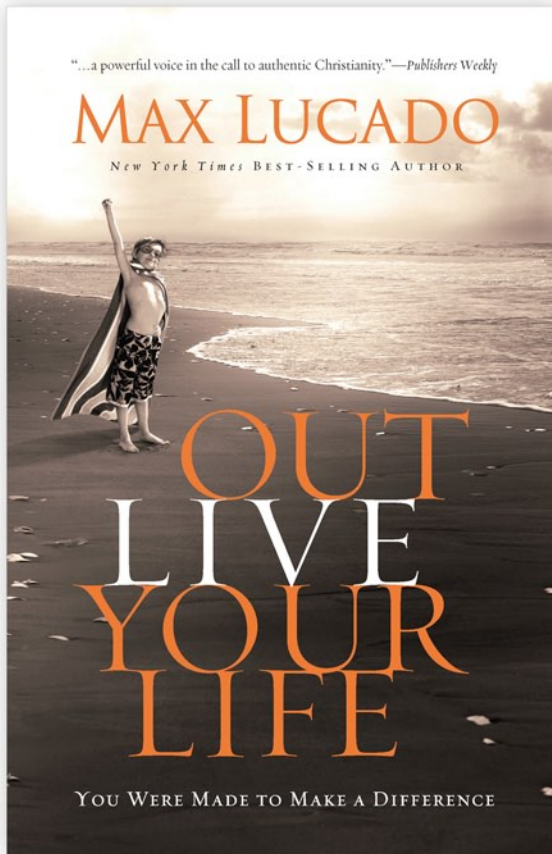
O Lord, what an amazing opportunity you have spread out before me—a chance to make a difference for you in a desperately hurting world. Help me to see the needs you want me to see, to react in a way that honors you, and to bless others by serving them gladly with practical expressions of your love. Help me be Jesus' hands and feet, and through your Spirit give me the strength and wisdom I need to fulfill your plan for me in my own generation. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

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