

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MAX LUCADO



BECAUSE OF
Bethlehem

LOVE IS BORN
HOPE IS HERE

BECAUSE OF
Bethlehem

ALSO BY MAX LUCADO

INSPIRATIONAL

3:16
A Gentle Thunder
A Love Worth Giving
And the Angels Were Silent
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
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
When Christ Comes
When God Whispers Your Name
You'll Get Through This

FICTION

Christmas Stories
The Christmas Candle
Miracle at the Higher Grounds Café

BIBLES (GENERAL EDITOR)

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

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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God Forgives Me, and I Forgive You
God Listens When I Pray
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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
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You Were Made to Make a Difference

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Grace for the Moment
Grace Happens Here
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

BECAUSE OF
Bethlehem

LOVE IS BORN, HOPE IS HERE

MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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*Denalyn and I are honored to dedicate this book
to Randy and Rozanne Frazee.*

Able workers.

Devoted servants.

Wonderful friends.

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Grandbaby Rose—Your mom delivered you into the world at the time I delivered this book to be published. Your arrival is the one that matters! Welcome!

And dear, dear Denalyn—Because of you I've enjoyed Christmas every day for thirty-four years. Love you.

1



I Love Christmas

I love Christmas. Let the sleigh bells ring. Let the carolers sing. The more Santas the merrier. The more trees the better.

I love Christmas. The ho ho ho, the rooty toot toot, the thumpety, thump, thump, and the pa rum pa pum pum. The “Silent Night” and the sugarplums.

I don’t complain about the crowded shops. I don’t grumble at the jam-packed grocery store. The flight is full? The restaurant is packed? Well, it’s Christmas.

And I love Christmas.

Bring on Scrooge, Cousin Eddie, and the “official Red Ryder, carbine-action, two-hundred shot range model air rifle.” “You’ll shoot your eye out!”

The tinsel and the clatter and waking up “to see what was the matter.” Bing and his tunes. Macy’s balloons. Mistletoe kisses, Santa Claus wishes, and favorite dishes. Holiday snows, warm winter clothes, and Rudolph’s red nose.

I love Christmas.

I love it because somewhere someone will ask the

Christmas questions: What's the big deal about the baby in the manger? Who was he? What does his birth have to do with me? The questioner may be a child looking at a front-yard crèche. He may be a soldier stationed far from home. She may be a young mom who, for the first time, holds a child on Christmas Eve. The Christmas season prompts questions.



I love Christmas because somewhere
someone will ask the Christmas
questions: What's the big deal
about the baby in the manger?



I can remember the first time I asked those questions. I grew up in a small West Texas town, the son of a mechanic and a nurse. Never poor but certainly not affluent. My dad laid pipeline in the oil fields. Mom worked the three-to-eleven shift at the hospital. I followed my brother to elementary school every morning and played neighborhood ball in the afternoons.

Dad was in charge of dinner. My brother washed the dishes, and I was in charge of sweeping the floor. We boys took our baths by eight and were in bed by nine with permission to do one thing before turning out the lights. We could read.

The chest at the foot of our bed contained children's books. Big books, each with a glossy finish and bright pictures. The three bears lived in the chest. So did the big, bad wolf and seven dwarfs and a monkey with a lunch pail, whose name I don't recall. Somewhere in the chest, beneath the fairy tales, was a book about baby Jesus.

On the cover was a yellow-hayed manger. A star glowed above the stable. Joseph and a donkey, equally big eyed, stood nearby. Mary held a baby in her arms. She looked down at him, and he looked up at her, and I remember looking at them both.

My dad, a man of few words, had told my brother and me, "Boys, Christmas is about Christ."

In one of those bedtime, book-time moments, somewhere between the fairy tales and the monkey with the lunch pail, I thought about what he had said. I began asking the Christmas questions. In one way or another, I've been asking them ever since.

I love the answers I have found.

Like this one: God knows what it is like to be a human. When I talk to him about deadlines or long lines or tough times, he understands. He's been there. He's been *here*. Because of Bethlehem, I have a friend in heaven.

Because of Bethlehem, I have a Savior in heaven. Christmas begins what Easter celebrates. The child in the cradle became the King on the cross. And because he did, there are no marks on my record. Just grace. His offer has no fine print.

He didn't tell me, "Clean up before you come in." He offered, "Come in and I'll clean you up." It's not my grip on him that matters but his grip on me. And his grip is sure.



Because of Bethlehem, I have a Savior
in heaven. Christmas begins what
Easter celebrates. The child in the
cradle became the King on the cross.



So is his presence in my life. Christmas presents from Santa? That's nice. But the perpetual presence of Christ? That's life changing.

God is always near us. Always for us. Always in us. We may forget him, but God will never forget us. We are forever on his mind and in his plans. He called himself "Immanuel" (which means 'God with us') (Matt. 1:23).

Not just "God made us."

Not just "God thinks of us."

Not just "God above us."

But God *with* us. God where we are: at the office, in the kitchen, on the plane. He breathed our air and walked this earth. God . . . with . . . us!

We need this message more than ever. We live in anxious times. Terrorism is living up to its name—terror. Violence

hangs over our planet like a dark cloud. Think about the images on the news: the senseless attacks, the bloodshed, the random acts of cruelty.

And, as if the malice were inadequate, there is the fear of another recession. We seem to teeter on the edge of bull markets going bear and the financial world going down. The shepherds stayed awake, watching their flocks by night. You've been sleeping with one eye open trying to keep watch over your stocks by night.

And there is more:

The job you can't keep
The tumor you can't diagnose
The marriage you can't fix
The boss you can't please

We can relate to the little boy who played the part of the angel in the Christmas story. He and his mother rehearsed his lines over and over: "It is I; don't be afraid." "It is I; don't be afraid."

Yet, when the Christmas pageant began, he walked onto the stage and saw the lights and audience and he froze. After an awkward silence, he finally said, "It is me and I'm scared."

Are you scared? If so, may I suggest that you need a little Christmas? I don't mean a dose of saccharine sentiment or Santa cheer or double-spiked eggnog. That's not Christmas.

Christmas, as my dad said, is about Christ. Christ's name occupies six of the nine letters, for crying out loud. This isn't Santa-mas, or shopping-mas, or reindeer-mas. This is *Christ*-mas. And *Christ*-mas is not *Christ*-mas unless or until you receive the message of Bethlehem.



God is always near us. Always for us. Always in us. We may forget him, but God will never forget us.



Have you? In the hurry and scurry of the season, have you taken time to receive the promise of the season?

- God gets us.
- God saves us.

God is always near us. By the way, Bethlehem was just the beginning. Jesus has promised a repeat performance. Bethlehem, Act 2. No silent night this time, however. The skies will open, trumpets will blast, and a new kingdom will begin. He will empty the tombs and melt the winter of death. He will press his thumb against the collective cheek of his children and wipe away all tears. “Begone, sorrow, sickness, wheelchairs, and cancer! Enough of you, screams

of fear and nights of horror! Death, you die! Life, you reign!” The manger invites, even dares us to believe the best is yet to be. And it could all begin today.

But if it doesn't, there is a reason. No day is accidental or incidental. No acts are random or wasted. Look at the Bethlehem birth. A king ordered a census. Joseph was forced to travel. Mary, as round as a ladybug, bounced on a donkey's back. The hotel was full. The hour was late. The event was one big hassle. Yet, out of the hassle, hope was born.

It still is. I don't like hassles. But I love Christmas because it reminds us how “God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God” (Rom. 8:28 NLT).

The heart-shaping promises of Christmas. Long after the guests have left and the carolers have gone home and the lights have come down, these promises endure.

Perhaps you could use some Christmas this Christmas?

Let's do what I did as a six-year-old, redheaded, flat-topped, freckle-faced boy. Let's turn on the lamp, curl up in a comfortable spot, and look into the odd, wonderful story of Bethlehem.

May you find what I have found: a lifetime of hope.

2



God Has a Face

*W*hy do we punch elevator buttons more than
once?

Why do we love the front seat of a bus and the backseat
of a church?

Why do we pierce holes in our bodies and hang jewelry
from them?

Why do we ask for instructions and then argue with the
person who gave them?

Of what purpose is a necktie?

Rational behavior is not one of our trademarks. But if
you want to see people on the edge of insanity, just watch
the way families treat their babies at Christmastime.

The poor child has no warning. He is just starting to
recover from the slide down the birth canal when the fam-
ily begins decorating him as if he were a puppy in the dog
parade. Red furry stocking cap with a white ball on the
end. Goofy elfish shoes that curl at the toes. When this baby
becomes a teen and wears baggy jeans and sports a tattoo,

grown-ups will groan at the sight. But dress a six-month-old in suspenders and reindeer antlers? That's cute.

And the gifts we give. The little one can't get out of her crib, yet ever-earnest Mommy has her hooked on phonics. He can't even walk without help, and Grandpa gives him a Louisville Slugger baseball bat.

And the pictures we take!

Baby teething on the ornaments

Baby snoozing under the tree

Baby on Santa's lap

Santa with wet spot on lap

We make such a fuss! Bring the baby into a room, and everything changes. Grandma reaches up. Grandpa wakes up. Conversation shifts from politics and presidents to Pampers and pacifiers. This time of year babies take center stage. And well they should. Is not Christmas the story of a baby?

Heaven's seed enwombed in Mary.

Minuscule, yet mighty.

A fetus, yet a force.

God descends a birth canal.

Born.

Creator cradled in a Bethlehem barn.

Infant, yet infinite.

Asleep, yet a King.

God gurgles in Mama's arms.
Baby.

This is the Christmas moment that shaped all the others to follow. On a starlit night in the company of sheep, cattle, and a bewildered Joseph, Mary's eyes fell upon the face of her just-born son. She was bone weary, surely. In pain, likely. Ready to place her head on the straw and sleep the rest of the night away, probably. But first Mary had to see this face. *His* face. To wipe the moisture from his mouth and feel the shape of his chin. To be the first to whisper, "So this is what God looks like."



Jesus entered our world not *like*
a human but *as* a human.



People have always wondered about the image of God. Societies have speculated. Tribes have cogitated. And we've reached a variety of conclusions. God has been depicted as a golden calf and a violent wind and an angry volcano. He wears wings, breathes fire, eats infants, and demands penance. We've fancied God as ferocious, magical, fickle, and maniacal. A god to be avoided, dreaded, and appeased. But never in mankind's wildest imaginings did we consider that God would enter the world as an infant.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 NKJV). The Word became not a whirlwind or a devouring fire but a single cell, a fertilized egg, an embryo—a baby. Placenta nourished him. An amniotic sac surrounded him. He grew to the size of a fist. His tiny heart divided into chambers. God became flesh.

Jesus entered our world not *like* a human but *as* a human. He endured puberty, pimples, hot weather, and cranky neighbors. God became human down to his very toes. He had suspended the stars and ladled out the seas, yet he suckled a breast and slept in hay.

Some years ago I wrote a chapter titled “Twenty-Five Questions for Mary,” in which I imagined the ponderings that young Mary had about Jesus.¹ The idea captured the imagination of an elementary-school teacher. She asked her students to make a list of questions they would have liked to ask young Mary. Here are some of their responses:

“Could you believe that you were pregnant for the whole world?”

“Were you scared of not doing a good job?”

“What was Jesus’ first word as a baby?”

“Was he beautiful?”

“Did he ever get sick?”

“Did Jesus ever misbehave?”

“Was Jesus born with hair?”

“What was his favorite food?”

“Did you feel any holier?”

“Did he ever have a pet?”

These are legitimate questions. The fact that we can ask them raises a greater one.

Why such a journey? Why did God go so far?



Why did God go so far? He wants you to know that he gets you. He understands how you feel and has faced what you face.



A chief reason is this: he wants you to know that he gets you. He understands how you feel and has faced what you face. Jesus is not “out of touch with our reality. He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let’s walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help” (Heb. 4:15–16 MSG).

Since you know he understands, you can boldly go to him. Because of Bethlehem’s miracle, you can answer these fundamental questions: Does God care if I’m sad? Look at the tear-streaked face of Jesus as he stands near Lazarus’s tomb. Does God notice when I’m afraid? Note the resolve in the eyes of Jesus as he marches through the storm to rescue his friends. Does God know if I am ignored or rejected?

Find the answer in the compassionate eyes of Christ as he stands to defend the adulterous woman.²

“[Jesus] radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God” (Heb. 1:3 NLT). Jesus himself stated, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

“Anyone who has seen me weep has seen the Father weep.”

“Anyone who has seen me laugh has seen the Father laugh.”

“Anyone who has seen me determined has seen the Father determined.”

Would you like to see God? Take a look at Jesus.

In 1926 George Harley founded a medical mission among the Mano tribe of Liberia. The locals were receptive to the doctor and helped him construct a clinic and a chapel. Eventually Harley treated more than ten thousand patients a year. During the first five years, however, not one person from the tribe visited his chapel.

Shortly after the doctor and his wife arrived, she gave birth to Robert, their first child. The boy grew up on the edge of the forest. “He was the apple of our eye,” Harley later said. “How we loved our little boy! But one day when he was almost five years old, I looked out the window of the medical dispensary and saw Bobby. He was running across the field but he fell down. Then he got up and ran some more and fell again. But this time he didn’t get up. So I ran out and picked up the feverish body of my own little boy.

I held him in my arms and said, ‘Bobby, don’t worry. Your daddy knows how to treat that tropical fever. He’s going to help you get better.’”

Dr. Harley tried every treatment he knew. But nothing helped. The fever raged, and in short order the disease took the boy’s life. The parents were distraught with grief. The missionary went into his workshop and built a coffin. Harley placed Robert inside and nailed the lid. He lifted the coffin on his shoulder and walked toward the clearing to find a place to dig a grave. One of the old men in the village saw him and asked about the box. When Harley explained that his son had died, the old man offered to help him carry the coffin. Dr. Harley told a friend what happened next:

So the old man took one end of the coffin and I took the other. Eventually we came to the clearing in the forest. We dug a grave there and laid Bobby in it. But when we had covered up the grave, I just couldn’t stand it any longer . . . I fell down on my knees in the dirt and began to sob uncontrollably. My beloved son was dead, and there I was in the middle of an African jungle 8,000 miles from home and relatives. I felt so all alone.

But when I started crying, the old man cocked his head in stunned amazement. He squatted down beside me and looked at me so intently. For a long time, he sat there listening to me cry. Then suddenly, he leaped to his feet and went running back up the trail through

the jungle, screaming, again and again, at the top of his voice, “White man, white man—he cries like one of us.”³

That evening as Harley and his wife grieved in their cottage, there was a knock at the door. Harley opened it. There stood the chief and almost every man, woman, and child in the village. They were back again the next Sunday and filled the chapel to overflowing. They wanted to hear about Jesus.

Everything changed when the villagers saw the tears of the missionary.

Everything changes when we see the face of God.



He took on your face in the hope
that you would see his.



He came with tears too. He knows the burden of a broken heart. He knows the sorrow this life can bring. He could have come as a shining light or a voice in the clouds, but he came as a person. Does God understand you? Find the answer in Bethlehem.

Gaze where Mary gazed. Look into God’s face and be assured. If the King was willing to enter the world of animals and shepherds and swaddling clothes, don’t you think he’s willing to enter yours?

He took on your face in the hope that you would see his.

Tools for your Church and Small Group

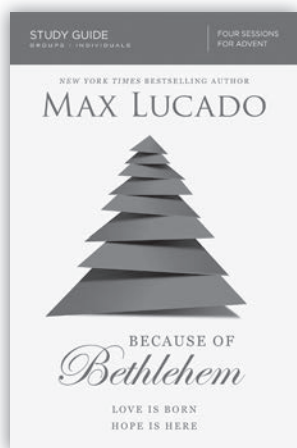


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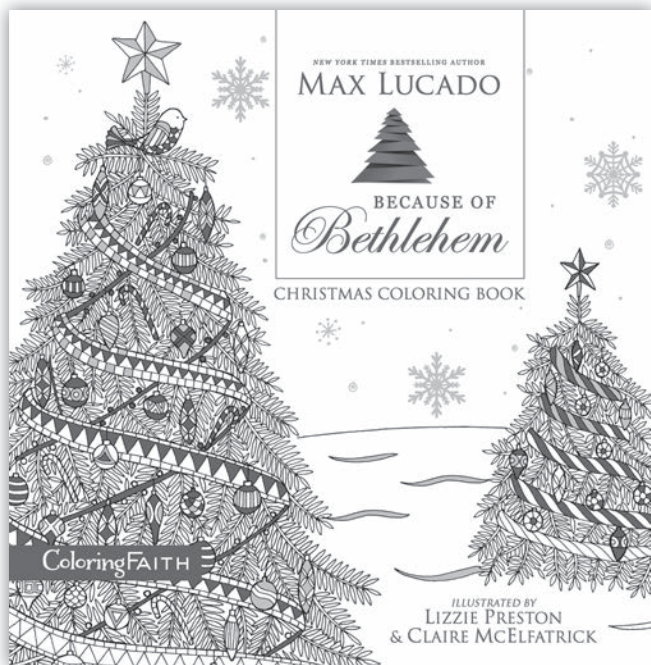
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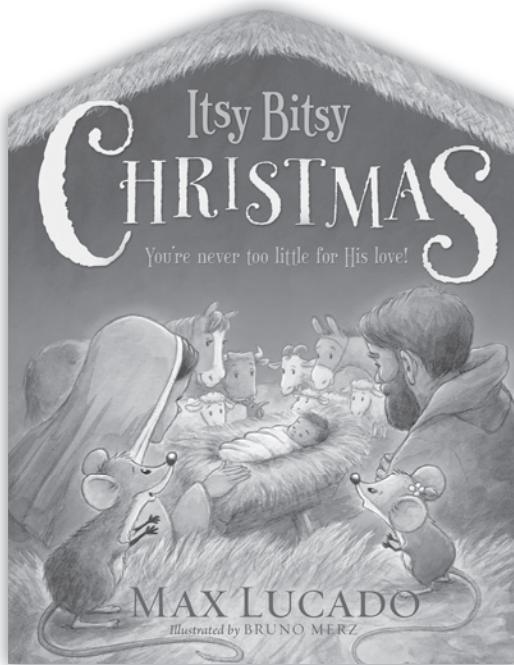
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“The King has come! Even
for a little one like me.”



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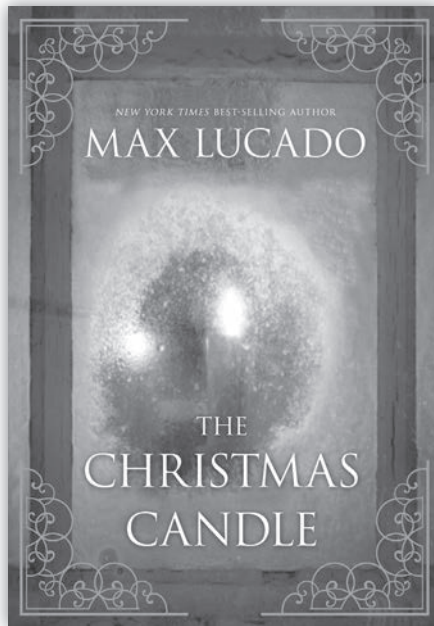
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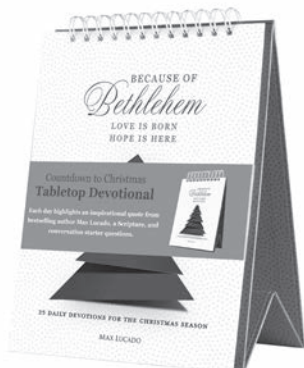


Imagine a Victorian England village in the Cotswolds where very little out of the ordinary ever happens . . . except at Christmas time. This year, Edward Haddington, a lowly candle maker, is visited by a mysterious angel. That angel silently imparts a precious gift—a gift that's bungled and subsequently lost. When the candle maker and his wife finally find the gift, they face a difficult choice. Who among their community is most in need of a Christmas miracle?

Spread the Joy of Christmas



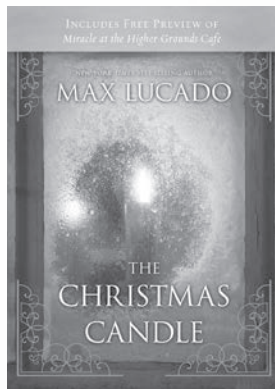
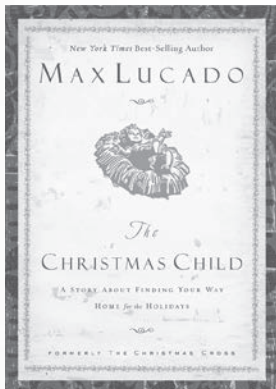
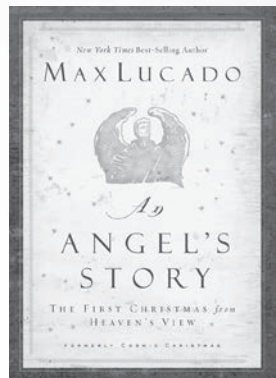
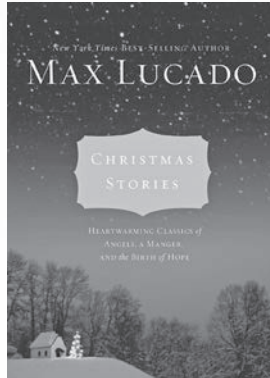
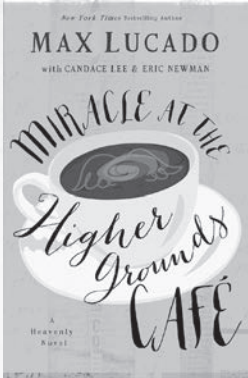
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