

HOW HURTS BRING HOPE

by Max Lucado

NIGHTS without stars. Days without sunshine. You keep looking for a ray of hope to hold onto, but...

You pick yourself up, dust yourself off and barn! Another crisis, another disappointment knocks you to the ground, and...

What do you do? Where do you turn? When you're mired in the sticky swamp of hurts, how do you climb out?

The answer isn't found in bartering with God. The answer isn't found in completing a checklist.

The answer is found in making a choice. Choosing to concentrate on the hurt, or choosing to have faith in the healer. To hide in the shadows of hurt, or to walk in the light with the Savior.

What will be your choice?

Chapter One

When You're Out of Choices

Later Jesus went to Jerusalem for a special Jewish feast. In Jerusalem there is a pool with five covered porches, which is called Bethzatha in the Jewish language. This pool is near the Sheep Gate. Many sick people were lying on the porches beside the pool. Some were blind, some were crippled, and some were paralyzed. Sometimes an angel of the Lord came down to the pool and stirred up the water. After the angel did this, the first person to go into the pool was healed from any sickness he had. A man was lying there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw the man and knew that he had been sick for such a long time, Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be well?"

The sick man answered, "Sir, there is no one to help me get into the pool when the water starts moving. While I am coming to the water, someone else always gets in before me."

Then Jesus said, "Stand up. Pick up your mat and walk." And immediately the man was well; he picked up his mat and began to walk.

The day this happened was a Sabbath day. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "Today is the Sabbath. It is against our law for you to carry your mat on the Sabbath day."

But he answered, "The man who made me well told me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'"

Then they asked him, "Who is the man who told you to pick up your mat and walk?"

But the man who had been healed did not know who it was, because there were many people in that place, and Jesus had left.

Later, Jesus found the man at the Temple and said to him, "See, you are well now. Stop sinning so that something worse does not happen to you."

Then the man left and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well.

Because Jesus was doing this on the Sabbath day the Jews began to persecute him. But Jesus said to them, "My Father never stops working, and so I keep working, too."

This made the Jews try still harder to kill him. They said, "First Jesus was breaking the law about the Sabbath day. Now he says that God is his own Father, making himself equal with God."

John 5:1-18

Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be well?"

The sick man answered, "Sir, there is no one to help me."

John 5:6-7

FOR the longest time this story didn't make any sense to me. I couldn't figure it out. It's about a man who has barely enough faith to stand on, but Jesus treats him as if he'd laid his son on the altar for God. Martyrs and apostles deserve such honor, but not some pauper who doesn't know Jesus when he sees him. Or so I thought.

For the longest time I thought Jesus was too kind. I thought the story was too bizarre. I thought the story was too good to be true. Then I realized something. This story isn't about an invalid in Jerusalem. This story is about you. It's about me. The fellow isn't nameless. He has a name—yours. He has a face—mine. He has a problem—just like ours.

Jesus encounters the 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 a monument of wealth and prosperity, but its residents are people of sickness and disease.

It's called Bethesda. It could be called Central Park, Metropolitan Hospital, or even Joe's Bar and Grill. It could be the homeless huddled beneath a downtown overpass. It could be Calvary Baptist. It could be any collection of hurting people.

An underwater spring caused the pool to bubble occasionally. The people believed the bubbles were caused by the dipping of angels' wings. They also believed that the first person to touch the water after the angel did would be healed. Did healing occur? I don't know. But I do know crowds of invalids came to give it a try.

Picture a battleground strewn with wounded bodies, and you see Bethesda. Imagine a nursing home overcrowded and understaffed, and you see the pool. Call to mind the orphans in Bangladesh or the abandoned in New Delhi, and you will see what people saw when they passed Bethesda. As they passed, what did they hear? An endless wave of groans. What did they witness? A field of faceless need. What did they do? Most walked past, ignoring the people.

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.

What is he thinking? 'When an infected hand touches his ankle, what does he do? When a blind child stumbles in Jesus' path, does he reach down to catch the child? When a wrinkled hand extends for alms, how does Jesus respond?

Whether the watering hole is Bethesda or Bill's Bar. . . how does God feel when people hurt?

It's worth the telling of the story if all we do is watch him walk. It's worth it just to know he even came. He didn't have to, you know. Surely there are more sanitary crowds in Jerusalem. Surely there are more enjoyable activities. After all, this is the Passover feast. It's an exciting time in the holy city. People have come from miles around to meet God in the temple.

Little do they know that God is with the sick.

Little do they know that God is walking slowly, stepping carefully between the beggars and the blind.

Little do they know that the strong young carpenter who surveys the ragged landscape of pain is God.

“When they suffered, he suffered also” Isaiah wrote (Isa. 63:9). On this day Jesus must have suffered much.

On this day Jesus must have sighed often as he walked along the poolside of Bethesda... and he sighs when he comes to you and me.

Remember, I told you this story was about us? Remember, I said I found our faces in the Bible? Well, here we are, filling the white space between the letters of verse 5: “A man was lying there who had been sick for thirty-eight years.”

Maybe you don't like being described like that. Perhaps you'd rather find yourself in the courage of David or the devotion of Mary. We all would. But before you or I can be like them, we must admit we are like the paralytic. Invalids out of options. Can't walk. Can't work. Can't care for ourselves. Can't even roll down the bank to the pool to cash in on the angel water.

You may be holding this book with healthy hands and reading with strong eyes, and you can't imagine what you and this four-decade invalid have in common. How could he be you? What do we have in common with him?

Simple. Our predicament and our hope. What predicament? It is described in Hebrews 12:14: “Anyone whose life is not holy will never see the Lord.”

That's our predicament: Only the holy will see God. Holiness is a prerequisite to heaven. Perfection is a requirement for eternity. We wish it weren't so. We act like it isn't so. We act like those who are “decent” will see God. We suggest that those who try hard will see God. We act as if we're good if we never do anything too bad. And that goodness is enough to qualify us for heaven.

Sounds right to us, but it doesn't sound right to God. And he sets the standard. And the standard is high. “You must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).

You see, in God's plan, God is the standard for perfection. We don't compare ourselves to others; they are just as fouled up as we are. The goal is to be like him; anything less is inadequate.

That's why I say the invalid is you and me. We, like the invalid, are paralyzed. We, like the invalid, are trapped. We, like the invalid, are stuck; we have no solution for our predicament.

That's you and me lying on the ground. That's us wounded and weary. When it comes to healing our spiritual condition, we don't have a chance. We might as well be told to pole-vault the moon. We don't have what it takes to be healed. Our only hope is that God will do for us what he did for the man at Bethesda—that he will step out of the temple and step into our ward of hurt and helplessness.

Which is exactly what he has done.

Read slowly and carefully Paul's description of what God has done for you: "When you were spiritually dead because of your sins and because you were not free from the power of your sinful self, God made you alive with Christ, and he forgave all our sins. He canceled the debt, which listed all the rules we failed to follow. He took away that record with its rules and nailed it to the cross. God stripped the spiritual rulers and powers of their authority With the cross, he won the victory and showed the world that they were powerless" (Col. 2:13-15).

As you look at the words above, answer this question. Who is doing the work? You or God? Who is active? You or God? Who is doing the saving? You or God? Who is the one with strength? And who is the one paralyzed?

Let's isolate some phrases and see. First, look at your condition. "When you were spiritually dead. . . and. . . you were not free."

The invalid was better off than we are. At least he was alive. Paul says that if you and I are outside of Christ, then we are dead. Spiritually dead. Corpses. Lifeless. Cadavers. Dead. What can a dead person do? Not much.

But look what God can do with the dead.

"God made you alive."

"God forgave."

"He canceled the debt."

"He took away that record."

"God stripped the spiritual rulers."

"He won the victory."

"[He] showed the world."

Again, the question. Who is active? You and I—or God? Who is trapped and who comes to the rescue?

God has thrown life jackets to every generation.

Look at Jonah in the fish belly—surrounded by gastric juices and sucked-in seaweed. For three days God has left him there. For three days Jonah has pondered his choices. And for three days he has come to the same conclusion: He ain't got one. From where he sits (or floats) there are two exits—and neither are very appealing. But then again, neither is Jonah. He blew it as a preacher. He was a flop as a fugitive. At best he's a coward, at worst a traitor. And what he's lacked all along he now has in abundance—guts.

So Jonah does the only thing he can do: He prays. He says nothing about how good he is— but a lot about how good God is. He doesn't even ask for help, but help is what he gets. Before he can say amen, the belly convulses, the fish belches, and Jonah lands face first on the beach.

Look at Daniel in the lions' den; his prospects aren't much better than Jonah's. Jonah had been

swallowed, and Daniel is about to be. Flat on his back with the lions' faces so close he can smell their breath. The biggest one puts a paw on Daniel's chest and leans down to take the first bite and. . . nothing happens. Instead of a chomp, there is a bump. Daniel looks down and sees the nose of another lion rubbing against his belly. The lion's lips are snarling, but his mouth isn't opening.

That's when Daniel hears the snickering in the corner. He doesn't know who the fellow is, but he sure is bright and he sure is having fun. In his hands is a roll of bailing wire and on his face is one of those gotcha-while-you-weren't-watching expressions.

Or look at Joseph in the pit, a chalky hole in a hot desert. The lid has been pulled over the top and the wool has been pulled over his eyes. Those are his brothers up there, laughing and eating as if they did nothing more than tell him to get lost (which is what they'd done for most of his life). Those are his brothers, the ones who have every intention of leaving him to spend his days with the spiders and the snakes and then to die in the pit.

Like Jonah and Daniel, Joseph is trapped. He is out of options. There is no exit. There is no hope. But because Jacob's boys are as greedy as they were mean, Joseph is sold to some southbound gypsies and he changes history. Though the road to the palace takes a detour through a prison, it eventually ends up at the throne. And Joseph eventually stands before his brothers—this time with their asking for his help. And he is wise enough to give them what they ask and not what they deserve.

Or look at Barabbas on death row. The final appeal has been heard. The execution has been scheduled. Barabbas passes the time playing solitaire in his cell. He's resigned to the fact that the end is near. Doesn't appeal. Doesn't implore. Doesn't demand. The decision has been made, and Barabbas is going to die.

Like Jonah, Daniel, and Joseph, it's all over but the crying. And like Jonah, Daniel, and Joseph, the time to cry never comes. The steps of the warden echo in the chamber. Barabbas thinks he's bringing handcuffs and a final cigarette. Wrong. The warden brings street clothes. And Barabbas leaves the prison a free man because someone he'd probably never even seen took his place.

Such are the stories in the Bible. One near-death experience after another. Just when the neck is on the chopping block, just when the noose is around the neck, Calvary comes.

Angels pound on Lot's door—Genesis 19.

The whirlwind speaks to Job's hurt—Job 38-42.

The Jordan purges Naaman's plague— 2 Kings 5.

An angel appears in Peter's cell—Acts 12.

God's efforts are strongest when our efforts are useless.

Go back to Bethesda for a moment. I want you to look at the brief but revealing dialogue between the paralytic and the Savior. Before Jesus heals him, 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. While I am coming to the water, someone else always gets in before me" (v. 7).

Is the fellow complaining? Is he feeling sorry for himself? Or is he just stating the facts? '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."

I wish we would do that; I wish we would take Jesus at his word. I wish, like heaven, that we would learn that when he says something, it happens. What is this peculiar paralysis that confines us? What is this stubborn unwillingness to be healed? When Jesus tells us to stand, let's stand.

When he says we're forgiven, let's unload the guilt.

When he says we're valuable, let's believe him.

When he says we're eternal, let's bury our fear.

When he says we're provided for, let's stop worrying.

'When he says, "Stand up," let's do it.

I love the story of the private who ran after and caught the runaway horse of Alexander the Great. When he brought the animal back to the general, Alexander thanked him by saying, "Thank you, captain."

With one word the private was promoted. 'When the general said it, the private believed it. He went to the quartermaster, selected a new uniform, and put it on. He went to the officers' quarters and selected a bunk. He went to the officers' mess and had a meal.

Because the general said it, he believed it. Would that we would do the same.

Is this your story? It can be. All the elements are the same. A gentle stranger has stepped into your hurting world and offered you a hand.

Now it's up to you to take it.

Chapter Two

When You're Afraid of the Future

When Jesus went in the boat back to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him there. A leader of the synagogue, named Jairus, came there, saw Jesus, and fell at his feet. He begged Jesus, saying again and again, 'My daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so she will be healed and will live. "So Jesus went with him....

While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of the synagogue leader. They said, "Your daughter is dead. There is no need to bother the teacher anymore."

But Jesus paid no attention to what they said. He told the synagogue leader "Don't be afraid; just believe."

Jesus let only Peter, James, and John the brother of James go with him. When they came to the house of the synagogue leader, Jesus found many people there making lots of noise and crying loudly. Jesus entered the house and said to them, "Why are you crying and making so much noise? The child is not dead, only asleep. "But they laughed at him. So, after throwing them out of the house, Jesus took the child's father and mother and his three followers into the room where the child was. Taking hold of the girl's hand, he said to her "Talitha, koum!"

(This means, "Young girl, I tell you to stand up!") At once the girl stood right up and began walking. (She was twelve years old.) Everyone was completely amazed. Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell people about this. Then he told them to give the girl something to eat.

Mark 5:21-24,35-43

Faith means. . . knowing that something is real even we do not see it.

Hebrews 11:1

LAST night I tried to teach my daughters to see with their eyes closed. I asked Jenna, the eight-year-old, to go to one side of the den. I had Andrea, the six-year-old, stand on the other. Three-year-old Sara and I sat on the couch in the middle and watched. Jenna's job was to close her eyes and walk. Andrea's job was to be Jenna's eyes and talk her safely across the room.

With phrases like, "Take two baby steps to the left" and "Take four giant steps straight ahead," Andrea successfully navigated her sister through a treacherous maze of chairs, a vacuum cleaner, and a laundry basket.

Then Jenna took her turn. She guided Andrea past her mom's favorite lamp and shouted just in time to keep her from colliding into the wall when she thought her right foot was her left foot.

After several treks through the darkness, they stopped and we processed.

“I didn’t like it,” Jenna complained. “It’s scary going where you can’t see.”

“I was afraid I was going to fall,” Andrea agreed. “I kept taking little steps to be safe.”

I can relate, can’t you? We grownups don’t like the dark either. But we walk in it. We, like Jenna, often complain about how scary it is to walk where we can’t see. And we, like Andrea, often take timid steps so we won’t fall.

We’ve reason to be cautious: We are blind. We can’t see the future. We have absolutely no vision beyond the present. I can’t tell you with certainty that I will live long enough to finish this paragraph. (‘Whew, I did!’) Nor can you tell me you’ll live long enough to read the next one. (Hope you do!)

I’m not talking nearsightedness or obstructed view; I’m talking opaque blindness. I’m not talking about a condition that passes with childhood; I’m describing a condition that passes only with death. We are blind. Blind to the future.

It’s one limitation we all share. The wealthy are just as blind as the poor. The educated are just as sightless as the unschooled. And the famous know as little about the future as the unknown.

None of us know how our children will turn out. None of us know the day we will die. No one knows whom he or she will marry or even if marriage lies before him or her. We are universally, absolutely, unalterably blind.

We are all Jenna with her eyes shut, groping through a dark room, listening for a familiar voice—but with one difference. Her surroundings are familiar and friendly. Ours can be hostile and fatal. Her worst fear is a stubbed toe. Our worst fear is more threatening: cancer, divorce, loneliness, death.

And try as we might to walk as straight as we can, chances are a toe is going to get stubbed and we are going to get hurt.

Just ask Jairus. He is a man who has tried to walk as straight as he can. But Jairus was a man whose path has taken a sudden turn into a cave—a dark cave. And he doesn’t want to enter it alone.

Jairus is the leader of the synagogue. That may not mean much to you and me, but in the days of Christ the leader of the synagogue was the most important man in the community. The synagogue was the center of religion, education, leadership, and social activity. The leader of the synagogue was the senior religious leader, the highest-ranking professor, the mayor, and the best-known citizen all in one.

Jairus has it all. Job security. A guaranteed welcome at the coffee shop. A pension plan. Golf every Thursday and an annual all-expenses-paid trip to the national convention.

Who could ask for more? Yet Jairus does. He has to ask for more. In fact, he would trade the whole package of perks and privileges for just one assurance—that his daughter will live.

The Jairus we see in this story is not the clear-sighted, black-frocked, nicely groomed civic

leader. He is instead a blind man begging for a gift. He fell at Jesus' feet, "saying again and again, 'My daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so she will be healed and will live' (Mark 5:23).

He doesn't barter with Jesus. ("You do me a favor, and I'll see you are taken care of for life.") He doesn't negotiate with Jesus. ("The guys in Jerusalem are getting pretty testy about your antics. Tell you what, you handle this problem of mine, and I'll make a few calls. . .") He doesn't make excuses. ("Normally, I'm not this desperate, Jesus, but I've got a small problem.")

He just pleads.

There are times in life when everything you have to offer is nothing compared to what you are asking to receive. Jairus is at such a point. What could a man offer in exchange for his child's life? So there are no games. No haggling. No masquerades. The situation is starkly simple:

Jairus is blind to the future and Jesus knows the future. So Jairus asks for his help.

And Jesus, who loves the honest heart, goes to give **it**.

And God, who knows what it is like to lose a child, empowers his son.

But before Jesus and Jairus get very far, they are interrupted by emissaries from his house.

"Your daughter is dead. There is no need to bother the teacher anymore" (v. 35).

Get ready. Hang on to your hat. Here's where the story gets moving. Jesus goes from being led to leading, from being convinced by Jairus to convincing Jairus. From being admired to being laughed at, from helping out the people to casting out the people.

Here is where Jesus takes control.

"But Jesus paid no attention to what they said. . ." (v. 36).

I love that line! It describes the critical principle for seeing the unseen: Ignore what people say. Block them out. Turn them off. Close your ears. And, if you have to, walk away.

Ignore the ones who say it's too late to start over.

Disregard those who say you'll never amount to anything.

Turn a deaf ear toward those who say that you aren't smart enough, fast enough, tall enough, or big enough—ignore them.

Faith sometimes begins by stuffing your ears with cotton.

Jesus turns immediately to Jairus and pleads:

"Don't be afraid; just believe" (v. 36). Jesus compels Jairus to see the unseen.

When Jesus says, "Just believe. . .," he is imploring, "Don't limit your possibilities to the visible. Don't listen only for the audible. Don't be controlled by the logical. Believe there is more to life than meets the eye!"

“Trust me,” Jesus is pleading. “Don’t be afraid; just trust.”

A father in the Bahamas cried out the same plea to his young son who was trapped in a burning house. The two-story structure was engulfed in flames, and the family—the father, mother, and several children—was on its way out when the smallest boy became terrified and ran back upstairs. His father, outside, shouted to him: “Jump, son, jump! I’ll catch you.” The boy cried: “But Daddy, I can’t see you.” “I know,” his father called, “but I can see you.”

The father could see, even though the son could not.

A similar example of faith was found on the wall of a concentration camp. On it a prisoner had carved the words:

I believe in the sun, even though it doesn’t shine,

I believe in love, even when it isn’t shown,

I believe in God, even when he doesn’t speak.

I try to imagine the person who etched those words. I try to envision his skeletal hand gripping the broken glass or stone that cut into the wall. I try to imagine his eyes squinting through the darkness as he carved each letter. What hand could have cut such a conviction? What eyes could have seen good in such horror?

There is only one answer: Eyes that chose to see the unseen.

As Paul wrote: “We set our eyes not on what we see but on what we cannot see. What we see will last only a short time, but what we cannot see will last forever” (2 Cor. 4:18).

Jesus is asking Jairus to see the unseen. To make a choice. Either to live by the facts or to see by faith. When tragedy strikes we, too, are left to choose what we see. We can see either the hurt or the Healer.

The choice is ours.

Jairus made his choice. He opted for faith and Jesus. . . and faith in Jesus led him to his daughter.

At the house Jesus and Jairus encounter a group of mourners. Jesus is troubled by their wailing. It bothers him that they express such anxiety over death. “Why are you crying and making so much noise? The child is not dead, only asleep” (v. 39).

That’s not a rhetorical question. It’s an honest one. From his perspective, the girl is not dead—she is only asleep. From God’s viewpoint, death is not permanent. It is a necessary step for passing from this world to the next. It’s not an end; it’s a beginning.

As a young boy I had two great loves— playing and eating. Summers were made for afternoons on the baseball diamond and meals at Mom’s dinner table. Mom had a rule, however.

Dirty, sweaty boys could never eat at the table. Her first words to us as we came home were always, “Go clean up and take off those clothes if you want to eat.”

Now no boy is fond of bathing and dressing, but I never once complained and defied my mom by saying, “I’d rather stink than eat!” In my economy a bath and a clean shirt were a small price to pay for a good meal.

And from God’s perspective death is a small price to pay for the privilege of sitting at his table. “Flesh and blood cannot have a part in the kingdom of God. . . . This body that can be destroyed must clothe itself with something that can never be destroyed. And this body that dies must clothe itself with something that can never die” (1 Cor. 15:50, 53, emphasis added).

God is even more insistent than my mom was. In order to sit at his table, a change of clothing must occur. And we must die in order for our body to be exchanged for a new one. So, from God’s viewpoint, death is not to be dreaded; it is to be welcomed.

And when he sees people crying and mourning over death, he wants to know, “Why are you crying?” (v. 39).

‘When we see death, we see disaster. When Jesus sees death, he sees deliverance.

That’s too much for the people to take. “They laughed at him” (v. 40). (The next time people mock you, you might remember they mocked him, too.)

Now look closely because you aren’t going to believe what Jesus does next. He throws the mourners out! That’s what the text says, “after throwing them out of the house. . . .” (v. 40). He doesn’t just ask them to leave. He throws them out. He picks them up by collar and belt and sets them sailing. Jesus’ response was decisive and strong. In the original text, the word used here is the same word used to describe what Jesus did to the moneychangers in the temple. It’s the same verb used thirty-eight times to describe what Jesus did to the demons.

Why? Why such force? Why such intolerance?

Perhaps the answer is found by going back to last evening’s living-room experience. After Jenna and Andrea had taken turns guiding each other through the den, I decided to add a diabolical twist. On the last trip, I snuck up behind Jenna, who was walking with her eyes shut, and began whispering, “Don’t listen to her. Listen to me. I’ll take care of you.”

Jenna stopped. She analyzed the situation and made her choice between the two voices. “Be quiet, Daddy,” she giggled and then continued in Andrea’s direction.

Undeterred, I grabbed the lid of a pan, held it next to her ear, and banged it with a spoon. She jumped and stopped, startled by the noise. Andrea, seeing that her pilgrim was frightened, did a great thing. She ran across the room and threw her arms around her sister and said, “Don’t worry I’m right here.”

She wasn’t about to let the noise distract Jenna from the journey.

And God isn’t going to let the noise distract you from yours. He’s still busy casting out the critics and silencing the voices that could deter you.

Some of his work you have seen. Most of it you haven't. Only when you get home will you know how many times he has protected you from luring voices. Only eternity will reveal the time he:

Interfered with the transfer, protecting you from involvement in unethical business.

Fogged in the airport, distancing you from a shady opportunity.

Flattened your tire, preventing you from checking into the hotel and meeting a seductive man.

And only heaven will show the times he protected you by:

Giving you a mate who loves God more than you do.

Opening the door for a new business so you could attend the same church.

Having the right voice with the right message on the right radio station the day you needed his encouragement.

Mark it down: God knows you and I are blind. He knows living by faith and not by sight doesn't come naturally. And I think that's one reason he raised Jairus's daughter from the dead. Not for her sake—she was better off in heaven. But for our sake—to teach us that heaven sees when we trust.

One final thought from the seeing-with-your-eyes-closed experiment. I asked Jenna how she could hear Andrea's voice guiding her across the room when I was trying to distract her by whispering in her ear.

Her answer? "I just concentrated and listened as hard as I could."

Chapter Three

When You Wonder If God Cares

Two days later there was a wedding in the town of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his followers were also invited to the wedding. When all the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

Jesus answered, "Dear woman, why come to me? My time has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you to do."

In that place there were six stone water jars that the Jews used in their washing ceremony. Each jar held about twenty or thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water. "So they filled the jars to the top.

Then he said to them, "Now take some out and give it to the master of the feast."

So they took the water to the master. When he tasted it, the water had become wine. He did not know where the wine came from, but the servants who had brought the water knew. The master of the wedding called the bridegroom and said to him, "People always serve the best wine first. Later, after the guests have been drinking awhile, they serve the cheaper wine. But you have saved the best wine till now."

So in Cana of Galilee Jesus did his first miracle. There he showed his glory and his followers believed in him.

John 2:1-11

"People always serve the best wine first. Later, after the guests have been drinking awhile, they serve the cheaper wine. But you have saved the best wine till now."

John 2:10

LET'S pretend you are an angel. (That may be a stretch for some of you, but let's give it a try.)

You are an angel in the era before the Messiah. God has not yet come to the earth, but he soon will and that's where you come in. You receive notice that you've been given a special assignment. A once-in-an-eternity opportunity. You've been asked to serve on a special committee. Quite an honor, don't you think?

Michael chairs the heavenly task force. "Let's begin by choosing the first miracle," he states.

“The first miracle is crucial. It’s the lead-off proclamation. It’s the vanguard demonstration. It must be chosen carefully.”

“Must be powerful,” someone volunteers. “Undeniable.”

“Unforgettable,” chimes a third. “We are in agreement, then,” affirms

Michael. “The first miracle of God on earth must have clout. Any ideas?”

Angelic creativity begins to whirl. “Have him raise a person from the dead.” “Or a whole cemetery from the dead!” “Yeah, vacate the place.”

“What about feeding every hungry person one meal?”

“Too easy. How about removing all the disease from the planet?”

“Bingo. I like that idea.”

“I know,” the voice is yours. All the other angels turn to look at you. “What if he rids the earth of all evil? I mean, with one great swoop all the bad is gone and just the good remains.”

The group is silent. “Not bad,” says one.

“Good thinking,” says another.

“Get it done once and for all,” agrees Michael. “It’s settled. The first miracle will obliterate evil from the earth!”

Wings rustle with approval and you smile with pride. (You may get a promotion out of this.)

“Now let’s move on to the second miracle..”

Sound far-fetched? Maybe, but the story is not without a couple of threads of truth.

One is that Jesus did have a plan. You can tell by some phrases he uses.

“The right time for me has not yet come” (John 7:6).

“The time has come for the Son of Man to receive his glory” (John 12:23).

“The chosen time is near” (Matt. 26:18).

“The time has come for the Son of Man to be handed over to sinful people”

(Mark 14:41).

“He looked toward heaven and prayed, ‘Father, the time has come...’”

(John 17:1).

Look at those words. “The right time has not yet come.” “The time has come.” “The chosen time.” “The time has come.” What do those phrases imply? A schedule. They represent a definite order of events. The mission of Christ was planned. I doubt if a committee ever existed,

but a plan did.

There is a second shred of truth in my little scenario. Not only was there a plan in Christ's ministry, there was also a first miracle. 'What was it?

The plot is almost too simple. Jesus and his disciples are at a wedding. The host runs out of wine. All the stores are closed, so Jesus, at his mother's urging, transforms six jugs of water into six jugs of wine.

That's it. That's the lead-off hitter. Pretty low key, don't you think? Certainly doesn't have the punch of calling a person from the dead or the flair of straightening a crippled leg.

Or does it? Maybe there is more to this than we think.

You see, a wedding in the day of Christ was no small event. It usually began with a sundown ceremony at the synagogue. People would then leave the synagogue and begin a long, candlelight procession through the city, winding their way through the soft evening sunlight of the city streets. The couple would be escorted past as many homes as possible so everyone could wish them well. After the processional, however, the couple didn't go on a honeymoon; the honeymoon was brought to them.

They would go home to a party. For several days there would be gift-giving, speechmaking, food-eating and—you guessed it!—winedrinking. Food and wine were taken very seriously. The host honored the guests by

keeping their plates full and their cups overflowing. It was considered an insult to the guests if the host ran out of food or wine.

Hospitality at a wedding was a sacred duty. So serious were these social customs that, if they were not observed, lawsuits could be brought by the injured parties!

"Without wine," said the rabbi, "there is no joy." Wine was crucial, not for drunkenness, which was considered a disgrace, but for what it demonstrated. The presence of wine stated that this was a special day and that all the guests were special guests.

The absence of wine, then, was a social embarrassment.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is one of the first to notice that the wine has run out. She goes to her son and points out the problem: "They have no more wine."

Jesus' response? "Dear woman, why come to me? My time has not yet come" (v. 4).

There are those words again. "My time." Jesus is aware of the plan. He has a place and a time for his first miracle. And this isn't it.

About now the angelic committee on the miracles of the Messiah lets out a collective sigh of relief.

"Whew, for a minute there, I thought he was going to blow it."

“Me, too. Can you imagine Jesus inaugurating his ministry with a water-to-wine miracle?”

“That’s it, Jesus, say no. Stick to the plan.”

Jesus knows the plan. At first, it appears he is going to stay with it. But as he hears his mother and looks into the faces of the wedding party he

reconsiders. The significance of the plan is slowly eclipsed by his concern for the people. Timing is important, but people are more so.

As a result, he changes his plan to meet the needs of some friends. Incredible. The schedule of heaven is altered so some friends won’t be embarrassed. The inaugural miracle is motivated—not by tragedy or famine or moral collapse—but by concern for friends who are in a bind.

Now if you’re an angel on the committee of Messianic miracles, you don’t like that one bit.
No, sir. You don’t like this move on the part of Jesus. Everything about it is wrong. Wrong time.
Wrong place. Wrong miracle.

“Come on, Jesus. Remember the schedule,” you urge. “Remember the strategy. This isn’t the way we had it planned.”

No, if you’re an angel on the committee, you don’t like this move.

But if you’re a human who has ever been embarrassed, you like this very much. Why? Because this miracle tells you that what matters to you matters to God.

You probably think that’s true when it comes to the big stuff. When it comes to the major-league difficulties like death, disease, sin, and disaster—you know that God cares.

But what about the smaller things? What about grouchy bosses or flat tires or lost dogs? What about broken dishes, late flights, toothaches, or a crashed hard disk? Do these matter to God?

I mean, he’s got a universe to run. He’s got the planets to keep balanced and presidents and kings to watch over. He’s got wars to worry with and famines to fix. Who am I to tell him about my ingrown toenail?

I’m glad you asked. Let me tell you who you are. In fact, let me proclaim who you are.

You are an heir of God and a co-heir with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

You are eternal, like an angel (Luke 20:36).

You have a crown that will last forever (1 Cor. 9:25).

You are a holy priest (1 Pet. 2:5), a treasured possession (Exod. 19:5).

You were chosen before the creation of the world (Eph. 1:4). You are destined for “praise, fame, and honor, and you will be a holy people to the Lord your God” (Deut. 26:19).

But more than any of the above—more significant than any title or position—is the simple fact that you are God’s child. “The Father has loved us so much that we are called children of God. And we really are his children” (1 John 3:1).

I love that last phrase! “We really are his children.” It’s as if John knew some of us would shake our heads and say, “Naw, not me. Mother Teresa, maybe. Billy Graham, all right. But not me.” If those are your feelings, John added that phrase for you.

“We really are his children.”

As a result, if something is important to you, it’s important to God.

If you are a parent you know that. Imagine if you noticed an infected sore on the hand of your five-year-old son. You ask him what’s wrong, and he says that he has a splinter. You ask him when it happened. He says last week! You ask him why

he didn’t tell you, and he says, “I didn’t want to bother you. I knew you had all those things to do running the household and all, I didn’t want to get in your way.”

“Get in my way? Get in my way! I’m your dad. You’re my son. My job is to help. I hurt when you hurt.”

I have a perfect example of this on videotape. My eight-year-old daughter Jenna sang a solo at an appreciation banquet. I agreed to stay home with our other two daughters if my wife would film the performance. When they came home, they had quite a story to tell and quite a tape to show.

Jenna forgot her lines. As she stood onstage in front of a large audience, her mind went blank. Since Denalyn was filming the moment, I saw the crisis through her eyes, the eyes of a mom. You can tell Denalyn is getting nervous the minute Jenna is getting forgetful—the camera begins to shake. “It’s OK, it’s OK,” Denalyn’s voice assures. She begins singing the words so Jenna will remember. But it’s too late. Jenna says “I’m sorry” to the audience, bursts into tears, and bolts off the stage.

At this point Mom drops the camera and runs after Jenna. The camera records the floor and Denalyn’s voice saying, “Come here, honey.”

Why did Denalyn do that? Why did she drop everything and run after her daughter? (By the way, Jenna recovered. Denalyn dried her tears. The two rehearsed the lyrics. And Jenna sang and received a loud ovation.)

Now, why did Denalyn go to all that trouble? In the great scheme of things, does a social embarrassment matter that much? You

know the answer before I tell you. To an eight-year-old girl, it’s crucial. And because it was important to Jenna, it was important to Mom.

And because you are God’s child, if it’s important to you, it’s important to God.

Why did Jesus change the water to wine? To impress the crowd? No, they didn't even know he did it. To get the wedding master's attention? No, he thought the groom was being generous. Why did Jesus do it? What motivated his first miracle?

His friends were embarrassed. What bothered them bothered him. If it hurts the child, it hurts the father.

So go ahead. Tell God what hurts. Talk to him. He won't turn you away. He won't think it's silly. "For our high priest is able to understand our weaknesses. When he lived on earth, he was tempted in every way that we are, but he did not sin. Let us, then, feel very sure that we can come before God's throne where there is grace" (Heb. 4:15-16, emphasis added).

Does God care about the little things in our lives? You better believe it.
ii it matters to you, it matters to him.

Study Guide

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN YOU'RE OUT OF CHOICES

1. How often do you deliberately choose to be among the suffering? Is Jesus' presence at the pool of Bethesda an encouragement to you or a rebuke—or both? Explain.
2. In what way is the sick man's story really a tale about you and me?
3. Max writes, "we must admit we are like the paralytic. Invalids out of options." What does he mean by this? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
4. Comment on this statement: "In God's plan, God is the standard for perfection . . . The goal is to be like him; anything less is inadequate." Identify some Scripture passages that say this in another way.
5. Why does it seem easier for an army private to believe the word of Alexander the Great than it does for us to believe the word of Jesus Christ?
6. Is Jesus telling you today, like the paralytic, to "stand up" in any area of your life? If so, what? If he is, what do you plan to do about it?

Building on the Rock:

Read Romans 3:9–23.

- a. What groups of people are included in this evaluation? What groups are excluded? Where do you **fit**?
- b. What does it mean to "are not good enough for God's glory" (v. 23)? How serious is this?

2. Read Colossians 2:13–15.

a. What was your condition prior to coming to faith in Jesus Christ (v. 13)?

b. List the things Jesus accomplished for you on the cross, based on this passage.

According to verse 15, was the cross a victory for Jesus or a defeat? Explain how this can be.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID OF THE FUTURE

Looking Under the Stones:

1. What did you think of Max's "faith experiment" with his daughters? What was he trying to teach them?
2. Do you ever wish you could see into the future? What would be the benefits of doing so? The drawbacks? If you could acquire the ability to see your whole future, would you do so? Explain.
3. Max writes, "There are times in life when everything you have to offer is nothing compared to what you are asking to receive." Describe a time in your life when this was true of you.
4. Have you ever tried to "barter" with the Lord? ("You do this for me and I'll . . .")
What's wrong with bartering? Why isn't God at all interested in it?
5. Max claims that a critical principle for seeing the unseen is to ignore what people say. 'What does he mean? 'What sort of people do you ignore? What kinds of advice do you refuse to heed? Couldn't Max's advice be dangerous in some circumstances? In what kind of circumstances?
6. Comment on the concentration camp inmate's words: "I believe in the sun, even though it doesn't shine, I believe in love, even when it isn't shown, I believe in God, even when he doesn't speak." Do you have faith like this? Explain your answer.
7. Max writes, "Death is a small price to pay for the privilege of sitting at table." Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
8. Why did Jesus throw the people out of Jairus's home?

9. What did you learn about faith from Max's experiment with his daughters?

Building on the Rock:

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50—57.

- a. According to this passage, why cannot “flesh and blood” inherit the kingdom of God?
- b. What must occur for us to take our place at God's side? Who makes it possible for us to get there (v. 57)? How did he do this?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16—18.

- a. 'What reason does Paul give in verse 16 for not giving up hope? How does he amplify,' this in verse 17?
- b. According to verse 18, how permanent is the world we see? How permanent is the world we do not see? How do you “Set our eyes” on Jesus?

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN YOU WONDER IF GOD CARES

Looking Under the Stones:

1. Max writes that Jesus was referring to some kind of plan when he spoke phrases such as “the time has not yet come.” What plan is he speaking of? A plan to do what?
2. Max writes, “The inaugural miracle is motivated—not by tragedy or famine or moral collapse—but by concern for friends who are in a bind.” What does this say about Jesus? How does this knowledge affect the way you relate to him today?
3. Comment on the statement: “This miracle tells you that what matters to you, matters to God.” How true is this? How do you know? What examples from your own life can you produce to demonstrate its truth?
4. How do you think God sees you? If he were to describe you to an angel, what would he say? What does he think of you?
5. How does Denalyn’s response to her daughter Jenna illustrate how God responds to the pain of his own children?
6. Jesus’ first miracle was turning water into wine at the wedding of some friends; his last miracle was to heal the ear of a man who had come to arrest him (see Luke 22:50– 51). What does this tell you about Jesus’ availability to listen to your requests?

Building on the Rock:

1. Read Hebrews 4:14–16.
 - a. How is Jesus described in this passage? List each description.
 - b. Based on the characteristics listed above, what should be our response? What are we encouraged to do?

2. Read Philippians 4:6–7.

a. What things does this text instruct us to pray for? What elements of prayer does it mention?

b. According to verse 7, what results can we expect from praying as we are instructed in verse 6?

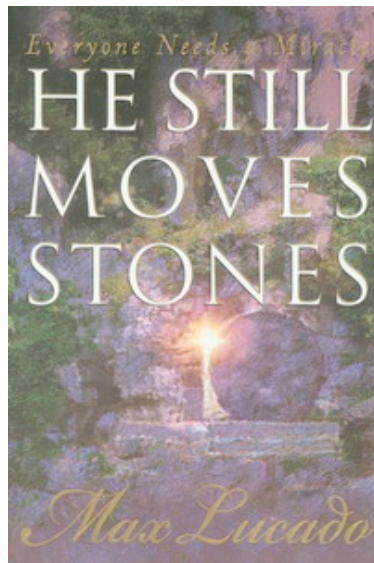
3. Read 1 Peter 5:6–7.

a. 'What are we instructed to do in verse 6? How do you do this? What promise is given?

b. How is verse 7 dependent upon verse 6? 'What are we told to do in verse 7? What promise is given?

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